

How To Start Over

Matthew 2:1-12

What a wonderful joy and privilege it is to gather together in God's House on the first Sunday of the year 2010! We all look forward to fresh beginnings, new starts, clean slates, or however else you choose to phrase it. The year ahead of us holds much promise, and we are grateful to God for His bountiful blessings in our lives.

It wasn't all bad, but the year 2009 most definitely earned the right to the title, "The Year We'd Like To Forget." It *was* filled with large amounts of bad news. It was the year which witnessed the divisive debate over health care reform, Wall Street bailouts, the federal stimulus package, cash for clunkers, Steve McNair being shot dead by a girlfriend while he slept, the Tiger Woods scandal, and Bernie Madoff being sentenced to 150 years in a federal prison for a massive ponzi scheme. 2009 was the year of the Swine Flu, or H1N1, and the year that unemployment shot up to over 10%. The entire world was in an economic free-fall.

It was also the year that we said goodbye to celebrities such as actress Bea Arthur; actor David Carridine; and Walter Cronkite, who concluded the CBS Evening News for twenty years with the iconic words "And that's the way it is." The year 2009 also saw the death of actress Farrah Fawcett, pop icon Michael Jackson, *The Tonight Show* sidekick Ed McMahon, Senator Ted Kennedy, and Jack Kemp, former pro football player and congressman. There were so many others: actor Karl Malden, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, musician Les Paul, actor Ron Silver, television evangelist Oral Roberts — and the one I personally will miss the most, radio newsman Paul Harvey, of whom it was said, "A great tree has fallen, and left an empty place against the sky."

Add to all of that our own personal tragedies and problems that arose during the year, and *yes*, we may agree: 2009 may be the year we would

like to forget. Your own life may have been filled beyond measure with many good things which you will remember for the rest of your life.

We typically view the turning of the calendar page from December to January as an opportunity to start over, and this is something people do the whole world over. In **Scotland**, it is considered to be good luck if a tall, dark and handsome man is the first to enter your house after the New Year has begun. In **Japan**, New Year's Day is perhaps the most important holiday. In December, the Japanese people hold "Forget-the-year" parties to say goodbye to the problems and concerns of the past year and prepare for a new beginning. A **Spanish** ritual is to eat twelve grapes at midnight, to secure good fortune for each of the twelve months in the coming year. The **Dutch** build huge bonfires of Christmas trees on the street, to purge the old and welcome the new. And here in the **United States**, perhaps the most famous traditions are eating blackeyed peas, the dropping of the New Year ball in Times Square, New York City, and the college football games around the country.

Regardless, people around the world see the beginning of the calendar year as a time when we can start over. The truth is that there are many opportunities throughout the entire year when we can start over, and many reasons why we might need to. But since we all tend to see January 1 as the prime opportunity, let's spend a few minutes looking at a group of men who needed to start over. We usually don't think of these men as actually *needing* to start over, but a careful reading of the story of the Wise Men in Matthew 2 will show us that they did need a new start, and how they got it.

These Magi had been following a star, one which they believed foretold of the birth of the Messiah, and was leading them to Him. But suddenly we see them in Jerusalem, asking "*Where is the one born king of the Jews?*" Now it has always seemed to me that if they had kept their eyes on the star, and followed it, that they wouldn't need to be asking this question in the first

place. This star had led them one thousand miles — and now it can't lead them just a few more miles?

I don't think the failure was in the star — I think the problem was that these wise men had a temporary lapse of wisdom. It wasn't that God had stopped leading them — somewhere along the way they had taken their eyes off the star. Somewhere along their journey they must have said to themselves, "A king of the Jews naturally must be born in the palace of the current king. The star is leading us that way, but common sense takes us this way."

That common sense almost got them into trouble. When they began asking their questions about the birth of the Jewish king, we read in verse two, "*When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.*" Herod was a very unstable man, and he had great potential to do them harm. He had already had his own wife and her mother killed because he was suspicious of them. He had three of his own sons killed because he was afraid they were after his throne. Augustus, the Roman emperor, had said that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. And later he ordered the deaths of every male child two years of age and younger in the entire vicinity around Bethlehem.

