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January 1

A New Heart and a New Spirit

“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. . . . You shall be my people, and I will be your God.”

—Ezekiel 36:26–28, ESV

Recently, as I was studying Hebrews 8, I asked myself the following questions: *What does this text say about God? What does this text say about me? And what does this text say about my walk with God?* Then one sentence caught my attention: “I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people” (Hebrews 8:10, KJV). I was reminded about a text that I teach regarding the gospel—today’s theme text—Ezekiel 36:26–28. As I paused to comprehend the meaning of these verses, the reality of *no sin* came into focus: “I [God] will remember their [my] sins no more” (Hebrews 8:12, ESV).

The new heart and new spirit are the work of, and a gift from, the Holy Spirit when we say yes to Jesus. This newness isn’t something I work for or strive to become. When I choose to believe today, God does *all* the work on my new heart and spirit that He places within me. That is the reason God can say, “I will remember [your] sins no more.” Because of the shed blood of Jesus Christ, He took the sin for me, and I am without sin from the moment I believe.

But I live as a sinner, a sinful woman, because of my birth. Yet it is the blood of Jesus Christ who died on the cross that gives Him the right to gift us with the new heart and spirit that is only from the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:22–28). And He promises to be our God. Oh, my dear sisters, when you and I choose Jesus, He claims us as His daughters—daughters of the King—with the new hearts and spirits He has placed within us.

As we begin this new year, may we grasp the meaning of these texts. I have chosen Him to be my God because He chose me first. Now, in newness of life, by the grace of the cross, I can live a triumphant life, daily in His presence. I challenge you to study prayerfully and meditate on these promises. In Him, we can live fuller, freer lives. Savor your relationship with Jesus Christ as you watch Him show up and show off His glory through your new heart and new spirit.

Mary H. Maxson

A Resolution Kept

*Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer;
thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am.
—Isaiah 58:9, KJV*

I understand that January comes around every year, so why does it always creep up on me? Somehow, though, I manage to make at least two New Year's resolutions, which I promptly forget. Last year I was a little more determined to do this thing right. As I packed away my Christmas decorations, I asked the Lord to give me a resolution that would bring honor to His name and make it last all year.

Through the years, my Nativity scenes have downsized from life-size figures on the lawn to small porcelain figurines on a table. Whatever their size, though, they are a reminder of the love of God and of what I want to be—someone who trusts in God and who will be the best listener, obedient to Him as He reveals Himself to me. As I carefully placed each fragile figurine back in its place in the Styrofoam liner, a thought occurred to me. *Lord, I believe it would bring honor to Your name if I, too, could “fit in” in the life You want for me this year—in my home, in the community, and in my precious church. Would You show me how and give me extra strength to do what You want?*

Being involved in our church's community services for several years has given me insight into the problems of many poverty-stricken families in our community. My steps have slowed some since I turned seventy-two a few months ago, but I stay on call for these families and distribute many articles of clothing weekly. Recently, our church started a new venture called Hope for the Hungry. Immediately, I felt the Lord urging me to volunteer. I believe this was the answer to my resolution to “fit in.” I thank Him, my forever Friend, for letting me be a part of this successful ministry, “fitting in” with great workers of God. Now many starry-eyed children are not as hungry anymore. Our Hope for the Hungry has expanded to include an Angel Tree this year, providing gifts and toys for the children, new clothing, and Bibles.

No matter who you are, you can “fit in” in this world and spread joy, making an impact on children for the rest of their lives. Pray for me and my commitments this year. May we all do our part to spread the word—Jesus is coming to end hunger forever!

Jane Wiggins Moore

January 3

What God Wants for the New Year

PART 1

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the LORD require of you?

*To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.*

—Micah 6:8, NIV

A question recently came to my mind: “What can I give to Jesus in this new year?” If I were going to give Jesus a gift, what could I give Him that He would appreciate? After all, He is the Creator of all things (Hebrews 1:2) and the One who holds all things together (Colossians 1:17). So what do you give Someone who not only *has* everything but actually *made* everything? That’s a tough question, yet there had to be something I could give Him that would bring a smile to His face and would bring Him joy.

