

WHAT DO YOU EXPECT?

Well, we are still here. It may be that all the confusion is not over, but then, when was it ever? And we are still here. That's good news and bad news. The bad news is that we did not get to go to Heaven yet. The good news is that we get to go on serving our Lord right here, for as long as He gives us time and life. Isn't that marvelous? What did we expect?

We are told that ancient peoples watched the approach of the winter solstice with avid interest and considerable alarm. Why were the days getting shorter? Was the sun dying? Was there some great battle going on in the heavens between the gods of darkness and the gods of light? And the invariable questions arose: Have we done something wrong? Was there something we could have done to help? A little self-centered, no doubt, but part of human nobility. Most of us just assume that we are responsible for at least part of the story. After all, creation was created for us, wasn't it? Only a few of you still believe this. May your tribe increase.

Sacrifices and rituals abound to help us meet and deal with this crisis of the changing seasons. It's interesting that most of them tend toward exuberant celebration: Dance and sing and be joyful! The gods are sad or discouraged, and we need to have a big party to help cheer them up and encourage them. Behind the scenes is usually a more serious note: After the party we will clean up our act – be more responsible, more grateful, more attentive to the true principles of life. So, in hundreds of different ways, humans have greeted the New Year in joyful celebration. Mixed in with that are gratitude for having survived the years past and resolutions for doing some things better in the years to come. Naturally that requires taking inventory. You cannot make any changes if you cannot decide what changes to make. The New Year is a time to take personal inventory and decide what changes to make. It would be even better if there was also some meaningful way for groups and nations to take inventory and decide on some changes to make. I suspect the business world does it best and most often. But then, they take survival seriously. Even so, some go out of business every year.

However, instead of the New Year moving on into such creative and meaningful dimensions, some say it has been regressing in the last generation or so. New Year resolutions are widely ridiculed.

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People who make them are laughed at: it's dumb to try to improve your life; it will not last; no good will come of it. It is even more ridiculous to imagine that a group, an organization, or a nation could take inventory and work together for better goals or in better ways. That at least seems to be the general flavor and atmosphere of many modern New Year celebrations. And the news media reminds us that the New Year is now the most widely celebrated occasion in the world. "Full of sound and rejoicing – signifying nothing."

It's only logical. Having lost all touch with the "music of the spheres," the meaning and the myths cannot live for very long thereafter. So there is no drama. The earth is just spinning in its natural orbit, and the seasons come and go in boring reaction to natural law. It doesn't mean anything. There is nothing to celebrate or get alarmed about. Sunsets used to be beautiful; but really, they are just dirt in the sky. There are too many people; how could any of us be special? Destiny is just a word for those who have never grown up enough to get over being romantic.

Modern New Year celebrations are really wonderful, aren't they? So many people having so much fun. It's enough to bring tears to our eyes. Am I missing something? Surely I must be missing something. But more each year, it seems to me that New Year celebrations are the essence of emptiness – a great, nationwide fanfare introducing nothing, celebrating nothing, doing nothing for those who participate. Further, I suspect that the New Year celebrations often counteract the impact of Christmas so that people can begin January in a barren reality rather than in any true meaning or joy.

One of the nice things about life is the realization that we do not have to go with or stay with the things that do not lead us onward. It is a New Year, and most of us would be happy for a new beginning: one better than the past, however good the past has been, and one we can believe in. Our Lord is the One to go to for new beginnings. So at least here, we begin this New Year in communion with our Lord. Maybe that is *too* full of newness – too risky and exciting. To me it seems a welcome relief after the weary, idiot smile of the other New Year celebrations, where the only goal is a post at the end of a dozen bowl games. I admit that in those celebrations, there is a certain delight about so many people being together, and all the energy and cooperation it takes to bring together such grand displays and parades. Maybe in some different ways, we are still trying to have big parties to encourage and cheer up the gods.

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But what do we really expect in the coming year? Same old thing with perhaps a few wrinkles and variations thrown in? Perhaps. More and more, the evidence is mounting that to some degree people get what they expect. Isn't that scary? We cannot just expect any old thing we want to. Do we know that? Expectation is not like daydreaming.

