



Living in Light of Christ's Resolutions

This past summer, I had the experience of practicing some archery for a few hours with my three oldest children. Though it was humbling, it was also enjoyable, and instructive. One thing I took away from the experience was the need to aim in order to strike the target. When you aim, you might hit the bull's eye only 60% or even 20% of the time, but if you never aim, you will hit it 0% of the time.

When we apply this principle to the Christian life, we find that many professing Christians aim at little or nothing, and consequently often achieve little or nothing. Many think the Christian life for the most part will just happen by itself. One seeming exception to this is the common practice of New Year's resolutions that people make; however, most of these evaporate after a few days or even a few hours.

This raises the question to what extent it is proper or helpful in spiritual life to have certain aims or to make certain resolutions. Should I aim at a certain length of time for my daily Bible reading and prayer? Should I resolve to share the gospel every day, or help out at a shelter once a week?

Edwards and Others

Well-known Christians of former times commonly made, and sometimes wrote down, resolutions. Most famous may be Jonathan Edwards' 70 Resolutions, still widely circulated today. Before he turned twenty, Edwards penned wide-ranging resolutions that gave his life a determination that is difficult not to admire. For example, his first resolution reads:

Resolved, that I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God's glory, and my own good, profit and pleasure, in the whole of my duration, without any consideration of the time, whether now, or never so many myriads of ages hence. Resolved to do whatever I think to be my duty and most for the good and advantage of mankind in general. Resolved to do this, whatever difficulties I meet with, how many and how great soever.

Another resolution (# 64) concerned prayer:

Resolved, when I find those 'groanings which cannot be uttered' (Rom. 8:26), of which the Apostle speaks, and those 'breathings of soul for the longing it hath,' of which the Psalmist speaks, Psalm 119:20, that I will promote them to the utmost of my power, and that I will not be weary of earnestly endeavoring to vent my desires, nor of the repetitions of such earnestness.

Another concerned how to process afflictions in his life (#67): "*Resolved, after afflictions, to inquire, what I am the better for them; what good I have got by them; and what I might have got by them.*" It is hard not to appreciate resolution number 70. "*Let there be something of benevolence in all that I speak.*"

Edwards, however, was not the only one to write down resolutions. According to his diary, Ebenezer Erskine seems at some point to have been addicted to "snuff" (tobacco) and during a number of illnesses he repeatedly resolved to give it up, only to take up the habit again. Finally, he writes: "*I resolved to leave it, and because what I spend in this way, if bestowed in charity, would do good to some of the poor people of God; and besides, I am too much under the power of it.*" He goes on in his diary: "*O Lord, deliver me from every evil word and work; and let me never lay any sin whatever in the balance with the light of thy countenance, or the least smile thereof. O kill every*

lust and idol in my heart by the virtue of the blood of the Lamb.” Donald Fraser, writing on Ebenezer Erskine, comments wisely: *“The(se) resolutions ... may to some appear weak and superstitious; but they will commend themselves to others, as exemplifying a minuteness of Christian vigilance, not unworthy of a rational and a vigorous mind.”*

Actually, many Puritans and others considered resolutions, as part of the category of vows and oaths with resolutions being considered lesser than either vows or oaths. Richard Baxter, for one, cautions people against making vows when ordinary decisive resolutions will do. He writes: *“Try therefore what deliberate resolutions will do, with the help of other ordinary means, before you go any further.”*

Others have had a different opinion about resolutions altogether. Noted for his practical Pelagianism, Charles G. Finney strongly condemned the practice of making resolutions: *“Any attempts to coerce the mind by oaths, vows, covenants, and resolutions, beget bondage. If a man has the Spirit of Christ, he does not need these, and if he has not, he can never get it in this way.”*

Scripture

Scripture, however, speaks frequently of resolutions, along with oaths and vows. Paul speaks repeatedly about *“purposing in the Spirit”* (Acts 19:21; 2 Cor. 1:17). He also commends the Corinthians for their purpose of heart to give to the cause of the poor in Jerusalem. He draws attention to their forwardness and readiness, and urges them to undertake the performance of it (2 Cor. 9:7). Paul was very deliberate in his mission of undertakings as well (e.g., Rom. 15:24). He planned and purposed, though, of course, in the end the Lord opened and closed doors (Acts 16:6-7).

The Psalms likewise contain many vows and resolutions. Regularly, sometimes in association with some or other trial, the Psalmist would make a vow, and then urge his soul to the performance of it. David says: *“So will I sing praise unto thy name for ever, that I may daily perform my vows”* (Ps. 61:8). Psalm 116 is well known:

“I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the LORD. I will pay my vows unto the LORD now in the presence of all his people.”

Psalm 116:13-14

Many people remember, however, how cautious Christ was concerning vows and oaths. In a society and religion where people took the Lord’s name in an oath-like fashion for things small and great, the Saviour urged His disciples to let their communication be genuine and real so that oaths would be unnecessary (Matt. 5:34-38). However, does this mean that Christ censured the practice of resolutions or even oaths when necessary for civil reasons and otherwise? When Caiaphas made Christ swear concerning His identity, He entered into such an oath (Matt. 26:63, 64). Paul bound an oath upon the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5:27: *“I charge you by the Lord”*; literally, *“I adjure you by the Lord”*).

The *Heidelberg Catechism* helps explain the difference between unnecessary oaths and proper oaths in Lord’s Day 37. Oaths that the government demands or those which *“confirm fidelity and truth to the glory of God and the safety of our neighbour”* are proper, provided they are *“founded on God’s Word”* (Answer 101; see also the Westminster Confession, Chapters 21 and 22). For that reason, we also ask for vows or oaths on the occasion of confession of faith, baptism, marriage, and installation into the offices of the church. As we noted, resolutions need to be understood as being of lesser intensity than vows and oaths.

