

Covenant and Sacrificial Giving

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Date: 23 January 2022

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- [0 : 0 0] There's a short phrase that tends to come up around about the last week of December, and it makes me feel ill. New Year's resolution.
- Now, let me just break down that phrase. It's three words, and in fact, with two of those words, I haven't got a problem with it all. The word resolution is a good word.
- In terms of Christian discipleship, it's about resolution. It's about responding to God's call, God's covenant with us, and saying, yes, I want to give this my all.
- I believe you've got plans for my life, and I believe that you want the best for me to live life to the full. So, you know, show me what to do. It's about setting out and making a fresh start.
- Resolution's a good thing. As is the word new, no problem with that whatsoever. Christian faith is about fresh starts, new beginnings. It's good stuff.
- [1 : 0 2] My hang-up with the phrase New Year's resolution is to do with the word year. Because it locks all of that into the calendar in a fixed kind of way.
- If you like it, it calendarizes. Is that a word? It is now. It kind of calendarizes. It locks it in time as though you've got one chance to make a go of it.
- And it starts in early January. And if you get it wrong by January the 3rd, well, then that's it. Until next year. And in the meantime, you just feel a bit rubbish. It couldn't be further from New Testament spirituality.
- Romans 12 talks about being living sacrifices. That sounds like a contradiction in terms, doesn't it? If you sacrifice something, how can it still be alive?
- But that phrase is there to carry that duality of meaning there. That actually to be a Christian is to be alive. And it's to sacrifice. And as you sacrifice, as you make sacrifices, so you are truly alive.
- [2 : 1 2] And yeah, we'll get it wrong. Because we're human and we're broken and we're weak. And we mess up. But you don't have to wait another 12 months before you make another set of New Year's resolutions.
- Now, I'm all for praying the covenant prayer at the beginning of the year. I think it's a good thing to do. But the danger is that it can get caught up in that similar sort of cycle that we think, well, you got one shot at this.
- If we're to understand the meaning of covenant properly, yes, by all means, say at the beginning of the year. Yes, at the beginning of the year, commit that year to God.
- But remember, that commitment is something that we're called to live out every day. And we will mess it up. But covenant says to us that we're accepted as messed up people.
- Because God knows. God knows what we can do and longs for us to grow and to grow and to grow. We're called to be living sacrifices.

[3 : 15] That means that it's about the right here and the right now, each and every day of our lives. That faith is something that's about fresh starts, new beginnings, new resolutions every day. And there's nothing wrong with the fact that we know, we look back at the last 24 hours and we see we've messed up.

We make a fresh start. We move on. And we keep on moving. Because that's what faith is. It's dynamic. It's not locked into time. It's not frozen. It's something that keeps on moving.

We are called to be living sacrifices every day, right here and right now. But I want to suggest that where we go wrong is when we actually do lock that into time.

And we do so with our preoccupations with time. Either preoccupied on the future, what's ahead. Or we're locked into the present. Or we're locked into the past.

Let me say what I mean by that. Firstly, what about that sense of preoccupation with the future? How might that actually stymie that sense of being a living sacrifice right here, right now?

[4 : 15] Well, I think there's two things that come to mind. The first is we're preoccupied by the future because of a sense of procrastination. In other words, we're saying, yeah, okay, I know God's saying this to me.

Probably God's been challenging me to do this certain thing in my life for quite some time. But I will get on with it and I will do it. Whereas actually God perhaps is saying, you've waited long enough.

Get on and do it. Right here. Right now. You might make a bit of a hash of it, whatever that is. But he's asking you to do it.

Don't put it on hold. Whether that means putting yourself up to help out with our youth and children's work. Whether it means that God's calling you to a ministry of preaching or leading worship.

Whether God's calling you to some kind of ministry throughout the week in some way. Maybe God's calling you to a particular type of job and to serve you in a workplace in a very different... Serve God in a workplace in a different way.

[5 : 14] Maybe God's calling you, yeah, I'm going to say it, to sign a standing order form. Don't wait. Be a living sacrifice.

Right here. Right now. Do it. Procrastination is the first thing then. The second thing, and I want to say, by the way, I'm preaching to myself as much as anybody this morning.

I hope I always do that, but especially this morning as I was getting ready for this. These are challenges to myself as much as anybody else. One of the ways in which we are preoccupied with the future is we worry about it.

