

December 30, 2018

## “How to Begin Again”

Isaiah 1:18-20

FCF: The longing for a fresh start

**PROPOSITION:** (anchor) The LORD alone makes new beginnings.  
(magnet) We must look to Him to start anew.

### SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Thinking back over the events of the past year, my guess is that there are no few who would really like a “do over.” Whether we cast our eye to the realms of politics, academia, sports, pop culture – or if we just look in the mirror – there’s a common desire for a fresh start.

So we hear much said about resolutions for the New Year – which ones to make and how to keep them. Typically, we want to weigh less, read more, learn a skill, or finish a project. And we want to do it better, certainly than before. So we try new strategies and fresh approaches.

Which is all fine. But there’s something that needs to be injected into all of that. Odd as this may sound, most of our resolutions don’t go far enough. We’re settling for too little. A real change is possible, something that comes not by resolution but renewal. We can begin again.

**SCRIPTURE READING:** **Isaiah 1:1-20** (vv.18-20)

### PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

### SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Few voices say “Christmas” like that of Bing Crosby. And few Bing Crosby songs are as beloved as “White Christmas” – the best-selling single of all time, over 50 million copies. Released during the early months of WWII, with thousands of soldiers away from home and longing for the familiar sights and sounds of the holidays, the song was an immediate success. And still today it has a nostalgic pull upon us. But there may be more to its endurance than just nostalgia – something deeper, a chord being struck we might sense but not quite understand.

(**READ Isaiah 1:18**) What was snow from a biblical perspective? The references are few which speaks to its rarity in the Near East, mostly known by the distant sight of mountaintops far away. Snow is mostly used as a symbol in the Scriptures, a symbol of two things. First, its whiteness points to purity. That’s clear even from our text. But there’s something else as well and that has to do with its source. Snow comes from God. He controls the forces of nature and sends it as He wills. Bring those two things together and we have this dynamic. We can begin again but not without God’s intervention. He alone is the One who makes new beginnings. And so, if we are to begin again, we must look to Him, taking seriously what it is He is promising.

Which comes in two parts – hearing the charges and then believing the gospel.

### I. HEARING THE CHARGES

First, hearing the charges. We need to know that our sins are like scarlet. We need to grapple with the fact they are red like crimson. We need to hear this, to face it, and to own it.

*A) A Summons to Creation*

Isaiah begins by summoning creation to hear the charges, to serve as witness against us.

1. Charge of rebellion

(**READ Isaiah 1:2**) Israel's history is summarized in two parts - a rearing and then rebellion.

2. State of estrangement

Despite their privilege, they had thrown away all they had and turned away (**READ Isaiah 1:4b**).

3. Rampant foolishness

And in all of this, shown themselves to be fools. Thus, these images in vv.5-8 of a beaten body and a ravaged landscape. We see clearly that sin is not only unreasonable but unreasoning.

*Illustration:*

There is an insanity to sin. We live for and chase after fleeting comforts and finite things. We are ruled by our desires and tyrannized by our disappointments. We were made for the One who made us and yet think ourselves to be our own lords and masters. The insanity of sin.

*B) A Summons to His People*

Isaiah then shifts to another summons. The people are called to appear in court (**READ Isaiah 1:10**). Sodom and Gomorrah were associated with the most flagrant of evil and twisted of ways, the very bottom threshold of sin. And God's people were being equated with them.

1. A sham religion

Why? A sham religion. You see it in vv.10-17 (**READ Isaiah 1:11**). All their rituals meant nothing, added nothing, did nothing. It was burdensome and unbearable to the LORD. Why?

2. Disconnected from reality

It was disconnected from reality. There was no concern for God, for holiness or righteousness.

3. Empty formalism

It was all just an empty formalism. They were going through the motions. Worse – as if it can get any worse – in their hearts, the people of God were really just bent on manipulating Him.

*Illustration:*

It was what most any child does with Santa Claus. Think with me. There's little interest in actually knowing Santa, in a relationship with him. The letters show no concern for his well being. It's all a list of wishes and wants. The joys of Christmas held hostage by demands.

It's the same here. God's people weren't ready to be renewed, to begin again, until they had heard the charges, until they understood the state of their hearts. That had to come first.

*Application:*

The same is true now. Isaiah 1 is about us. We don't want to hear that but it's true. And whether we need to begin again for the first time or for the umpteenth time, we really can't until we see how we too have turned away from the LORD in our self-reliance and self-righteousness. Creation could be called as witness against us. We too could easily be called into this court.

We need to be. We need to have the disease revealed, our sin exposed, our guilt unveiled, the veneer stripped away. We need to see the hate, the lust, the pride that lurks within. We need to own the ways we try to “use” God. Think of how this shows itself in our suffering. “I don’t want the peace you promise or the maturing that comes. I don’t want intimacy with you. I don’t care about your will being done on earth or anywhere else. I just want to be done with this.”