Legalism?

Still the question can occupy us whether the practice of resolutions does not evidence a works-oriented religion, and tends to legalism. Is it not true that believers are not under rules such as *“touch not; taste not; handle not”* (Col. 2:21)? Isn’t it so that it is easy to bind our consciences in

ways in which Scripture does not and that ends up robbing Christians from the full enjoyment of the freeness of the gospel?

Indeed, as in all areas of religion, there are a number of dangers that we must be aware of. Certainly, a self-righteous spirit is always near at hand to even the best of God's saints. Also, there is a persistent tendency for the Christian to omit love for Christ and communion with Him in exchange for something that is merely weak ritual or paltry ceremony. Our sinful natures are so wedded to the covenant of works that we are liable to turn anything good into a wrong way to achieve acceptance with God.

Nevertheless, in light of the scriptural teaching briefly surveyed above, we must maintain the distinct value of spiritual resolutions. In our days, when the church of the West by and large is spiritually underachieving and anemic, we would do well to heed Peter's exhortation to "*gird up the loins of your mind*" (1 Pet. 1:13). We need the Holy Spirit, who aims at the best things (1 Cor. 12:31). We need the mind of Christ, who resolved to do all with the glory of His Father in view. If we have His Spirit and His mind by grace, our resolutions will not be vain exercises of unsanctified pretense, but holy stirrings up from the Spirit of the Father and the Son.

David's Resolutions

Psalm 101 is a notable compilation of various resolves from David. Our Psalter version of this Psalm has as its heading: "*Godly Resolves*" (Psalter 271). There are in this Psalm nine explicit "I wills," and altogether between fifteen and seventeen resolutions (depending on how you count them). Some imagine that this is David's oath of office or else his resolves while he is still fleeing from Saul. He sees what has gone wrong in Saul's life and now that he stands on the precipice of being king, he is afraid, how left to himself, he might end as Saul did. Thus he resolves to set himself to the following matters.

1. He resolves to delight himself in the character of God (v. 1)

Lest anyone think that making resolution is necessarily the work of a legalist seeking to stand on his own performance for acceptance with God, David shows the proper beginning. "*I will sing of mercy and judgment: unto thee, O LORD, will I sing*" (v. 1). Christian resolutions begin with a heart that is enflamed with God. Mercy and judgment are fit subjects for contemplation and song. We ought to delight ourselves in the covenant that God has undertaken. This is not legalism; this is the language of faith.

2. He resolves to walk in paths of the Lord (v. 2)

Some have looked at David's resolutions in this Psalm and thought him focused on deeds and actions, do's and don'ts, external and outward things; however, verse 2 gives a different picture. David says: "*I will behave myself wisely in a perfect way ... I will walk within my house with a perfect heart.*" The word "perfect" here should not be taken in a perfectionist sense. It means "a full-orbed way." David is not interested in what God demands just here and there, now and then. Now, he resolves to walk in the paths of the Lord with his heart and mind fully consecrated to the Lord. He desires that nothing be held back. He begins here with the heart (v. 2) and moves on from that, to the palace (v. 7) and then to whole city (v. 8).

3. He resolves to walk in good company and counsel (vv. 3-6)

In these verses, David is talking about his close associates – his inner circle of friends and counselors. He realizes what many have observed and Paul states in 1 Corinthians 15:33: "*Bad communications [company] corrupt good manners.*" None of us are impervious to the influences of those around us. Like the man of Psalm 1, he will not walk or stand or sit in the company of those who do not fear God (v. 1). David, however, does more than just avoid the negative. He says in verse 6: "*Mine eyes shall be upon the faithful of the land.*" Such people will meet with his favour and approval. He will surround himself with such as believe God's Word and walk in His ways. As zealously as he will avoid the wicked, just as eagerly will he regard fellow-believers.

4. He resolves to see to it that God's church prospers (vv. 7-8)

Finally, David resolves to give himself to the good of Zion. In the position of authority that the Lord has given him, he aims to see to it that God's church is pure and clean, as she ought to be for the coming of the Lord, much like Paul desires to do (2 Cor. 11:2).

It is helpful to notice the progression of these resolutions. They begin vertically; they proceed internally; and thus they permeate all spheres of life and culminate in seeing the cause of God promoted. This is a worthy model to follow for any child of God who wishes to live a God-centred and gospel-centred life to the glory of God.

David's Reality

David's resolutions are admirable, but when you look at David's actual reign in light of these resolves – how far short he fell from his target. Many of the things he resolved to do, he left undone, and did the opposite instead. Indeed, he was a man of like passions as we are. Like Paul, he would have said: *"The good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do"* (Rom. 7:19). His resolutions made shipwreck on the hard rocks of reality. This is the place where all Christians come, even daily, crying out like Paul: *"O wretched man that I am: who shall deliver me from the body of this death"* (Rom. 7:24).

It is not surprising then, that David couches in between all his resolutions a critical question that expresses his longing for his Redeemer: *"O when wilt thou come unto me?"* (v. 2). He knew that One was to come from his loins – bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. Only that One could fulfill these resolutions perfectly. He would be a King who would always behave himself in a perfect way and with a perfect heart. When He came into the world, He says: *"Lo, I come, in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart"* (Ps. 40:7-8). While He was on the earth, He expressed it like this:

"But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!"

Luke 12:50

Beyond David with his resolutions, we must see the great Son of David and His resolutions – all of them perfectly executed. He has proved Himself impeccably faithful to each of them. Through faith, we may and should make resolutions, but let us then learn also to live on and out of Christ's resolutions. That will give solidity, comfort, and blessedness, also this Year

GM Bilkes

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