We hear some silly things about expectations. Some people make it sound like we can turn them on or off at will. We cannot keep from having our expectations, but neither can we just make them up whenever we like or in any way we choose. Do you remember Johnny Appleseed? "Oh, the Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord, for giving me the things I need: the sun and the rain and the apple seed." Can Johnny just suddenly decide on a whim one day to expect pineapples instead of apples? If in some inexplicable way he does that, it will change his entire way of life.

What we trust, what we count on, what we focus on, and what we eliminate from our lives are all intricately mixed up with our genuine expectations. Wanting something, no matter how hard or how long we go on wanting it, will never turn into an expectation. Expectations align our lives to the things they envision. Asking "What do you expect?" asks for a summation of our entire philosophical and theological stance in life up to this moment. Never do our expectations change genuinely – unless we have changed on the inside. When our expectations *do* change dramatically and rather quickly, there is always some kind of powerful conversion experience behind it. We fall in love, or we encounter the Holy Spirit – or both. To change our expectations, some experience powerful enough to outweigh years of normal experience must occur. We often call them "crises." We normally describe them as traumatic.

Suppose, for instance, that someone we really believed in came to us today and said: "Don't worry about your livelihood. Stop worrying over questions about food and drink and clothing. You must be through with worrying about tomorrow. Instead, seek God's Kingdom first – seek God's Kingship over your life. Also, if you learn to ask anything in my name, it will actually come into your life – because God already loves you. I tell you these things that you may find true peace. You will encounter suffering in this world, but take courage – I have overcome the world!"

How would you like to live through the coming year *believing* that? Being absolutely sure that Jesus' word was good? Would that change your expectations any? WOW! If it had been anybody else but

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Jesus, I would know he was nuts – completely crazy. Just hearing those few words from Jesus, instantly I know there is a terrific war going on inside me between *my* normal expectations and what *Jesus* tells me to expect. Any time I get anywhere close to Jesus, I can feel this war starting up, and I have to fight really hard to hang on to my negatives. I mean, I know He had a hard life, but He just doesn't seem to understand that life here can be difficult and dangerous, and that we should be careful, cautious, fearful, and worried all the time.

Listening to Jesus, for instance, makes me ashamed of the way I sometimes worry about this church. Usually I figure I have some good reasons, but that is not a good enough excuse; it's just the same old sin of putting faith in the wrong place. What do I *really* believe? I believe it is HIS church. If He likes it, He will keep it. If not, it doesn't matter anyway. No power on earth can maintain this church if Jesus deserts it. No power on earth can destroy this church if Jesus decides to keep it and move it forward. Some people are trying to help; some people are trying to hinder. But the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord will decide. What do we expect if we are a faithful people? What can we expect if we are only pretending?

What a total reversal of expectations there is in the presence of Jesus! A God who knows our needs. A God who cares. A God who communicates. A God we can trust to provide. Can you imagine your own soul relaxing, breathing a great sigh of relief, smiling even? I can see that you fight it too; it shows on your faces. But I was talking about *supposing* we believed in Him. I said just suppose, just imagine ...

Is it possible to imagine Jesus' words seeping into us, filling us until we really are at peace – until we can spend ourselves joyfully, without tension or grimness, without pride or fear? “*Will he not clothe you, O people of little faith?*” How little faith we actually have sometimes.

Goodness! What an attitude and perspective to have toward life! It is so beautiful that it burns us with a strange longing to be and live that way. But with the portents of so many possible crises – with poverty and disease and a whole world moaning and crying out desperately with its unfulfilled needs – how can we believe that our needs will be filled? And if our needs are filled, will it not just make us feel all the more guilty because of all the others whose needs are *not* filled? What do we expect in the coming year? Certainly not the kind of faith Jesus was talking about.

But it was such a pleasant oasis, such a happy mirage. I hate to leave the imaginary place so quickly, don't you? Couldn't we stay just a moment longer before we return to our running with the heathen? There is no alternative, you know. It is either Life with Jesus or running with the unbelievers. Half of both is neither. *"Will he not clothe you?"* What if God really will? Not every oasis is a mirage. Besides, a person gets tired of running. Let us rest a bit longer and look at the beautiful image behind the words.