There *is* something! I discovered it in the little book of Micah. In his day, Micah wrote to a world facing huge problems. He not only pointed out the rampant sin and hypocrisy among God’s people but also, in no uncertain terms, warned them of judgment to come.

Dropped into this severe message from God, however, Micah included a delightful passage. Although it is only three verses long (see today’s theme text), it tells us exactly what God wants from you and me in this new year.

“Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?” (Micah 6:6, NIV). Does God want a *quantity* of sacrifice? The answer is no!

“Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?” (verse 7, NIV). Does God want only a *quality* of sacrifice? Again, the answer is no!

“Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (verse 7, NIV). Is God asking me for the *ultimate* sacrifice? The answer is no.

What God desires to receive from us comes from a place that is very accessible yet very personal. And it has everything to do with our hearts.

Premila Pedapudi

What God Wants for the New Year

PART 2

He answered, “ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

—Luke 10:27, NIV

It’s so typical of us to offer big sacrifices to God: “Lord, I’ll do anything You want. You name Your price. You want a missionary? I’m ready to go. You want me to be married or stay single? Just let me know. I’ll be a preacher, a pastor, a deacon, or an elder. I’ll pray every day and read my Bible. Whatever You want from me, that’s what I’ll do. I really mean it, Lord!”

Now there’s nothing wrong with these sentiments. They are good and noble and proper. God is pleased when we offer ourselves to Him. So what’s wrong with these offers? They deal only with things we would *do*. But, dear friend, God wants your heart. You can be a missionary and still have a hard heart. You can be married or single and still have a rebellious heart. You can be very religious yet far away from God.

So what *does* God want from us this year? The answer is found in Micah 6:8, which some consider to be the greatest verse in all the Old Testament. This verse sums up what God really wants from you and me. (This is a verse we need to commit to memory, write out on a card, and put on our mirrors so we can read it every day.)

He has shown you, O man, what is good;
And what does the LORD require of you
But to do justly,
To love mercy,
And to walk humbly with your God? (NKJV).

What God wants from us every day is justice, mercy, and humility. These are matters of the heart. Jesus Himself came to proclaim justice to the nations (Matthew 12:18), show mercy to “them that fear him” (Luke 1:50, KJV), and humble Himself by dying on the cross (Philippians 2:8).

What He asks of us, He first gave to us by establishing justice, showing mercy, and lifting up the humble. Amen. I pray that you and I are willing to give to Jesus from the heart.

Premila Pedapudi

January 5

The Peace of Christ

*“Go in peace, and may the God of Israel
grant you what you have asked of him.”*

—1 Samuel 1:17, NIV

Hannah was sad, even tormented. At a time when women were valued according to the number of children they had, she was barren. To society, Hannah was worthless. In spite of her husband’s sincere love for her, she was not happy, did not feel complete, and felt almost as if she were being punished. What a heavy burden she carried! To make matters worse, her husband, Elkanah, had a second wife, Peninnah, who had given birth to several children.

Every year Elkanah took his family to Shiloh to worship the Lord and present offerings. Peninnah brought her children and repeatedly pointed out that she had many while Hannah had none. Hannah watched her sadly. Because of her anguish, Hannah did not eat and often wept. She wanted to be a mother, but being childless was a situation over which she had no control.

One year when the family was at Shiloh to worship, Hannah knelt before God. Her offering was different from what she usually presented; this time she laid her wounded heart at the feet of the Most High. She prayed as never before, feeling weak and small in the face of such trouble. There, in the silence of the house of the Lord, she sought refuge for her weary soul. Her intense demonstration of prolonged, prayerful grief caught the attention of Eli, the high priest. He assumed she was drunk and gave her a stern rebuke. When Hannah explained the reason for her sadness, Eli quickly realized he had erred. She was not a vulgar woman but rather a daughter seeking comfort in the arms of her Father. Eli pronounced a blessing of peace over her. Hannah stood up a different woman. Now she was radiant, calm, and confident.

