

Well, it's been 2014 for almost two weeks now, has it lived up to your expectations?

Did you take some time to consider how the last year went first? Maybe see if you got everything done in the year you originally planned? Or are you still working on some 13 to-dos here in 14? Still even maybe trying to get them started? Yeah, I know how that goes. Or maybe you did get everything done last year that you planned to do way back last January. But New Year's is when we all try to come up with a list of what we're finally going to accomplish or do differently over the next orbit of the planet. Drop weight, quit that bad habit, finish that project that never seems to get done, the list goes on. And why is it that we do this? What makes this rotation of the earth so much more special than the last 364? Well, the new year is symbolic of a fresh start. Yeah, I messed up in the past, but let's wipe the slate clean and try again. And we like doing that.

So how's it going so far?

Let's be honest. How many times have you tried to just make a fresh go at something and have had it fizzle out quietly? How many times have you said to yourself, "just one more go at this and I can get it"? And yet how many times does it end up the same way? We crash and burn. We just plain fail. Don't get me wrong, sometimes those resolutions stick, but more often than not they're doomed from the get-go. Well why is that? There are a lot of different reasons we could pick out, but I think I can give you a simple one that will work for most of you. The problem with all my resolutions is that they rely on a notoriously unreliable person. Me. And what am I? I am a huge pile of walking, talking sin. I am the embodiment of all the things that work against the good resolutions I try to come up with. Just like all of us. I'm not really sure what good could possibly come of all that. And what about all the troubles and challenges the new year will bring that I don't know about yet? How am I supposed to get through all that as I am now?

And that really bothers me when I consider the greatest challenge that faces me through this year is staying true to the mission of the church. Being part of the church, we all know that there is nothing more important than the work of God's Kingdom. Everything else in this life will pass away. That perfect kitchen won't matter when I die. The new car will not help when my time is up. It won't matter how many books I've read or football games I've watched or vacations I took when I'm six feet underground. Only the spiritual things in this life truly matter. So it's most important that I face the challenges I'm going to encounter spiritually. It's most important that I stay true to our mission, to grow myself in the Word of God and to go with the Word of God.

But like I said, that bothers me.

If this mission, if staying true to God is what is most important in this year and the years to come, if eternal life and death hang in the balance, then I'm in big trouble. If I can't keep up a resolution to stop eating candy or to quit biting my nails, how can I possibly handle a responsibility this big?! It's would seem to be pretty near hopeless.

Let's see what our God has to say on all this...<read text: Heb 2:10-18>.

Ah yes, of course. Jesus. Jesus is our help. Not only is Jesus the all-powerful God with the ability to do anything and the authority to rule over this world, but Jesus is also true man. In other words, he took our place. Jesus lived a life as one of us, a human life. He was born, he was baptized and he lived under the law of God in our place. He knew what it was to have little. He knew what it was to be hungry. He knew what it was to experience pain, loss and suffering. And Jesus knew what it was to be tempted.

You see, you have a God who has walked a mile in your shoes. You have a Savior who has been where you are. Just think for a minute on what a great blessing that is for you. A lot of times when we're dealing with a particularly troubling problem, we'll look to speak to or confide in someone who's been through the same thing. It's the principle that most support groups are built around. Why? Well, for one, it's comforting to know that someone else really understands what you're going through because they've been there, they've actually experienced it and they don't have to guess at what it might be like. And guess what; Jesus understands what you're going through because he went through it. And Jesus has promised to be with you always. So there, in just that, you always have someone who is with you who always knows what you're going through. Someone who always understands what it's like for you.

But another reason we like to speak to people who have been through similar circumstances is so that we can see that it's possible to overcome these problems. Someone else was able to get through this and be okay, so I must be able to as well. And when I look at the problems I face in this life, here particularly we're thinking of those most important struggles of trying to stay in the Word of God regularly and take it to others, I can see that Jesus was able to do it. Jesus overcame temptations and trials, He grew in the Word and He went with the Word. Fantastic! It can be done.

