

Renewing Our Vows for the New Year Ahead

*“When thou shalt
vow a vow unto the
LORD thy God,
thou shalt not
slack to pay it: for
the LORD thy God
will surely require
it of thee; and it
would be sin in
thee.”*

—Deuteronomy 23:21

FOR GENERATIONS, THE

start of another new year has often been associated with the resolve to set certain new goals. It is thus a proper time to be thinking about making commitments that would improve our lives. As we enter the New Year 2009, many of the Lord's people will also take the opportunity for solemn reflection regarding their consecrated walk in newness of life. They will rededicate, refocus, and strive for higher attainments of growth as New Creatures in Christ Jesus, and to be more faithful in carrying out their consecration vows even unto death.

Turning over a new leaf on our calendars is an excellent time to reflect on the abundant goodness, mercies, and blessings that were received from the

loving hands of our Heavenly Father during the year now ending, and to do so with much joy and thankfulness. It is also a time to look forward with increased anticipation and hope as we see increasing evidence that Christ's long-promised kingdom is nearer than when we first believed. We look forward to using our time, talents, and opportunities in new ways to serve our loving Heavenly Father and his people. We may share with him in his ultimate plans and wonderful purpose to bring blessings of life and peace to the poor sin-sick and dying human family, and to provide reconciliation for all of the obedient under the administration of Christ's future kingdom of peace.

MAKING A VOW

The word 'vow' means to make a solemn promise, or pledge, to do a certain thing. When the consecrated follower of our Lord Jesus makes a vow, it reflects the heart condition of the brother or sister, and represents a life of total commitment and service to the Heavenly Father. It involves the sacrifice of all that we have and all that we hope to be. It must be done with our best intention to carry out that pledge and to be faithful even unto death. David's son Solomon spoke of the seriousness of making vows and faithfully keeping them when he wrote, "When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay."—Eccles. 5:4,5

THE ACCEPTABLE TIME

This present Gospel Age has been set aside by God for the very special purpose of selecting the

bride of Christ. "Being also co-laborers, we exhort you not to receive the favor of God in vain; (for he says, 'in a Season acceptable, I listened to thee, and in a Day of Salvation I assisted thee.' Behold! now is a well-accepted Season; behold! now is a Day of Salvation.)" II Cor. 6:1,2, *Wilson's Emphatic Diaglott*

A LIVING SACRIFICE

All like-minded children of God are energized by the wise counsel of the Apostle Paul, who wrote, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."—Rom. 12:1,2

Paul's inspiring exhortation to give our lives as a sacrifice to the Heavenly Father is addressed only to the fully consecrated and justified members of the household of faith. They are being called and selected by God during the acceptable time of sacrifice—this present Gospel Age. As the typical high priest of Israel offered himself to God, so also did Jesus. "Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself. For the law maketh men high priests which have infirmity; but the word of the oath, which was since the law, maketh the Son, who is consecrated for evermore."—Heb. 7:27,28

The apostle appreciated his privilege to live a life of sacrifice to God, and speaking of his own

experience said, “Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake, which is the church.” (Col. 1:24) He reminded his beloved Timothy in his letter to him, saying, “It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us: If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself.”—II Tim. 2:11-13

GIVING ALL DILIGENCE

The Apostle Peter spoke of our High Calling in Christ Jesus, and stressed the importance of making it our highest priority in life. “Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity.”—II Pet. 1:4,7

“Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”—vss. 10,11

WINNING CHRIST

Paul wrote a very personal account of his own experiences in his letter to the church at Philippi

which are meaningful lessons for us. He said, "What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead."—Phil. 3:7-11

The apostle tells us that he was ready to give up all personal hopes, ambitions, and honors to receive a position of favor with Christ. All other interests and earthly advantages have no lasting value. They fade into insignificance in comparison with the heavenly hope, and to attain the Divine favor and chief blessing as an heir of God and a joint-heir with our Lord Jesus.