Do you see how it changes as the light shifts? A minute ago it looked like birds in the sky and wildflowers growing, and all that seemed to matter were physical serenity and security. And now all the shades are changing. *"Will he not provide much more for you?"* More than for the flowers and for the birds! *"Clothed with power from on high."* Clothed in immortality. *"Not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life."* (II Corinthians 5:4) *"For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed"*

Such a Message is from a different dimension. These are the same words we have heard many times before, only we are forever deserting the oasis before spending enough time to look around. We do not give our eyes a chance to adjust to the new light. We come out of the desert at a dead run, dripping with anxiety, legitimate concerns, worries, and perhaps some logical cynicism. We take a fast look at Jesus and His Message and, seeing that He has it all backwards, we take off running again.

And it is backwards – just exactly backwards. A person is supposed to apply a *short-range* faith to a long-range earthly future. Everybody knows that. We have always done it that way. We look to God for abundance *now*, so we can plan our own futures and feel secure. And the more God does not seem to do that for us, the more we run with the heathen.

Jesus gets it all mixed up and backwards. He applied a long-range faith to living one day at a time here. He asked for spiritual gifts of faith in each and every moment, so He could be free enough and secure enough to let God plan the future. You think I'm exaggerating? *"Seek first the kingdom of God, his way of holiness, and all these things will be given you besides."*

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Can we imagine what would happen to us – what would become of our homes, our businesses, our grade point averages, and our budgets – if we went around thinking all the time about God’s Kingship over us, about his way of holiness? At first glance, my mind says that everything would be lost – our homes and jobs and security. At second glance, there is that strange inner smile: What if it turned such things into what we have always really wanted and hoped they would be? At third glance, I start to lose it. How could we even imagine it – all of us really thinking and living that way? It would certainly be a strange and incredible New Year though, wouldn’t it?

Yes, but look at the difference between what Jesus expected and what *we* ordinarily expect. Jesus expected prayers to be answered, people to be healed, God alive and active everywhere. He even expected resurrection. And we expect – what? What is your most exciting expectation for the coming year?

We are practical and realistic, aren’t we? We like to see results, see things accomplished, feel like something is happening. And the oasis of faith is so theoretical, futurized, idealistic, and impractical. We do not want to just sit around “believing” and “expecting”; we want to “do” something. Yet *believing* is what gets it done. That is the strange, *unearthly* truth. Behold the man who did it backwards and got it done. Compare Him to the practical realists who do it the usual way: working so hard and expecting the worst, and frequently getting it or even creating it (the worst, that is).

Consider the theoretical, impractical, irrelevant, unrealistic, backwards way of Jesus: who talked to people about God’s Kingdom, shattering their guilt and giving them something to live FOR; who healed the sick, fed the hungry, and calmed the storm; who made rich men generous, lonely men joyous, and timid men courageous; who redeemed a thousand years of hidebound tradition, changed the world’s history, and broke the power of the Prince of Darkness on a day of blood and murder that all the gods of death and destruction could not make stick. One strange carpenter, from His knees, doing it all backwards – putting God first. And not just sort of first – *really* first.

No, we cannot do it that way – it will not work that way, we say ... we think ... we think we know. Why are we so sure?

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.”

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

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“God so loved the world that he gave his only son.”

“Will he not clothe you, O people of little faith?”

With His whole life and death and resurrection behind it, Jesus opened up a New WAY for us. It is still open. He still beckons. Do we not also long to follow Him into His “backwards” WAY?

Well, here I am, rambling on about this and that, when we should be considering our expectations for the coming year. I hope you came here to do that, in the presence of God, in communion with Christ – maybe even to allow your expectations to be changed.

What do we *expect*? God to be with us no matter what happens – no matter where we go. The Holy Spirit guiding our lives on a daily basis – helping us with all the choices and tasks and decisions we face. Another year with God. A year in which God will have more to say about our opinions and our choices than we have ever allowed before. Will God not clothe us, if we allow it – if we believe and ask? What do we expect from Jesus Christ? Miracles? Salvation? Strength and patience? Transformation? Change from within? Isn't that why He came?

Oh yes, we wish each other a Happy New Year. But Jesus is the One who can bring the newness that will make it real.