We worry like mad because we look into the future and we don't know what lies ahead. And in that uncertainty, we live out that anxiety through nervous energy.

Corrie Ten Boom said this. Worry does not empty tomorrow of sorrow, but it empties today of strength.

[6 : 13] Let me say that again. Worry does not empty tomorrow of sorrow, but it does empty today of strength.

Think ahead. That's good. Plan ahead. That's good. But worrying ahead actually serves no purpose. And I just wonder how much we expend that energy that actually God could use right here, right now.

Because our minds are focused on that uncertain future that we're worrying about so much. Here's an idea that I'm trying to experiment with.

I wouldn't say I've cracked it, but I'm finding it quite a helpful experiment. If you know how to worry, then you probably know how to pray because you know how to meditate, because you know how to go over things in your mind.

So when you find yourself in that state of tension between the now and the uncertain future, and it generates those feelings of worry, why not try and translate that into an expression of prayer and use that energy as a kind of being held in that place of tension.

[7 : 22] Allow the uncertainty to be a living out of a prayer of faith. And instead of allowing it to turn in on yourself, turn it over to God.

Let it go and make it your prayer. Allow it to be that living by faith, being a living sacrifice.

So a preoccupation with the future can be the first thing. It can step in the way of the right here, the right now, the getting on with it. You know, the other thing, it makes me a strange thing to say, but a preoccupation with the present can also trip us up.

Let me see what I mean by that. If we're not careful, we can get so caught up with that question, am I in the right place right now? Am I doing what God wants me to do right now?

That actually, we never actually get on with doing things right now. We can be so caught up with that question, well, is God saying to me that right now I should be there doing that?

[8 : 23] Or perhaps I've made the wrong decision. I need to, I should be somewhere else. It's good to write, to ask those questions. For all intents and purposes, where you are at any given moment in time is where you are at that given moment in time.

And therefore, whilst it's no bad thing to be asking God questions about what he might have in store, and perhaps he does have a change of plan in mind for you, as long as you're in that place, you're in that place.

So it may be, for example, that you're in a job right now, that maybe you think God's calling you to something else. Maybe, but until you've left it, you're still there. Maybe that where you live is not where you're meant to be right now, but as long as you're there, you're there.

Maybe your situation is something that is going to change and needs to change. But until it has, that's where you are. And the danger can be we can be so absorbed with the question of insecure, that we become insecure as to where we are, that we don't actually get on with the right here and the right now, and that's what God's saying to us every day.

In the 11th century, this is a true story, there was a Bavarian king, and he was a Christian, and he felt that he was being called to join a monastery, to become a monk.

[9 : 46] So he decided that he was going to leave the throne, and he approached the prior, and he explained to him that he wanted to join that place as a monk.

The prior said to him, Your Majesty, do you understand that your pledge here would be one of obedience? That will be very hard for you, having been a king.

The king said, I understand. I want you to know that the rest of my life, I will obey you as Christ leads you. The prior replied, Then return to your throne, and serve faithfully where God has placed you.

I think the third way in which we can be distracted by time is the focus on the past. And I need to say right at the beginning now, that this is perhaps the most challenging thing, I think. Particularly the longer we've been Christians, the more of that Christian past we've got.

The danger is the longer you've been a Christian, you can look back at your previous spiritual experiences, wistfully. Whether that's kind of saying, I remember that day when I made that commitment at Billy Graham's rally in 1967.

[11 : 16] I remember that amazing experience of renewal I had at Spring Harvest in 1988. New wine 2011, it was just awesome.

You know, it's good to look back at these things and to celebrate them, to draw on those things. But we lose something very dangerous.

Dangerously lose something if we just live off that past. A married couple will look back at their wedding day. Will look back at when they first met and fell in love. And that sort of time, that moment in time, has a uniqueness of its own.

But in marriage, it's not about looking back at that great day or that great moment when you first met. It's about the living outness of that over the decades.

And that only deepens and strengthens over the decades. And when it comes to our relationship with God, the danger is that we look back wistfully at what was. And without discrediting that for one moment, the reality is, is God calls us to be living sacrifices right here, right now, wherever we are.

[12 : 32] Whether we are in this place or whether we are in the office, whether we're at the school gates, whether it's in our homes, wherever it is, that's where we're called. Right here, right now, to be living sacrifices.

The danger can be that the longer we've been Christians, the more in danger we are of becoming tired and feeling, well, I'm exhausted and I've done that and, well, I've been there.

