

Title: I Resolve
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How are you going with your New Year resolutions? Winning? How many of us actually made consciously made one or more New Year resolutions? After years of abject failure, how many of us have given up all together? I read this cartoon this week that spells out the fleeting nature of most of our resolutions to change:

Angus asks his friend Phil, 'What exactly is a New Year Resolution?'

Phil's answer is this, 'It's a "to do" list for the first week of January?'

The reality is that most New Year diets last only a few days, exercise plans not much longer, as with commitments to spend less, save more, work less, play more and so on. We are creatures of habits that are frustratingly difficult to change and shift.

Some British researchers proved what we already know; most New Year resolutions fail – 88% of them to be precise. The research suggests a key reason we fail is because we make too many resolutions, attempting too much significant change all at once. It seems that the way God has wired our brains means that in our own strength we have a finite capacity to change significant aspects of behavior. Put another way, in their own strength, our brains have limited will power. Success rates sore when we attempt to change one aspect of our behavior or life course at a time. If you have a list of things that you are trying to change all at once, the research is clear – you are likely to fail. For example, Sue is doomed to failure if she tries giving up eating chocolate and being a more patient wife at the same time.

This is all rather dispiriting. Why bother pursuing positive change at all if it is all so hard? We could respond by lowering our sights. We can massage our expectations to something more manageable. Let me give you an example. Who here has ever made a resolution to lose some weight? Jay Leno has some wonderful advice to help us feel successful, even when we fail to lose weight. Rather than make a resolution to lose weight, resolve to be a person of average weight. Leno then says:

There are more overweight people in America than average-weight people.
So overweight people are now average.
Which means, you have met your New Year's resolution.

The famous painter Michelangelo said this:

The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it,
but that it is too low and we reach it.
(Michelangelo)

Better than lowering our sights, perhaps we should focus our sights. Have one resolution, one goal, one target that we aim for and give all our energy and effort to hitting that one target. Which begs the question that if we are to enter 2013 with one goal in mind, one significant change that we want to achieve in our life, what would it be? But even if we do this, and we are successful in achieving our goal, in the end it is still possible to fail.

This is Matt Emmons. He is a champion shooter from the United States. At the time this photo was taken he had the gold medal in sight in the 50 meter competition. He was one shot away from claiming victory in the 2004 Olympic 50-meter three-position rifle event. He didn't even need a bull's-eye to win. His final shot merely needed to hit the target.

Normally, the shot he made would have received a score of 8.1, more than enough for a gold medal. But in what was described as "an extremely rare mistake in elite competition," Emmons fired at the wrong target. Standing in lane two, he fired at the target in lane three. His score for a good shot at the wrong target? Zero. Instead of a medal, Emmons ended up in eighth place.

In the end, it doesn't matter if we are successful in hitting target, even the bull's eye, if it's the wrong target.

Most of you know me well enough to know that I don't have many, if any original thoughts. I draw a lot from the wisdom of others. One piece of wisdom I come back to again and again, not because it comforts me, rather because it challenges me to the core is this quote from an anonymous missionary:

Our greatest fear should not be of failure, but of succeeding at something that doesn't really matter.
(New Tribes Missionary)

For your sake, for our sake, for God's sake – don't make the mistake of giving your life to succeeding at something that doesn't really matter.

I love to set goals. Each year I sit down with three of our Elders for my review and together we review how I have gone against the goals I set a year before and then at the goals I am setting for the year ahead. For me, it's a really helpful process. My review is coming up in the next couple of weeks and I will set some new goals. But beyond those, I am entering this New Year with One Resolution. It is the one target I believe that if I am successful in hitting it, will change my life in ways that I can't even imagine right now. At the end of today's message I am going to ask you to go away and make your one God-breathed and inspired Resolution for 2013. But for now here is mine:

In 2013 I resolve to live more fully in the Presence of God.

Inspired? Underwhelmed? Confused? You might be one or more of all these, but I hope to explain in the next few moments why this is not just so critical for me, but also for us as a church. You see, I passionately believe that God's desire for us as a church, like His desire for me, is that we might live more fully in his Presence this year. In a way today's message is an introduction to a theme that will shape our next twelve months – Living in the Presence of God.

At first glance my Resolution does not seem to make sense. As Christians we believe that God is present everywhere – omnipresent. King David put it poetically in Psalm 139, as he addressed God:

Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
(Psalm 139:7-10)

The bible is clear – God is everywhere present.

Tomas Watson puts it this way:

God's centre is everywhere. His circumference is nowhere.
(Thomas Watson)

If this is the case – if God is everywhere present – everywhere centred - then by default I am living in his presence no matter where I am or what I am doing, right?