JESUS TAUGHT IN PARABLES

An important lesson in connection with how we pay our vows of consecration to the Heavenly Father was given to us by the Master when he taught the parable of the talents.

"The kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability;

and straightway took his journey.” (Matt. 25:14,15) During this Gospel Age, each of Jesus’ consecrated followers has been responsible and accountable to God in accordance with their own several abilities. This would be shown in their faithfulness to use what they possess in their service to him, including their time, influence, and opportunity. “If there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not.”—II Cor. 8:12

THE FIVE TALENTS AND THE TWO

Jesus continued, “Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made them other five talents. And likewise he that had received two, he also gained other two. But he that had received one went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord’s money.”—Matt. 25:16-18

A responsible steward will seek and find ways and places where he can use the talents he possesses which are fully consecrated to the Heavenly Father. He uses sanctified wisdom and judgment to his best advantage under the providence and guidance of God’s Word. It is our duty to study how we may invest our talents to receive the greatest advantage. The believer who had one talent did not show proper judgment, but carelessly buried his talent in earthly desires and pursuits. This indicates a lack of love and appreciation to God for the blessings received from him.

Jesus then said, “After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them. And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou

deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more. His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. He also that had received two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside them. His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.”—Matt. 25:19-23

The words ‘after a long time the lord of those servants cometh’ points to the closing scenes of the present Gospel Age at the time of our Lord’s Second Advent. His first work would be with the faithful members of his church, as spoken by Peter, “The time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?” (I Pet. 4:17) Paul also wrote, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.”—II Cor. 5:10

Each one of the bride class who are found faithful unto death will receive their rewards in proportion to the degree of effort spent in carrying out their covenant of sacrifice, and in their service to the Heavenly Father. Faithfulness in using the few talents given to each one will bring a correspondingly greater privilege of service as part of Christ’s future kingdom.

THE ONE TALENT

Continuing in Matthew, we read, “Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine. His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury.”—Matt. 25:24-27

The consecrated believer who had received the one talent represents the large number of the Lord’s people who may not possess outstanding abilities or means whereby they may serve God. They have numerous small opportunities that they may use in serving our loving Heavenly Father who accepts these small offerings of love and devotion to him. However, these humble provisions of grace were buried in earthly interests and were thus neglected.

NOT MANY WISE OR NOBLE

Paul wrote concerning the fact that few would be called from among the worldly wise, saying, “Ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring

to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.”—I Cor. 1:26-29

THE UNPROFITABLE SERVANT

The unprofitable servant who had the one talent serves as an important point of reference. “Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”—Matt. 25:28-30

Jesus taught that those who fail to use the opportunities and privileges that are available to them to serve God will have these privileges taken from them, and they will be given to another consecrated believer who has been faithful in using his talents profitably. A talent that is not used has been buried under worldly cares and encumbrances which have not been set aside. A faithless and slothful servant has broken his covenant as a colaborer with the Heavenly Father.

The revelator provides an important perspective when he wrote, “One of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the lamb.”—Rev. 7:13,14

TESTINGS NECESARY

Carrying out our vows to God encompasses a concerted effort in overcoming the temptations that

surround us in this evil world. It includes overcoming the failings of our own fleshly weaknesses and the wiles of Satan, the Devil—the great Adversary of the Lord’s people. “I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night.”—Rev. 12:10

SATAN’S CHALLENGE

Our Lord Jesus is the standard example of total commitment for us to follow, and he demonstrated that pledge soon after he was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. It was at that time that the Heavenly Father allowed Satan to tempt him according to the flesh, the world, and the Adversary. The Gospel account reads, “Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred.”—Matt. 4:1,2

Jesus challenged Satan’s suggestion that if he were the Son of God he could command that the very stones be made bread to satisfy his hunger. Jesus quickly responded with a scriptural answer [Deut. 8:3], when he proclaimed, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.” (Matt. 4:3,4) Satan then attempted to quote a scripture [Ps. 91:11,12] that assured Jesus that if he were indeed the Son of God he could cast himself from the pinnacle of the Temple with no fear of harm to himself. Again Jesus turned to the scripture [Deut. 6:16]

for his answer—"Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God."—Matt. 4:5-7

