

The Opportunity to Start Over

On Wednesday, the kids and I had the opportunity to serve the men at the Wheeler Mission Men's Residential Center. These are all men who have gotten caught up in addiction and are trying to get their lives turned around. I got to speak with one fellow while we ate. I found out he was from South Carolina, but had been just about everywhere as a truck driver. A few years ago, he said he owned a house, was married, had a couple of cars. He told me he never thought he'd get where he is right now.

I asked him what brought him to Indiana.

He responded, "Well, I was invited to have an opportunity to start over. I thought I'd better take it."

What a wonderful feeling that is. The opportunity to start over. Today is January 1. What a wonderful opportunity it is for us. It is the first day of a new year. We have new opportunities, new options, new possibilities laid out before us. The fact is we don't have to let ourselves hit rock bottom before we start over. We can actually do it at any time. No matter where you've gotten to in your life, you can let today be your day to start over.

Consider the woman caught in adultery in **John 8:1-11**. I know there are all kinds of questions surrounding this story, but I can't help but see it as a story of starting over. Here was a sinner. She deserved death. But Jesus didn't condemn her. Rather, He let her go free. Further, He even convinced all those who wanted to see her stoned to drop their rocks and walk away. But notice Jesus final words to her: "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more" (ESV). Jesus' lack of condemnation was not an opportunity for her to continue down the same old soul destroying path. Rather, it was permission to start afresh. She no longer had to be defined by what she had done in the past. She didn't have to think of herself as just an old adulteress. She was a forgiven friend of the King. She could start over.

Romans 8:1 tells us, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (ESV). Just as Jesus told the adulteress woman, "Neither do I condemn you," He tells us the same thing. When we come to Him, He doesn't turn us away. He doesn't claim we were just too bad. He doesn't shrink from us. Rather, He embraces us with open arms. And then He says, "Go, and from now on sin no more." He has set us free from the past. We can start over.

We do not have to be defined by our past sins. We don't have to think of ourselves as liars, cheats, thieves, adulterers, coveters, lusters, arrogant, grumblers, strivers, idolaters, etc. Just because that was our problem last year does not mean we are condemned to continue in that this year. Rather, Jesus has refused to condemn us. We are free to be different. We are free to let 2012 be a different year for us. It does not have to be governed by our 2011 mistakes.

Of course, that no condemnation is in Jesus Christ. If you want to be set free from the past, you have to be in Jesus. The woman caught in adultery was not able to start over because of any of the religious men. She wasn't able to start over because she did enough good works to pay for her sin. She wasn't able to start over because she just thought it might be a good idea. She was able to start over because Jesus said so.

Are you in Christ? Have you let Him set you free so you can start over? Perhaps you have entered Christ, started over, and then allowed yourself to fall back into your old ways. **I John 1:8-10** explains that we would be lying if we said we had no sin. However, we can confess our sins and God will faithfully forgive them. We can start over again.

I remember hearing one person lament about the story of the prodigal son. He said he loved the story, but he needed a story that told of a prodigal who left, came back, then left again, then came back, then left again, etc. Not that he was looking for permission to leave again, but because he felt like he had messed up after coming back to God so many times that sooner or later God was going to quit letting him start over. If you need to hear that story, let me encourage you to read **Psalms 106**. According to this psalm the Israelites rebelled by the Red Sea, but when they saw the waters parting and then crash on their enemies, they believed and started over. Then they forgot God again as they wandered in the wilderness. God sent a wasting disease. Then they abandoned God over their jealousy of Moses and Aaron. They made a golden calf. But Moses stood in the breach for them and they were able to start over. But then they despised the Promised Land. But with the new generation they were able to start over. Then they didn't destroy all the people and those people caused them to sin. Then God judged the Israelites. But when they turned to Him, He heard their distress, set them free, and let them start over. Chances are, this psalm was written during the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. Israel was remembering all the times God had let them

start over. Now they were held captive in punishment again and they were asking for another opportunity to start over. We know how this story ends. God gave them another opportunity to start over.

So, if you need that story of the repeating prodigal, there it is. Don't think God has already let you start over too many times. He will deal with you as with Israel. You have another opportunity to start over right now. Yes, one day it will be too late. But as long as you are still living, that day hasn't arrived.

Obviously, in Jesus Christ, you can start over on any day. But today is January 1. What a great day to start over. If we can help you start over, make sure you let us know.

--Edwin L. Crozier