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Let me use a very simple analogy. Sue baked earlier this week. She is a temptress my wife, for she baked the food of the gods – chocolate muffins. I love chocolate muffins. Despite my best efforts, I cannot resist chocolate muffins. So I walked in the door soon after Sue had taken the muffins out of the oven and placed them on the cooling trays. As soon as I walked in the door, my nose was assaulted with the wonderful smell of muffins – beautiful muffins. My nose told me I was in the presence of muffins. In just smelling the muffins, I had already encountered them. But muffins are not made just to smell, they are made to be eaten. Muffins are made to be devoured, demolished – inhaled. So even though Sue told me they were for the kids, I took the cloth off the muffins and I saw them. I picked them up and I touched them. I placed one – the first of many in my mouth – and I heard my teeth chew them. And then finally, I encountered Sue’s muffins in the best way they should – I tasted them.

Unlike Sue’s muffins, God is everywhere present. If you like, we smell – we encounter his presence everywhere – in the beauty of his Creation, in the warmth of human friendship and love, or the transcendent moments when we encounter though great art or music. Here’s the thing. Even though God is everywhere present – and even atheists encounter him without knowing it – God offers and calls us into a far deeper experience of Him than just catching a whiff of him. God offers us the profound opportunity to see, hear, touch and taste him – to encounter him with all of our senses, with all of our being - to drink him in, to dine on his Presence. God wants us to taste him and see that he is good!

In 2014 my resolve is not just to be acquainted with God, but daily, hourly, minute by minute be tasting the very presence of God with all of my being and so declare with wonder that God is good! Anyone want to join me?

I want to turn back to the scripture and share a verse with you that awakened this desire in me. Before I share it, let me set the scene.

Through the leadership of Moses, God has miraculously delivered Israel from generations of slavery in Egypt. But straight after they cross the Red Sea, the Israelites immediately begin to doubt God, complain to and question God. But God is faithful, and continues to lead and provide for them. Eventually they come to Mount Sinai, where they set up camp as Moses goes up onto the mountain and has a forty-day, earth shaking, awe-inspiring up close and personal encounter with God, where he receives the Law, including what we know as the Ten Commandments. But while Moses is literally having a mountain top experience God, Israel is down in the valley forgetting the God they barely knew. This is what we read:

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.”

(Exodus 32:1)

Here is the thing; the people of Israel knew about God, but did not know God. The people of Israel were acquainted with God, but did not have the close, intimate relationship with God as Moses did. As soon as Moses disappeared, so too did their tenuous connection with God. They forgot the God they barely knew and they started building their own god in the form of a golden calf.

It is easy to forget or ignore a God we barely know. Unless we have our own earth-shaking, awe-inspiring, up close and personal encounter with the God of the Bible we will turn to other gods – money, sex, power, status – whatever, in a desperate attempt to meet the appetite for God we were born with. We cannot live in the shadow of other people’s encounters with God; we need our own revelation.

Moses comes down from the mountain and sees his brother Aaron and the people of Israel worshipping the golden calf. God was about to destroy them for their betrayal, but Moses pleads their case and God relents. God then charges Moses and Israel to break camp and march towards the promised land. Rather than God himself, an angel will now lead them because if God was to go with them he would destroy them because his anger still lingered. The people are devastated, but Moses meets with God in a tent outside the camp where a pillar of cloud would guard the doorway signifying God’s tangible presence. It was in the Tent of Meeting that Moses, and only Moses, would meet with God and speak with him face to face, as a friend. In conversation with God, Moses pours out his doubt and fears and even his reluctance in leading God’s people.

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Moses is looking for reassurance. And it is now that we come to the verse that so captivated me a few months ago. God responds to Moses' request for reassurance with these words:

The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."
(Exodus 33:14)

The Hebrew word translated as presence is 'panem' – which literally means 'face'. 'My face will go with you' – the 'face' of the same God that Moses has seen in the Tent of Meeting. God is promising Moses that it won't be some depersonalized force that will accompany him and Israel to the promised land, but God's very close, personal, involved and engaged presence. God will not and cannot abandon Moses and the people. Moses knows how significant God's promise is. He responds, with these words:

And (Moses) said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here."
(Exodus 33:15)

Moses is clear; if God will not accompany him and the people on their journey to the Promised Land, they are doomed to failure. Without the personal, involved and engaged presence of God, it will all end in tears.

As a church we stand on the brink of a new era in our life. Today one chapter closes, and tomorrow a new one opens. We are entering an uncertain season where the potential for failure is real. Since reading this passage afresh a few months ago, I have been praying a really difficult, but very honest prayer, 'God, if your presence will not go with us, do not send us – do not allow us to go from here – stop us now.' And as difficult as the prayer has been to pray, the answer that's come is so reassuring. I believe that in so many ways, God has confirmed again and again and again that his presence – God's personal, engaged and involved presence – has been, and continues to be with us. Again and again we have cried out, 'Only God' as God has provided for us in ways beyond our imagination – and I believe passionately we are going to be singing that refrain again and again through 2013. As we step out in faith into this next season, I believe with every fibre of my being that God's presence goes with us.