The following year Hannah did not go on the family trip to Shiloh. Instead, she stayed home to take care of her baby—Samuel, her son, who was God’s answer to her prayers. Peace reigned in her heart, filling all the broken places.

The peace that Christ gives brings forgiveness, love, and hope. It brings the assurance of His presence with us in the midst of our struggles. We remember God’s mercy and grace, demonstrated by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross to redeem us—and to be our hope in any situation. The same peace that Hannah experienced helps to make *our* burdens easier to bear.

Sueli da Silva Pereira

Facing My Fear Mountains

*If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God,
who gives generously to all without finding fault,
and it will be given to you.*

—James 1:5, NIV

Fear gripped me recently, when after a seven-year break, I was back in the workforce full time, teaching college English. But it wasn't teaching that caused me to fear; it was technology. Some of my hairiest moments of the semester came while trying to create and share a variety of resources for my students. To be embarrassingly honest, these and other seemingly simple computer tasks had me in tears. Why? Suffice it to say, for me, technology is one of those "fear mountains" we all have. Instead of asking for help or doing research, we wring our hands in despair; we weep and declare, "I can't climb that mountain!" Oh, what wasted energy!

In the past, I have wasted so much good, solid energy that I could have used to put one foot in front of the other; I have used it to complain or cry. Although sometimes the mountain really *is* a mountain, and sometimes a good cry or therapy session (or several) is called for, in general, there are better uses for our restless energy than weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

The first and most important use of our energy is prayer. When we're gripped with fear, God is always an appropriate audience, and crying out to Him is *always* a good first response. A second good use of restless energy is research. Over the past year, I've watched research transform writing students from questioningly clueless to passionately informed. Research is not just a college skill; it is a life skill. One night, as I was wondering how to get refreshed quickly on APA format, my husband suggested, "Why don't you look it up on YouTube?" Brilliant. I did.

No matter what our fear mountains may be, knowing whom to ask is half the battle. We can start by asking God for wisdom; we can also ask Him to direct us to the right people or information. The second half of the battle is putting into practice what we learn. What is the first step you can take today to start scaling your own "fear mountains"?

Lindsey Gendke

* Here, I would make a distinction between "big" and "little" mountains (or traumas). My history with depression and its causes was a *big* mountain, and it took years to heal. My technology mountain is considerably smaller and will be much easier to remedy.

January 7

Choosing to Be Content

*Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good,
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.*
—Psalm 136:1, NASB

This past week was a rough one. My mind wanted to focus on all the things I don't have instead of focusing on how blessed I am. I decided to attend the pity party I was throwing for myself—all week. Then the Friday morning devotional I received centered on choosing to be happy with what we have instead of focusing on what others have. I guess it shouldn't have surprised me that Friday night's reading, chosen by my daughter, was titled "Gratitude." By then, my complaining spirit had somewhat subsided, but God still knew that I needed to be reminded. The thing is, I know that when I start focusing on myself instead of God, my attitude is bound to change. But I chose to allow myself to remain in a more negative mood. Conversely, I know that had I tried harder to change my focus from myself to God, it wouldn't have taken all week. I knew I needed to ask for forgiveness. I also recognized how blessed I am, and I tried to keep that in focus, but even in that, I still found things to complain about.

Friends, are you going through something that is making you feel as if you don't have enough? I had to remind myself constantly that I needed to count my blessings more than focusing on what I don't have. When we focus on the negatives, I assure you, we will find plenty of negatives. But when we focus on the positives, those multiply too.

As I was reading the "Gratitude" devotional for my daughter and myself, I was tired and decided to read just the first page of scriptures. My daughter asked whether I had read all of them, and I answered honestly that I hadn't (I was ready to go to sleep). She suggested I read all of them. I think that was my needed reminder, for one of the texts was, "In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (1 Thessalonians 5:18, KJV).