A THIRD TEMPTATION

Satan's third attempt to test Jesus was to take him to a very high mountain from which they could view all the kingdoms of the world. The Devil offered them to Jesus if he would fall down and worship him, but our Lord answered, "It is written [Deut. 6:13], Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve." (Matt. 4:8-10) The Apostle Paul made clear the fact that Satan is the god of this evil world and was therefore able to offer Jesus the kingdoms of the world. "In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them." (II Cor. 4:4) Jesus said, "Hereafter I will not talk much with you: for the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me." (John 14:30) Immediately after the confrontation with Jesus we read, "Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him."—Matt. 4:11

PREPARING FOR THE WARFARE

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul urges, "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness [wicked spirits, *Marginal Translation*] in high places." (Eph. 6:10-12)

The apostle encouraged the brethren toward greater faith, confidence, and trust in our Lord, and this is especially true in our evil day.

“Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”—vss. 13-17

The ‘preparation[s]’ of which Paul spoke will provide the proper means to fight the good fight of faith. Putting on the ‘whole armor of God’ is necessary to protect us from the fiery darts that may come our way, and because the warfare will be against the prince of darkness and the wicked spirits in heavenly places. If Satan realizes that we are well protected and resisting him with the Heavenly Father’s provisions of grace, he will retreat from his attacks.

FACING AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

As we enter the New Year 2009, we do so with awareness of the fear and uncertainty that now grips the nations. “Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” (Eph. 5:16) The United States government will be installed with a new and untried administration to deal with many complex and unsolvable problems. These include the chaotic financial situation with millions of family homes subject

to foreclosure, unemployment lines growing longer, the weakening value of the American dollar, and the fear of major inflation. Savings and retirement accounts are losing value and major banks and corporations are failing.

The United States continues to fight two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, with the prospect of enlarging the confrontation to Pakistan. Israel is surrounded by hostile nations that seek its destruction, while Iran—one of its enemies—seeks to acquire nuclear weapons. There is concern over Russia's intentions toward their former territories, including Georgia and Ukraine, and Poland has allowed the United States to place weapons on its territory. Control over oil supplies threatens the people of Europe who are dependant upon Russia for their energy supplies. Terrorist organizations may be planning new and devastating attacks on innocent civilians. "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come." (II Tim. 3:1) These few evidences of the growing turmoil in the world point to the necessity of our putting on the whole armor of God, and resolve to fight the good fight of faith.

OUR DAILY REMINDER

Many students of the Bible are familiar with the reading of the Morning Resolve that has become a household source of daily help and encouragement in the narrow way. Let us continue to rejoice in its wonderful scope of blessings as we strive to make our calling and election sure. We include it here as a reminder of our responsibility to renew our vows to our loving Heavenly Father now and during the New Year just before us.

MY MORNING RESOLVE

My earliest thought I desire shall be, "What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits toward me? I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the LORD [for grace to help]. I will pay my vows unto the Most High."—Ps. 116:12-14

Remembering the Divine call, "Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice" (Ps. 50:5), I resolve that by the Lord's assisting grace I will today, as a saint of God, fulfil my vows, continuing the work of sacrificing the flesh and its interests that I may attain unto the Heavenly inheritance in joint-heirship with my Redeemer.

I will strive to be simple and sincere toward all.

I will seek not to please and honor self, but the Lord.

I will be careful to honor the Lord with my lips, that my words may be unctuous and blessed to all.

I will seek to be faithful to the Lord, the Truth, the brethren, and all with whom I have to do, not only in great matters, but also in the little things of life.

Trusting myself to Divine care and the Providential overruling of all my interests for my highest welfare, I will seek not only to be pure in heart, but to repel all anxiety, all discontent, all discouragement.

I will neither murmur nor repine at what the Lord's providence may permit, because

Faith can firmly trust him, come what may. ■