“Well hey that’s not really fair!” you might want to say. Jesus kind of had a leg up on me in doing that. He was able to live a perfect life because he was born without sin in him. Jesus is true God and God *can’t* sin, it’s one of his defining characteristics. That gives him kind of an advantage in that field I think. I don’t have any of that going for me. I was born with sin, a whole lot of sin as we mentioned before. In fact, I was born, as the theologians put it, “not able to not sin”. Let me say that again. Not able to not sin. That means that all I *can* do is sin. And I was *born* that way! So how on earth does it help that Jesus was able to get through life without sinning help me in any way?

In every way, actually. Jesus living a perfect human life is the *only* way for you or me to be helped. Look at what is written here, “**Since the children have flesh and blood (that’s us), he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.**” Only by becoming human, only by living the perfect life that we simply could not, only by dying the death that belonged to us, only this way could He take away the devil’s power.

The devil’s power is death. Eternal death. Separation from God forever. And we know that we have only one of two options when we leave this life. Heaven or Hell. The only thing worth being afraid of is Hell. Anything, and I mean anything in this life that happens to us will eventually pass away. But once this life is over and judgment is passed, that’s it. That’s the only permanent thing that ever happens to us. And we know, instinctively, that we don’t measure up. We have God’s law written on our hearts, we have our conscience always standing up, pointing that finger and saying, “You’re...not...good enough!” And so instinctively we fear death, because we know we’re not good enough, we know that we deserve punishment. And we’re slaves to that fear just like we’re slaves to sin.

And Jesus set us free. Not just by going through the same experiences and giving us advice on how to get through it ourselves, he just went ahead and did it for us. He lived a perfect life and called it ours. He paid the horrible price for sin on the cross and then credited that payment to our account. “Just have faith,” he said, “and it’s all yours. But you know what? I’m going to go ahead and give that to you too.”

So there you have it. The worst problem we could ever face, the only problem ever worth really worrying about is already taken care of. Because Jesus became one of us, because he lived our life and died our death, death no longer has any power over us. We are forgiven and heaven is ours. And Satan’s only power is made useless. He can’t threaten us with death because death is no longer an issue. And with the threat of death gone, so is fear. We never have any reason to be afraid again because we know the end of our story is heaven. Will we still be afraid from time to time? Yeah, probably. We still have sin in us on this side of eternity. We still will sin, we still will fail, but even though we don’t want to take that lightly, we also have confidence that it is already forgiven. The devil may be able to tempt us into it, but that sin has been paid for too. Heaven is still ours. It is not, of course, a license to go out and do whatever we please because, “hey, it’s forgiven”, but it is a comfort to us when we do fall. Our greatest challenge in this new year and in the years to come has been conquered already. The greatest and ultimately only important threat we could ever face has already been nullified. Now if that doesn’t give you confidence to face another year, I don’t know what will.

Of course, what I said earlier on is still true. Jesus still knows about your day to day problems. And he understands what they’re like. And he is and will continue to rule this world for the benefit of you and all believers everywhere. There will be challenges in the next year. We have never been promised an easy life. But Jesus knows what those challenges are and he’s ready to help you with them. He will not give you more than you can bear, and no matter what it is, no matter whether you can see it or not, there will be a good reason for it all.

So, we look forward to the new year with confidence. As we prepare to face the challenges ahead of us we know our Savior Jesus is right there with us. He is there as we go to carry out the great mission he has entrusted us with, the only directives we are given for this life that truly matter. He is there in his word to strengthen us when we come to him, to grow us in our faith. And he is there to be with us in that strength as we take his word to those who have not yet heard it. We can go to others without fear, reaching out in love and care. We know what will happen if they remain lost and we know that nothing can happen to us along the way to make us lost again. We know that Jesus is watching over us, blessing our efforts and keeping us in his care, guiding everything to ensure that we are kept in him until we reach life eternal in heaven with him.

Our Lord has given us the mission to grow and go. By ourselves, we would never be equal to this task. With Jesus, through Jesus it can be accomplished. This year and every year, go and grow with Jesus. Amen.