Dear Lord, we thank You for the reminder that we ought to be thankful in everything, no matter what we are facing. Lord, there are times that we can't see how our present difficult paths are being used to pave the way for the future, but You can see all things from the beginning to the end. I ask that You help us learn to give thanks in all circumstances, even the hard ones, because they ultimately help to build our characters.

Kaysian C. Gordon

Who Will Go?

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

—Matthew 28:19, 20, NIV

Since retirement allowed my husband and me much more flexibility, positive reports from friends inspired us to try short-term mission service. We have been active in our local church for many years, but our newly flexible time made short-term mission work appealing.

Our research revealed a building project in Modesto, California. No special skills were required, so we signed up. That experience left us with happy memories and a desire for more involvement. We were hooked! This became the first of many fulfilling projects, both in the United States of America and abroad, including building churches, schools, and an evangelism center. Despite my lack of building skills, joining the food preparation and cleanup crew, helping keep the work area free of potential hazards, aiding the electrician in stringing wire, and assisting with concrete work kept me involved.

Our mission service took us to several states in the United States, Norway, and Jamaica. After my husband's death, I accompanied my grandchildren on mission trips to Honduras and Venezuela and my sister-in-law to Peru, adding to my happy memories. Just the gratitude of the people for each project was pay enough.

When I remarried, my husband and I continued short-term mission service, which included a new experience for me. Off to Bolivia we went to do evangelism by *preaching* a series of sermons through an interpreter in Santa Cruz. What a privilege to be part of this outreach and see souls give their hearts to Jesus! My latest thrill was being part of two volunteer teams that built the church where I am a member. Finding no one else to cook meals for the second small team of fifteen, I volunteered to be responsible for three meals daily for fourteen days—something I had never done before. What a challenge, but by God's grace and the help of three of the volunteers, we met the need.

Every child of God needs to be a missionary one way or another. Age or lack of skills doesn't need to stop you because missionary work includes many kinds of outreach. God has a plan for each of us, so prayerfully seek His plan for you. When open to His leading, you may be amazed at what you find yourself doing and where He may lead you.

Marian M. Hart-Gay

January 9

Let's Keep Our Eyes on Jesus!

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize?

So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.

They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

—1 Corinthians 9:24, 25, ESV

Recently, my husband and I had the opportunity to watch our grandson, Nikolas, compete in a track and field championship in California. It was an exciting and memorable experience. We traveled a long distance to attend this event as well as his graduation from high school. Nikolas practiced hard daily because he wanted to win. On the day of the competition, we arrived early to secure seats that would give us a good view. We wanted to position ourselves to see him and cheer him on. Twenty-three high schools competed that day, so the stadium was packed with spectators.

Before it was time for Nikolas's group to compete, we watched many of the races and witnessed the exuberance of victory and the agony of defeat. As athletes walked by to position themselves for some of the races, spectators called out their names and cheered them on. Surprisingly, the competitors kept their focus straight ahead. No one turned around to wave, and no one stopped to acknowledge their family. In our heavenly race, we, too, have to stay focused, with our eyes fixed on Jesus.

In two of the three races in which Nikolas competed, he came in first. It was a thrilling moment to watch him run. We were extremely proud of him. In one of the races, a young man collapsed at the finish line. As he lay on the ground, a man walked over and extended his hand, pulled him up, then put his hand on his shoulder as they walked away. Another runner kicked over the first hurdle and fell, injuring his leg. After some time, he got up and limped away, unable to complete the race. Painful moans came from spectators.

As Christians, we, too, are in a race. Sometimes life's problems will knock us down, or we may stumble and fall, but Jesus, our loving Savior, is always waiting with outstretched arms to lift us up and give us the strength to keep on going. We must always rely on His power to help us make it to the finish line. Fellow traveler, as we continue the race of life, let's keep our eyes on Jesus as we "run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1, ESV).

Shirley C. Iheanacho