There is one more thing to say; perhaps the most important. God promises Moses that his presence will go with him, and that his presence will give Moses 'rest'. Here's the thing, Moses never asked for rest. He asks for help and on other occasions for wisdom and strength – but never rest. But God always is one step ahead. God doesn't always give us what we want, but God always gives us what we need.

In the personal, face-to-face presence of God there is rest. And God knew that Moses needed rest – rest from fear, rest from anxiety, rest from feeling it was all his responsibility, rest from trying to do it all in his own strength. God doesn't always give us what we want. But God always gives us what we need.

Rest is one of the first and best gifts we receive when we experience the face-to-face presence of God. Moses needed rest. And God knows, I need rest. You are probably thinking, 'Hey, he's just had 10 days off the lazy sod. And he only really works on Sunday.' That may or may not be true, but I'm not talking, nor do I believe God is offering a superficial rest from long work hours, but a soul-salving, heart-mending, mind-clearing spiritual rest.

At the beginning of 2013 I need rest – rest from trying to do God's work in my strength.

I need rest – rest from anxiety born from the pride-soaked belief that it all depends on me.

I need rest – rest from succumbing to the satanic lie that I still fall for from time to time that I can earn, rather than receive God's favor.

I need rest – and in God's presence, only there, will I find the rest Moses experienced and I need.

Many of us have got to start of a New Year and we are already tired – not necessarily physically, but spiritually. We are soul-weary and spiritually stuffed. Worship no longer moves us. The bible, if we read it, confuses us. Prayer, if we offer it, is a ritual rather than a revelation. Faith feel likes a habit we can't shake rather than a life-giving adventure God offers us.

But you are here. You are not quite sure why, but you are. You are here because as much as you wonder whether God has abandoned you, he hasn't.

In Matthew's gospel Jesus made this incredible offer:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.
(Matthew 11:28-29)

In the presence of Jesus there is rest – soul-salving, heart-mending, mind-clearing rest. At the heart of the Christian faith is the belief that everything that needs to be done for our souls to be at rest has been done by Jesus.

We do not have to work to earn God's favor. In the presence of Jesus we receive God's favor as a gift.

We don't have to chase after God's blessing. In the presence of Jesus we are showered with all of God's blessings.

We don't have to strive for God's love. In the presence of Jesus we are drenched in the unfailing, everlasting, grace-filled, mercy-rich love of God.

When Jesus cried with his dying breath from the Cross that 'It is finished', it was not simply a cry of anguish. It was a statement of profound truth that changed your and my destinies forever. Jesus was declaring that in his sacrificial death he had accomplished everything necessary for us to rest in the mercy, grace, love and forgiveness of God. And here's the thing - it is when we rest in what God has done for us through Jesus that paradoxically we are then and only then able to achieve great things for God as we work not in our power, but in the power of God's Spirit in us. AW Tozer put it this way:

I accomplish more when I rest wholly in the labour of Jesus than I do when I frantically try to do the work for Him.
(AW Tozer)

This is an instrument of torture. It's called a treadmill. Seriously, it is a torture instrument. Crude treadmills were used as a form of excruciating punishment in the prisons of Victorian England. Prisoners would be walk a treadmill for up to six hours a day, climbing the equivalent of up to 14,000 feet, putting one foot after the other, for hour after hour, day after day. The hearts and minds of prisoners would be broken in the act of expending a huge amount of physical energy and never getting anywhere.

As 2013 beings many of us will give in to the temptation to get back on to the same spiritual treadmill we were on in 2012. We can fill our lives with frantic activity, with doing good things – we can fill our lives with everything other than God. But this New Year offers the opportunity to get off our treadmills and instead come to Jesus and lay our burden to do at the feet of the one who has already done it. Someone has said that a form of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and over again and expecting a different result.

Some of you are soul weary. Some of you are heart sore. Some of you are mind tired. Some of you are spiritually stuffed. For God's sake, get off whatever elaborate treadmill you have constructed for yourself, and come with me to Jesus. I can promise you now, on the reliability of God's word, if you are weary and heavy laden – in his presence you will find rest – the only rest that satisfies for eternity.

The only work I am interested in this year, if you could call it 'work', is to come to Jesus. If I do this one thing, everything else will take care of it itself.

So, in 2013 my one resolve is this; to live more fully in the presence of Jesus. I can't tell you how much just the thought of it energises and frees me!

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