

Words of Encouragement: New Beginnings

It is a new year and a new beginning. In light of God's redemptive plan, that is cause for great rejoicing. God, who is slow to anger and abounding in love (Ex 34:6), provides us with opportunity after opportunity to be forgiven, to be renewed, to be refreshed—to begin again. What a joy to be able to put the past behind us and look forward to God's best.

Can we honestly do that? Can we really move beyond our past failures and shortcomings? Thanks be to God, Yes! In fact, this is another area where the Christian message stands in stark contrast to the wisdom of the world.

First, the world, our flesh, and the devil would like to keep us mired in our inadequacies and failures. How often are we overcome with pleasant thoughts for days on end when we do the right thing? By contrast, how often are we constantly reminded for weeks on end when we fall short and miss the mark? Circumstances, other people, our own thoughts—all seem to point to our failures. The word of Jesus, however, is a word of change and hope. It is a word that sees possibilities where the flesh sees nothing but despair. David said it this way: "I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." (Psa 27:13)

Second, the natural way of dealing with failures tends to be to cover them over or pretend they didn't happen. Sometimes this takes the form of excuses like being "misrepresented" or "misunderstood." However, there's no misrepresentation or misunderstanding with God! We've failed! God does not gloss over our failures. Instead, he addresses them faithfully and directly and extends to us a forgiveness that is not based on us putting our sin in a positive light. His forgiveness calls sin sin, and then carries the power to rescue us from it. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

A third distinction between God's way and our human nature is that we tend to look at failure as catastrophic and final. Now, all the positive thinking books tell us that every failure brings us one step

closer to success. Of course, sin doesn't work that way at all. The only thing that can bring us closer to righteousness is righteousness himself intervening on our behalf. There is no self-help when it comes to sin. But what about plain old mistakes that aren't sin? For all the talk about the mistakes that have lined the path to greatness, how many of us really think that way when we take the royal plunge into error? This is where positive thinking leaves me stranded. No matter how I try to convince myself that success is just around the corner, sometimes I just don't buy it.

The biblical message of redemption, on the other hand, gives me certain hope. Romans 8:28 says, "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose." Yes, even my knucklehead mistakes can be turned to good in when I actively submit to God's will (according to his purpose). This is not just an arbitrary belief that if I mess up enough times eventually I'm bound to succeed even if by mistake. Far from it. This reaches into miracle realm activity, where God begins to take the failures of a child who is submitted to him and turn them toward his purposes by training and correction and by commending us to make amends and stand in integrity. Not only so but in amazement we can look on as God uses the failures and shortcomings themselves to bring resolution and the message of grace into situations beyond our wildest inkling. That gives me true hope.

It's a new year. A new beginning. Maybe God wants to take our old stories, failings and all, and give them a surprise ending full of grace. Maybe God is encouraging us to hope afresh and believe for the impossible again. Maybe God is creating something new from out of the ruins. It won't be the first time.

*For behold, I create a new heavens and a new earth;
And the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create;
For behold, I create Jerusalem for rejoicing
And her people for gladness. (Isaiah 65:17-18)*

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old
has gone, the new has come. (2 Cor 5:17)*