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## II. BELIEVING THE GOSPEL

Which begins with hearing the charges. And then believing the gospel. (READ Isaiah 1:18) This is a striking contrast. And it pulls on our hearts. How can it become true for us?

### A) *Repenting of Our Sin*

#### 1. Seeing our sin for what it is

By repenting of our sin. Seeing it for what it is – as destructive, madness, foolishness, hurtful.

#### 2. Grieving over our sin

And not just hurtful to us but to God. There is an emphasis we need to see in vv.2-3. “My children, of all people!” Note also the pain of v.4. This “Ah” is a cry of pain and indignation.

#### 3. Turning from it to God

We need to see our sin, grieve over it, and turn from it to God (READ Isaiah 1:16-17). This in no way speaks of earning or winning God’s favor. It is simply heeding His call to turn, to repent.

*Illustration:*

C. S. Lewis captures this well in this passage from *Mere Christianity* (READ quote):

Now what was the sort of “hole” man had got himself into? He had tried to set up on his own, to behave as if he belonged to himself. In other words, fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms. Laying down your arms, surrendering, saying you are sorry, realising that you have been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again from the ground floor — that is the only way out of a “hole.” This process of surrender — this movement full speed astern — is what Christians call repentance. Now repentance is no fun at all. It is something much harder than merely eating humble pie. It means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will that we have been training ourselves into for thousands of years. It means killing part of yourself, undergoing a kind of death...Remember, this repentance, this willing submission to humiliation and a kind of death, is not something God demands of you before He will take you back and which He could let you off of if He chose: it is simply a description of what going back to Him is like. If you ask God to take you back without it, you are really asking Him to let you go back without going back. It cannot happen.

### B) *Trusting in His Work*

#### 1. The finished work of the Son

Now having heard this call to repent of our sin, we are to trust in the finished work of the Son. You may have noticed the mention of bruises, sores, and raw wounds in v.6. Ours were taken up by another in our place (READ Isaiah 53:4-5). This is the cross, the sacrifice of Jesus for us.

#### 2. The delighted gaze of the Father

(READ Isaiah 1:9) Helpless but not hopeless. God would not abandon His people. He would preserve a remnant. And through that remnant, the Messiah would come, His one and only Son. And as we entrust ourselves to the finished work of the Son, we can know the delighted gaze of

the Father. (READ Isaiah 1:18) The darkest stain now the purest white. So how does God see us? When He looks at you, what does He see? You are cloaked in the righteousness of Jesus.

This is the best of news, the gospel. His finished work for us and delighted gaze upon us.

*Application:*

It is a radical message. Once we were lost but now we are found. Once we were blind but now we see. Because of what Jesus has done, the debt paid and paid in full, God cannot love you any more right now than He does already. And there's nothing you can do to undo that.

It is a radical message. So much so that if its wonder is allowed to shine, it's likely to be misunderstood. We'll be accused of encouraging licentiousness, of letting people off. Paul was. You see it in his letters. But we can't take away from this. And we dare not add anything to it.

*Illustration:*

Thinking of snow, new fallen snow comes to mind. Untouched, undisturbed, just as we see first thing in the morning. Contrasted with how ugly it starts to look as it's plowed, moved around, and mixed with all our chemicals and dirt. Yes, we know the roads need to be cleared. But when it comes to the snow itself, to its purity, to add to it is to diminish its wonder and beauty. Again, God alone makes new beginnings. We can add nothing. It's by His grace alone.

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**CONCLUSION:**

So, Christian, how do you begin again? How do we start anew? It begins with this – remembering that you're already new. And there's nothing you need to do or even can do to make yourself new. Which means that when we blow it (not if, but when), we need to confess what we've done to those we've hurt – private sins to God, public sins to others. We need to be honest and clear. And we must avoid excusing or explaining things away. We confess and then we humbly ask for forgiveness. And repent, turning from our sin to God. Wrestling with the affections of our hearts and what it was in that moment that pulled us away, that blinded us and enticed us. And then we move forward. We confess, ask for forgiveness, repent, and move on.

All the while, hearing the Lord's gracious invitation to us, "Come now..." Come now, knowing that He's started over with others who've done so much worse than you. Consider King David. Go and read 2 Samuel 11 and the account of his sins of adultery and murder, of his discontentment and deceit. Consider the Apostle Peter. Go and read the Gospel accounts of his cowardice and betrayal during Jesus' trial, of his arrogance and presumption. Don't you see? You can't surprise the LORD. There's nothing too ugly or horrific for Him to handle. There's nothing He hasn't seen before. There's nothing He hasn't forgiven before or won't again. Stop kidding yourself. When it comes to your sin, you're really not that special. But you are loved.

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