Herod thought he would use them so he could find this child and kill him, but God was watching over them. When they left Herod in verse nine, they finally got back on track in their search for the child. They needed a new start. You and I may need to get back on track, too. We have been detoured, as the wise men were. Our common sense may have been bigger in our lives than our faith, and it has led us in a different direction. How can we get back on track? How can we start over?

1 Get away from the crowd and look up again.

Pay close attention to what happened in verse nine. As soon as the wise men left King Herod, they saw the star again. They got away from the city, from the noise and the palace of Herod — and they

saw the star again. Sometimes in our lives we need to get away from the routine of our lives, from the noise and the expectations of others and the demands on our time — and get alone with God.

In verse ten, we see that the wise men were looking up. They were no longer asking for Herod's advice. They had received the information they were looking for, but I think it is safe to say that none of these men had ever been to Bethlehem, and perhaps did not even know where it was. But when they left Jerusalem and resumed their journey, the star reappeared and led them to the very spot where Jesus was.

It is important that we get away from the things that prevent us from seeing what God is doing in our lives. It is urgent that we take the time each day to listen intently to what God is saying to us, to refocus our lives and our hearts on the things that God has prepared for us. God had prepared for them a star, and it was the star they were supposed to follow.

Theologian A. W. Tozer once wrote, "Retire from the world each day to some private spot. ... Stay in the secret place till the surrounding noises begin to fade out of your heart and a sense of God's presence envelops you. Deliberately tune out the unpleasant sounds and come out of your closet determined not to hear them. Listen for the inward voice till you learn to recognize it."

An unknown author has written,

*I wasted an hour one morning beside a mountain stream,
I seized a cloud from the sky above and fashioned myself a dream,
In the hush of the early twilight, far from the haunts of men,
I wasted a summer evening, and fashioned my dream again.
Wasted? Perhaps. Folk say so who never have walked with God,
When lanes are purple with lilacs and yellow with goldenrod.
But I have found strength for my labors in that one short evening hour.
I have found joy and contentment; I have found peace and power.
My dreaming has left me a treasure, a hope that is strong and true.*

From wasted hours I have built my life and found my faith anew.

In this New Year, let's correct the mistakes we made in the past. Let's listen to God. Let's spend time with Him. Let's get away from the influences that pull us away from Him, get away from the crowd and look up again.

2 Reacquaint ourselves with the Bible.

There is one verse of Scripture, Numbers 24:17, which refers to a star in relation to the coming of the Messiah. It reads, *"A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel."* Apparently the wise men had studied the Jewish Scriptures and were familiar with this verse. They took it literally, and when they saw a star with what they considered to be special significance, they followed it. They obviously believed it enough to take what some scholars believe was a one thousand mile journey across the desert.

After their detour into Jerusalem, it was time for them to get back on track. It was time for them to once again remind themselves of the truth of Scripture, a truth that they had staked a lot on in order to follow that star. So verse ten reads, *"When they saw the star, they were overjoyed."* What was the reason for such joy? I believe it was perhaps because they had thought that the star had disappeared. They had lost sight of it when they went into Jerusalem.

The year 2009 (or 2004, or 1999, or 1975) may have been the year that you got off track. I believe that if we are honest with ourselves, we will discover that we got off track with God when we neglected the reading and study of His Word. Were the truth of our neglect to be fully known, we would be appalled! The devil is not afraid of the Bible that has dust on it, and there is dust on too many of our Bibles. David Nygren has said that *"If all the neglected Bibles were dusted simultaneously, we would have a record dust storm and the sun would go into eclipse for a whole week."*

That may be an exaggeration, but it is not stretching the truth for us to say that we do not read and study and meditate on the precious words of God enough. We defend it, exalt it, and sing its praises—but we many of us do not even look inside of the copies that we have. Some who had read the Bible regularly have had their special times to do so—some in the morning, before the day begins, some at the close of day, and others read it whenever they find a few minutes during the day. Whatever works for you, use it—find something that fits your lifestyle and personality and do it!

