

A Good Time to Renew

January 1, 2023, A Service of Covenant Renewal | John 3:16

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Why would we renew our covenant with God at the start of a New Year?

In John 3:16, we discovered that God does all the work in saving us.

We focused on John 3:16 during December to help us understand the true meaning of Christmas.

John 3:16 says,

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

God does the work in John 3:16.

He loves the world.

God the Father gives God the Son and takes away our perishing problem.

He grants eternal life to those who belong to Jesus.

God does all the work in John 3:16.

God only asks that we believe.

Believing means agreeing with the Gospel, particularly that Jesus died and rose again.

Believing means trusting in Jesus.

Believing means having faith in Jesus.

Believing is the only thing John 3:16 asks people to do.

Believing is at the heart of our covenant relationship with God.

We've talked a lot about God's side of the covenant in studying John 3:16.

What is our side of that covenant?

What we know already about believing begins to describe what our side of the covenant looks like: agreeing, trusting, having faith.

The New Testament continues to develop what believing looks like.

As we continue to see what believing means, we learn what our side of our covenant with God requires. Plus, we see why it is a good idea to renew our covenant with God from time to time.

Believing starts a new relationship with God.

Believing in Jesus started a new relationship with God in Acts 4:4.

In Acts chapter 3, the apostles Peter and John went to the Temple in Jerusalem.

This was after Jesus' resurrection and ascension.

Along the way, Peter healed a man who had been lame since birth. It was a miracle!

The miracle attracted a crowd, and Peter began preaching to the crowd.

He called people to believe in Jesus.

The Temple authorities arrested Peter and John for their preaching.

But **Acts 4:4** tells us that people believed:

But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

Instead of rejecting, they accepted. Instead of mistrusting, they trusted. Instead of rebelling, they submitted. Their relationship with Jesus and with God was entirely different.

Believing in Jesus starts a new relationship with God for all of us according to Romans 1:16.

Because we live in a sinful world, our relationship with God starts when we are born with brokenness. We are already broken as is our relationship with God.

In **Romans 1:16** Paul writes that believing changes that relationship:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Instead of being judged, we are saved.

Instead of being against God, we are for God and with him.

Instead of being in the kingdoms of the world, we move to the Kingdom and family of God.

Believing starts a new relationship with God.

Believing leads to works.

Paul is careful to say that believing, not works, saves in Romans 4.

In Romans 3, Paul wrote that we are saved by God's grace, not by our own human works.

He gave the example of the Patriarch Abraham who was saved by belief, not works.

In **Romans 4:1-3**, Paul argued:

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

Paul was referring to the Patriarch Abraham's experience recorded in Genesis.

In Genesis 12, God told Abraham to get up and leave the land of his ancestors.

God promised to bless Abraham and to bless others through him.

Abraham did as God told him to do.

However, in Genesis 15, we learn that Abraham still has not had a male heir through whom to pass the promises God had made to him.

God assured Abraham that he would have descendants, that they would become numerous and prosperous, and that they would inherit the land of Canaan.

In **Genesis 15:6** we read:

And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Salvation comes by grace through believing, rather than as a result of works.

However, James reminds us that believing leads to works.

James did not disagree with Paul. Works cannot save us.

However, James clarified that works demonstrate what we believe.

Even more directly, believing always leads to works.

In **James 2:22-23** James cited the same passage Paul referenced about Abraham. James wrote:

You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God.

Works did not save Abraham; believing did. However, Abraham's believing still led to works. He left his homeland, settled in a new land, and built a household obediently because of his believing.

James was arguing that the same is true for us. Our believing leads to obedient working. We believe, so we do the work God gives us to do, not to get saved but out of love.

Believing leads to works.

Believing holds fast when tested.

Believing faces times of testing, according to Jesus' Parable of the Sower in Luke 8.

In Luke 8, Jesus tells the story about a man who went out into a field to sow seed.

The seed represents the Word of God. Broadly, the sower represents those sharing the Word of God. The ground represents the response of those hearing the Word of God.

The seed sown falls in different places. Some falls on the path, some on rocky ground, some falls among weeds, and some falls on good soil.

When the seed falls on good soil, it takes root and bears fruit.

However, Jesus acknowledges that belief is tested.

In **Luke 8:12** Jesus says that as soon as the seed falls on soil, the testing starts. Sometimes the seed is gobbled up:

"The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved."

Then in Luke 8:13, Jesus says that some seed falls on rocky ground. It takes root, but the testing comes, and the roots are shallow and can't sustain faith, so faith falters:

"And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away."

What's the message? Belief will be tested.

Hebrews 10:23 calls those believing in Jesus to "hold fast."

Hebrews 10:23 reads:

*Let us **hold fast** the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.*

Hebrews acknowledges that believing is constantly being tested.

Hebrews also acknowledges that, when tested, people may stop believing or believe less.

Hebrews says, "hold fast." Don't let go. You will be tempted to. But don't. Believing is worth it.

Believing holds fast when tested.

A new year is a good time to renew our covenant with God.

God always keeps his side of our covenant relationship faithfully. We see that in the prophet Hosea.

Several weeks ago, I started the story of the prophet Hosea.

God told Hosea to take a prostitute to be his wife.

Hosea did as he was told. He married Gomer, and they had three children together.

But Gomer couldn't stay faithful to Hosea. She left him and went back to her old life of prostitution. In the process, she became a slave to another man.

What happened next? God told Hosea to go and bring Gomer back.

So, Hosea bought his wife out of slavery and brought her home to live with him again.

God was saying something about Israel and about himself.

God was saying that his covenant relationship with Israel was like a marriage.

Israel had been faithless to her side of the covenant like an adulterous, faithless wife.

But God had been faithful to Israel and to his covenant.

Plus, God would do what was required to bring his faithless covenant partner back.

That's just who God is! He is faithful to his covenant with us.

That's who we are becoming.

We don't start out that way in life.

If we're looking to the Old Covenant of laws and expectations, we will never be that way.

But in the New Covenant we have, if we are believers in Jesus, God promises to give us new hearts that long to be faithful to him.

God promises how different it will be in Jeremiah 31:33:

"... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

When we believe in Jesus, God reshapes our desires so that we will increasingly long to be faithful to our covenant with God. Naturally.

However, that's not who we are yet.

We still fail tests. We stop working. We back out of our relationships.

We stop having faith. We stop trusting. We even find agreeing with the truth more difficult.

We find our belief failing. We stop keeping our side of the covenant.

We need a time of renewal.

We need God to renew us, and we need to renew our covenant with him.

A new year is a good time to renew our covenant with God.