

The Holy Spirit is the Power to Keep Your Resolutions

**Genesis 1:15, Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12,
Revelation 22:1-5, Mark 1:4-11, Acts 19:1-6**

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One summer on the farm we decided to be more “green” by feeding our cows through rotational grazing. Every week we would move the cows to a new small section of lush alfalfa so they would eat it all, then you would move them to the next section. After the fourth week we would repeat on the same section of land, so the cows were always eating the alfalfa at the peak of nutrition and delicious taste. The benefits were savings in labor, fuel, and machinery, because you did not need to harvest the alfalfa and bring it to the cows. It also should make for happier cows as they are eating fresh alfalfa. Cows are creatures of habit. They follow the same precise routine everyday. We always let our cows enjoy a spacious exercise lot shaded by trees. To get there they walked down a lane that was 20 feet wide. All 118 cows traveled down the lane single file on a path that was just 14 inches wide. There were a couple of wet spots where the path became washboard as all 118 cows made exactly the same stride putting their foot in the exact same spot every day causing a 14 inch square depression followed by a 14 inch square hump. No matter how deep the depression, the cows always walked in the exact small spot, so when it starting getting to deep we would smooth out the cow path. The plan was to graze the cows in the field beside the lane. We would then open up a section of fence. Since we knew they were creatures of habit we put a 6 strand blaze orange fence across the lane to guide them into the lush alfalfa. The first day the cows walked single file down their path until the lead cow reached the fence, guiding them into the lush alfalfa. The lead cow stopped, looked back and forth between the new 6 strand blaze orange fence blocking her usual path and the inviting lush alfalfa. The cows behind her bellowed, complaining about her hesitancy, then the cow put down her head and force her way through the fence never deviating from her usual path. Unfortunately several cows got hurt by going through the fence. Fortunately, we were able to bandage all of them up. They all recovered. The second day we made a human fence. This time, undeterred, the cows charged us and broke through us to keep on their normal path. The third day we parked a tractor and wagon across the lane. All the cows jumped on and over the wagon. Again several of the cows were hurt. The next day we loaded the cows into a trailer and drove them, then unloaded them into the center of the field. This took most of the day as the trailer could only hold 4 cows at a time. We hoped once they experienced the lush, fresh alfalfa they would return. In addition, the next day we erected a 10 foot metal fence and barricaded it with two tractors. After the cows pushed, kicked and struggled against the fence for a couple hours they final stepped into the lush alfalfa pasture that they enjoyed the day before. It took about 40 days of our influence and the power of an outside force, before the cows followed their new, better for them, path.

Certainly we are much, much smarter than cows however we do have an instinctive drive to follow habits and familiar behaviors. In fact experts have found that when someone is faced with an opportunity or challenge the first thing we do is to try and follow an old habit or follow a familiar pattern of behavior or a known problem solving technique even if a much better option is presented. Systems analysis has found that whenever change, even good, positive change, is presented to someone

or a group the initial reaction is almost always change back to the old way. Forming a new habit, embracing change takes, hard, intentional work and the power of an outside force. An open minded person, committed to a change in behavior usually needs to do that new behavior for about a month before the new way is accepted and even then sometimes after years of doing something a new way, stress will cause them to lapse back into the old pattern. This is why New Year's resolutions are so hard to keep.

Our scripture invites us to improve our life by accessing the power of an outside force, the power of the Holy Spirit. Every form of light we experience is an invitation from God to shine.

Today is Epiphany and Baptism of the Lord Sunday. The recommended scripture celebrates God's power to transform, restore, renew and make all things and everyone beautiful, symbolized by light, and urges us to receive and utilize God's power through baptism. To live more and more like Christ, to live more and more abundantly. Put together, the scriptures invite us to access the power of God to live a loving life.

We begin at the very beginning. **Genesis 1:1-5 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.**

Our English translation loses some of the immense contrast between the dark formless void and the light. In the Hebrew the dark formless void is chaos, confusion, disorder, destruction that is brought under control by God's light which is peace, understanding and order. There is supreme power in God's word and we have God's word in the Bible. The wind sweeping over the water foreshadows salvation by the Holy Spirit which we symbolize through baptism.

The prophet Isaiah foretold the transforming power of God's light through Jesus. **Isaiah 60:1-6 "Arise, Jerusalem! Let your light shine for all to see. For the glory of the Lord rises to shine on you. Darkness as black as night covers all the nations of the earth, but the glory of the Lord rises and appears over you. All nations will come to your light; mighty kings will come to see your radiance. "Look and see, for everyone is coming home! Your sons are coming from distant lands; your little daughters will be carried home. Your eyes will shine, and your heart will thrill with joy, for merchants from around the world will come to you. They will bring you the wealth of many lands. Vast caravans of camels will converge on you, the camels of Midian and Ephah. The people of Sheba will bring gold and frankincense and will come worshipping the Lord.**

Jesus is identified as the light of the world, the source of life and love. Wise people follow the light. **Matthew 2:1-12 "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory— this was during Herod's kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. They asked around, "Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We're on pilgrimage to worship him." When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?" They told him, "Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly: It's you, Bethlehem, in Judah's land, no longer bringing up the rear. From you will come the leader who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel." Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, "Go find this child. Leave no stone**

untuned. As soon as you find him, send word and I'll join you at once in your worship." Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time! They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they knelt and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh. In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country.