Billy Graham, towards the end of his life, wrote a book called Nearing Home. There's a whole chapter where he says you don't retire from life. Wherever we are, however long we've been around, God's got plans for us.

As long as we are in this world. They may have to change and adapt to our situation, to our circumstances, to our limitations. Of course they do. But as long as we're here, we're here and God's got a plan for us.

I remember having a conversation with a couple, I need to say right at the outset, they weren't part of any of the churches that I'm minister of at the moment. Okay, so in case I'm telling you this story and you start thinking, I wonder if he's talking about something.

[13 : 44] You won't know these people, okay? But so I'm safe to tell this story. But it was a few years ago and I was talking to this couple and they were explaining to me what they had done over many, many years in terms of the youth work in their church.

And it was amazing that what they had done over decades, I think it was, was just mind-blowing. They, they, they, they, weekends, Friday nights, Saturdays, Sunday, Sunday evenings, having young people round to their house, taking them off on different places, youth camps, the lot.

They had worked hard. They had done an amazing job. And as they told me these things, I was full of admiration.

And then, and they said, we've done our bit. Now for one moment, I think for one moment that I say this with any sense of disrespect, because I am sure that there are many, many people who are no longer quite so young, but who were, back in the day, who under their ministry became Christians and grew as Christians.

And that what they did over many, many years had a huge impact for God's purposes in the world. But you know that phrase, I've done my bit, has no place in Christian discipleship.

[15 : 13] It doesn't. And that may be a painful thing for us to come to terms with when we want to be able to say, I've done my bit. It's not an option.

It's not an option. Now, of course, it may well be, and to go back to that example, that that particular couple probably are not called to serve God in that way that they once did.

In that sense, it's a chapter, a season that has passed. Give thanks for it. Things change as we get older and we change and our situations change and we have to re-discern what God's plan is for us as our circumstances change and as we have to accept limitations.

But let's never, ever think for one moment that we can say, I've done my bit. Because as long as we are here in this world, God's got plans right here and right now.

a relatively recently retired man was giving a talk to a group of students. He was a Christian.

[16 : 31] It was a Christian union event that he was talking to. And as he spoke to these Christians, this man who was recently retired was a very, very successful businessman. His whole life was a success.

In fact, look at his life. Everything seemed to go really, really well for him. And he was talking to these young people, explaining to them how if you give everything over to God, God will honour that and will bless it.

And he said to them, as I look through my life now, I see that my relationships have been successful. I've got a wonderful family. You know, everything is going really, really well and I've been blessed financially. But you know, it hasn't always been like this.

In fact, I look back when I was 18 years old myself he said, I had just a few pounds. And yet, it was then as an 18 year old I just took that very small amount that I had and with the small amount of money that I had and with the very little possessions that I had I said to God, Lord, I want you to take my whole life and I want you to take everything and I want you to take every last penny that I have and use it as you see fit.

take it, take it, Lord. And as I look back over the years I see that God took what I gave him and increased it in ever greater measure and he keeps on giving and keeps on giving and has blessed me.

[18 : 01] Towards the, as it came to the end of his talk one very, very courageous student on the front row put up her hand and she said, can I just say I found your talk so inspiring.

Thank you. And what's challenged me so much is the way in which you have said that even though you have so much now there was a time when you had very, very little and how you had the courage and the boldness when you were the same age as we are to make your prayer, Lord, take everything I have and use it and you handed it over.

He was nodding and was about to sit down and she said, I dare you to do it again. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you that you are interested in the right here and the right now of our lives.

Thank you that as we look back on the past, whether we were aware of it or not, you were there. Thank you that as we look to the future, even though that is an uncertain future, you are there and you have promises.

[19 : 41] You have plans. You have purposes for us. Lord, thank you that it's right here and right now that you're most interested in in our everyday life.

Lord, forgive us for when we are preoccupied by the future or by the present or by the past. Forgive us for when we allow those things to get in the way. Lord, help us, help us, help us to be living sacrifices.

Whilst our thoughts may go to the past, the present, the future, may our focus be on the right here and the right now of your presence. May we hear your voice. May we have the courage to respond where you are calling us to make sacrifices and to truly live.

Lord, we hold our lives before you on this day in which we have said that covenant prayer. And as we continue to worship you now and on into this week, speak to us, challenge us, inspire us and lead us in the right here and right now that we may truly be living sacrifices.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.