Henry H. Halley is best known for his book entitled *Halley's Bible Handbook*, a reference work many of you may have in your homes. He wrote, "The Bible is the book we live by. Bible reading is the means by which we learn, and keep fresh in our minds, the ideas that mold our lives. Our lives are the product of our thoughts. To live right, we need to think right. We must read the Bible frequently and regularly so that God's thoughts may be frequently and regularly in our minds; so that His thoughts may become our thoughts; so that our ideas may become conformed to God's ideas; so that we may be transformed into God's own image and be made fit for eternal companionship with our Creator." —from "Halley's Bible Handbook," Henry H. Halley, Revised Edition, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000, p. 16

3 Look forward.

After they worshipped the Christ child, verse twelve tells us that "having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route." And we never hear from them again. They didn't go back into Jerusalem to revisit their old mistakes. They didn't go back to the chief priests and teachers of the law and say to them, "You were right! The child really *is* there—why don't *you* go worship Him, too?" No. They heeded the warning God gave them, and they never looked back.

We humans are tempted to look back too often, aren't we? We seem to like to revisit our old mistakes and sins, replaying them over and over in our

minds until we feel beaten down and defeated. The Bible makes it clear that God has provided a way for us to have victory over our past sins and errors, and it is a path through Jesus Christ, and His finished work on the Cross. God's plan for us involves a wonderful future—remember the words of Jeremiah 29:11? *“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”* They were true in 2009—they will be true in 2010, and in all the years which are to come.

Eight-year-old Frank had looked forward for weeks to one particular Saturday because his father had promised to take him fishing if the weather was good. There hadn't been any rain for weeks and as Saturday approached, Frank was excited about the fishing trip. But, wouldn't you know it, when Saturday morning dawned, it was raining heavily and it appeared that it would continue all day.

Frank wandered around the house, peering out of the windows and grumbling more than a little. "Seems like the Lord would know that it would have been better to have the rain yesterday than today," he complained to his father who was sitting by the fireplace, enjoying a good book. His father tried to explain to Frank how badly the rain was needed, how it would make the flowers grow and bring much needed moisture to the farmers' crops. But Frank would not be consoled. "It just isn't right," he said over and over.

Then, about three o'clock, the rain stopped, with time left for some fishing, so they quickly loaded their gear and headed to the lake. Whether it was the rain or some other reason, the fish were biting hungrily and father and son returned with a full string of fine, big fish.

At supper, when some of the fish were ready, Frank's mom asked him to say grace. Frank did--and concluded his prayer by saying, "And, Lord, if I sounded grumpy earlier today it was because I couldn't see far enough ahead." --James S. Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988), p. 314.

We cannot see very far ahead, so we tend instead to look back at the past, at something we can see a little more clearly. But getting back on track with what God wants in our lives involves that we should look forward as far as we can, and for what we cannot see, trust God for the rest. An unknown poet once wrote a poem entitled, *The Unlived Year*:

*Midnight strikes, and the old year's gone.
We close the tablets we've written on,
And torn 'twixt hope and doubt and fear,
We open the book of the unlived year!
An unlived year! Ah, stained with tears
Are the well-thumbed volumes of other years!
Soiled by blunders and dark regret
Are the pages we read with eyelids wet.
But fresh in our hands once more is laid
A clean, new book by the Master made.
Unmarred are the pages lying there--
Twelve new chapters fresh and fair.
It is ours to write the daily tale,
Of how we conquer--or how we fail;
Of struggle and effort and hope that makes
Like a song in the heart, when the bright day breaks.
Yes, fresh in our hands with the title clear,
Is the challenge now of an unlived year!*

Your common sense may have become bigger than your faith, and you may have been sidetracked in your walk with God. This is the year you can start again! This is the year you can walk out of your Jerusalem, away from your Herod, and begin following your star again!

- 1. Get away from the crowd and look up again!**
- 2. Reacquaint yourself with the Bible!**
- 3. Look forward!**