Ultimately God's light will illumine all for eternity. Revelation explains how one day all of us will enjoy the waters of baptism and the power of God's light. **Revelation 22:1-5** "Then the Angel showed me Water-of-Life River, crystal bright. It flowed from the Throne of God and the Lamb, right down the middle of the street. The Tree of Life was planted on each side of the River, producing twelve kinds of fruit, a ripe fruit each month. The leaves of the Tree are for healing the nations. Never again will anything be cursed. The Throne of God and the Lamb is at the center. God's servants will offer God service—worshiping, they will look on God's face, their foreheads mirroring God. Never again will there be any night. No one will need lamplight or sunlight. The shining of God, the Master, is all the light anyone needs. And they will rule with God age after age after age."

All of us have access to the power of God's light through baptism. The gospel of Mark explains how baptism enables us to make radical positive life changes, how baptism enables us to turn from sin, the dark, to God, the light. **Mark 1:4-5, 7-11** John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People flocked to John from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by John in the Jordan River into a changed life. As John preached he said, "The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. Jesus' baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out." At this time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. The moment Jesus came out of the water, Jesus saw the sky split open and God's Spirit, looking like a dove, come down on Jesus. Along with the Spirit, God's voice: "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, you bring me great joy."

The Apostle Paul revealed that repentance and desire to make a positive change is not enough. We need to embrace and utilize the power of the Holy Spirit. **Acts 19:1-6** "Paul made his way down through the mountains, came to Ephesus, and happened on some disciples there. The first thing Paul said was, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? Did you take God into your mind only, or did you also embrace God with your heart? Did God get inside you?" "We've never even heard of that—a Holy Spirit? God within us?" "How were you baptized, then?" asked Paul. "In John's baptism." "That explains it," said Paul. "John preached a baptism of radical life-change so that people would be ready to receive the One coming after him, who turned out to be Jesus. If you have been baptized in John's baptism, you are ready now for the real thing, for Jesus." And they were. As soon as they heard of it, they were baptized in the name of the Master Jesus. Paul put his hands on their heads and the Holy Spirit entered them. From that moment on, they were praising God in several languages and talking about God's actions."

Thomas Troeger wrote. "Repentance alone is a lot like making resolutions without having found or nurtured the resources needed to keep them. When Paul lays his hands on the disciples the Holy Spirit came upon them. Now they had more than repentance: they had the power to live out their resolution to live a new life. Luke is writing about a profound spiritual truth: it is not adequate to simply repent, to

resolve to lead a new life. We need the power, the resilience, the breath, the flame, the buoyancy of the everlasting springs of life, the energies of the Holy Spirit, in order to sustain the best intentions of our resolutions and repentance.”

Breathing Underwater: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps explains it this way. “The surrender of faith does not happen in one moment but is an extended journey, a trust walk, a gradual letting go, unlearning, and handing over... To finally surrender ourselves to healing, we have to have three spaces opened up within us—and all at the same time: our opinionated head, our closed-down heart, and our defensive and defended body. That is the work of spirituality... it is finally the work of “a Power greater than ourselves,” and it will lead to great luminosity and depth of seeing.”

All of us need to follow the light. All of us should make a resolution that identifies a specific way we can become more like Christ. Since we are creatures of habit change is challenging. If we are going to move from the dark to the light, from fear to love, if we are going to make a positive change we need the power of the Holy Spirit. Most people are pretty good at repentance. We are able to name our mistakes. We can list ways that we can be a better person. We are able to reflect on the light of God and our life. We are able to list resolutions.

It is not enough to passionately desire change. If we are going to truly change we need the power of God. The Holy Spirit empowers each of us in unique ways. Perhaps some of these suggestions will empower you with the Holy Spirit. Prayerfully, pick one resolution that will make you more Christ like. Write it down. Focus on this one item for two months until it becomes a habit. Pray for God to fill you, for God to enable you to change everyday. Find, write down and everyday read a scripture that speaks to the change you are making. Tell others about your desired change and ask them to pray for you and encourage you. Open your mind. Identify thought patterns that inhibit your change. Give them to Jesus. Identify positive thoughts that can replace the inhibiting thoughts. Open your heart. Feel and sense how this change will make you more loving. Open your body. Take a walk or relax and think and feel the benefits of your desired change. Imagine yourself yoked to Jesus, partnering with Jesus. Pay attention to God’s guidance. Find a way to put your desired change into action by serving others. Worship God. Praise God for God’s light. Praise God for God’s power. Remember your baptism. Invite God to sculpt you more and more into God’s likeness. Imagine God’s delight in watching you live your resolution. Keep asking good questions. How is your desired change revealing more of the most excellent way of love? How is your change shining light into your life and others? How will your change be passed on and on? How is your change bringing more of heaven to earth?

You have access to God’s endless power the source of all light, life and love. You have access to God’s supreme power that will ultimately resurrect and perfect all. Keep following God’s light and integrating the light into your life. Every night we die to sin and the next day rise to newness of life. God is eager to fill you with God’s Spirit, to give you a rejuvenated life, heart, will and vision, to make your hopes, dreams and resolutions a reality. Enlightened, empowered by God you can keep your resolutions and shine. *Amen*