

Title: Land of Beginning Again
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Text: 2 Cor. 5:16-18

Louisa Fletcher is the author of a very meaningful poem that begins with these lines:

*I wish that there were some wonderful place
Called the Land Of Beginning Again,
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches,
And all our poor, selfish grief,
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door,
And never be put on again.*

Many people say they have no regrets in life. Perhaps they have managed to deal with their flaws and failures in such an effective way they no longer feel the pain of regret. But certainly, most of us look back with some degree of remorse, because of certain things we did that we wish we didn't, and things we didn't we wish we did. There are things we said we would say differently, or maybe just said nothing at all. Certain choices we would make differently if "do-overs" were allowed, paths we would have avoided, and some we would have followed to the end instead of turning back. We may not carry a burden of guilt, but we still wish we had not been so foolish. We wish we had matured faster, that we had thought a couple of things through before jumping into the water. Like the guy described by Steve McQueen's character in magnificent Seven. He said the guy took off all his clothes and jumped in a pile of cactus. His friend asked why he did that. He said it seemed like the thing to do at the time.

That's the marvel of a New Year. Each year we all get an opportunity to engage in a tradition that has more potential for good than we give it credit. It's called New Year's Resolutions. These are the promises we make to change, to be different, to do certain things differently, to make this year better than last year. It may be breaking a bad habit, or losing weight, or paying off credit cards, or mending a rift with a friend. It could even be adopting a whole new attitude. Let's face it, we can all point fingers and point out mistakes we see other people make all around us. New Year is a time when I can be accountable for my share of botch-ups.

By the way, since I support gender equality I think I can get by with a little feminist humor. A woman said: *In the beginning God made man. Then he thought for a moment and said, 'Wait a minute. I think I can do better than that.'*

But what typically happens with our resolutions? Most of them don't last very long, because we're trapped in our habits. We are creatures of habit, customs, traditions, beliefs, and engrained patterns. Even when we know we ought to change, or maybe we know we can, we still struggle to do it.

One of Bill Murray's films is called *Ground Hog Day*. He plays a TV weatherman Phil Connors (rather selfish and unfriendly sort of guy) who is sent to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania to cover the annual Groundhog Day festivities. But on his way a blizzard hits, which he failed to predict. And stuck in Punxsutawney, he also finds himself caught in some sort of time loop where he relives one day, Ground Hog Day, over and over and over again, making the same mistakes. So, each morning when he wakes up he knows exactly what's going to happen, because everything around him is exactly the same as it was the day before. Eventually he begins to use this knowledge to his advantage—to change himself (do

good deeds, save lives, woo the woman he loves). Eventually he wakes up on the day after Ground Hog Day, because he finally got it right.

I suppose in a way that's how life goes. We wrestle with our desire for New Beginnings, yet are trapped in a stream of sameness and ongoingness, bad habits and bad decisions. We have trouble accepting that for anything to change, we have to change. We have to believe that at any given place in this flow of time we have the opportunity and ability to declare new beginnings. New vows, new commitment, fresh perspectives, new goals, and objectives, new wave of excitement.

The Bible has a lot to say about regrets. In fact in the story of Noah, God himself regretted having created humanity. But the Bible also has a lot to say about new beginnings. Like numerous characters in the Old Testament, we're all on a journey, heading out into the unknown, leaving behind a back-pack full of mistakes and regrets, maybe just bad memories and starting over- Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Naomi and Ruth, all left woes behind. Isaiah 43 describes God as doing a new thing. And in Lamentations 3:23 Jeremiah speaks of God's kindness and compassion as new every morning, and how Israel with all their lamentations and heartaches can look toward a bright future.

That's what the Christian life is all about. In the text we read in II Corinthians Paul says that our faith in Jesus Christ gives us opportunity for newness, not just at baptism, but every day. *So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:[a] The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.*

It reminds us that God's love and mercy are new every morning, blossoming before us with the freshness of Spring. Every day is an opportunity for a fresh start, because old things are passed away and everything is new. Kingdom of God is that Land of Beginning again!

Paul knew a lot about that. In his writings he occasionally mentions his regrets. But also allows them to be soothed by the balm of divine grace and in gratitude for the opportunity for a new life. Sometimes it takes a Damascus road event to open our eyes to our own wicked ways, stubbornness, callous spirit. But like Paul, when we do wake up we lift head high and march forward singing a joyful song. Opportunity to start over.

Clark D. Wells made a number of suggestions I think are both cute and meaningful.

- Accept that change and new beginnings are possible if you really believe and are really willing to try.
- Work at expressing love, especially to those who are dearest to you.
- Be patient and tolerant, accepting that you're not always right.
- Stop beating yourself up for not living up to your potential, because you cannot fix every problem, nor accomplish everything you imagine.
- Stop worrying so much about the future, but live more in present.
- Do more of the things you love, and fewer of the things you feel obligated to do.
- Do less stewing, envying, whining, regretting, and wishing.
- Stop fantasizing about what you'd do if you won the lottery.

- Stay as imaginative and open as you can to opportunities that matter, and be willing to pay the price.
- Remember that most people are just as neurotic, incompetent, and uncomfortable as you are, so feel good about yourself and go for it!

God bless you, and may every day be a new day, full of wonder and positive surprises.