

THE HEAVENS OPENED

In the Year of Our Lord Eighteen-hundred and two, someone calling himself as ‘The Public Secretari,’ wrote a letter to the editors of *Walker’s Hibernian Magazine* concerning ‘Resolutions for the New Year.’ He wrote:

In the first place, statesmen have resolved to have no other object in view than the good of their country, to abolish all sinicure places, to introduce plans of economy, and to encourage nothing but merit. Members of parliament have resolved never to speak but to the purpose, which come to think will shorten the debates very considerably. The clergy have resolved to reside on their living, to apply themselves sedulously to the duties of their sacred profession, and to win back from the methodists all the stray sheep who have wandered for want of a shepherd. The lawyers are resolved to encourage no causes that can be adjusted by arbitration, to encourage no litigation about trifles, to stick close to the subject in their pleading, not to brow-beat the witness, and to give every encouragement to the bench, in checking the alarming growth of licentiousness among the upper ranks. The physicians have determined to follow nature in her operations, and to prescribe no more than is necessary, and to be very moderate in their fees. Justices of the peace are resolved to look a little after the conduct of the officers, and enforce their diligence in apprehending well-known offenders and bringing them to justice, without considering what they weigh... (<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433081671889&seq=116>)

The author told the editor, “You may now close your labors with a solemn declaration, that from after the first day of January, one thousand eight hundred and two, all vice and folly ceases in the united kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.” Of course, the letter is satirical, the author knowing full well that no one made these resolutions, and that, if they had, they would not keep them. The beginning of a new year is the time for New Year’s resolutions. At this time people resolve to do things they ought to do, but failed to do in the previous year. Last December, Forbes Health reported that the five most popular New Year’s resolutions were: improve fitness, improve finances, improve mental health, lose weight, and improve diet. Sadly, the great majority of those who make New Year’s resolutions break them before the end of the second month. Even so, the New Year is a fine time to resolve to do better, to resolve to be a better subject in Christ’s kingdom. Some churches on New Years’ Eve hold Watch Night services, in which they confess the sins of the past year, resolve to do better, and ask God for help. The Christian God is the God of beginnings, and of new beginnings. He is the Creator and the Renovator. In the beginning God created the world, and then man by his sin ruined it. Yet, since the Advent of Christ God has by His Spirit been renewing the world, and doing so by renewing the people of the world.

The Scriptures begin with the words:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.” (Genesis 1:1–5)

God has always existed; He is eternal. The world began when God created it, and He created it out of nothing. He created all things, visible, and invisible. Saint Paul wrote the Colossians, “For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him.” (Colossians 1:16) Nothing was ever created that He did not create. Saint John wrote, “All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.” (John 1:3) In this is demonstrated the great power of God. he is the almighty God who created a world out of nothing. (Jeremiah 10:12) For this, Jeremiah the prophet praised God, saying, “Ah Lord GOD! behold, thou hast made the heaven and the earth by thy great power and stretched out arm, and there is nothing too hard for thee.” (Jeremiah 32:17) When God created the world, it was “void and vacancy,” it was “wasteness and emptiness;” it was “unformed and unfilled;” it was “formless and lifeless.” The entire globe was covered with water, and the Spirit of God hovered over the waters of the earth like a bird lovingly hovering over her young, nurturing them until their development is complete. God never intended that the world should remain in this desolate state, but would by His Spirit form the world into a habitable place, and fill it with living things. (Isaiah 45:18) The world lay in darkness, which is no created thing, but is rather the absence of light. So, God commanded light to come into existence, and it came to be. God regarded the light as good because it was what He willed to be. God separated the light from the darkness, and, although there was as yet no sun for the earth, the rotation of the earth relative to the light resulted in the earth being, at any given time, partly in light, and partly in darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness Night. This movement from light to darkness, from night and day is an earth day, and the day on which God made the light reckoned as the first day of creation.

As the first day was one of separation, so were the second and third. On the second, God separated the waters on the earth so that some were on the earth and some above, with a firmament between them, which he called Heaven. On the third day, God separated the waters so that dry land appeared, which he called Earth. Then God commanded that the earth should perpetually, and according to their respective kinds, bring forth plants that bear seeds, and trees the fruit of which contains seeds.

On the first three days, God formed the earth, and on the latter three He filled it. On the fourth day, He commanded that there be lights in the firmament to make the vicissitudes of day and night, and of the seasons of the year. These are the celestial bodies. On the fifth day, He filled the seas and the heavens. He commanded that the seas should teem with living creatures, and that winged creatures should fly above the earth and under the firmament. On the sixth day, He filled the land. He commanded that the earth bring forth, as for all living things, perpetually, according to kind, living things to fill the land. Finally, God made man. The Scriptures say:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (Genesis 1:26, 27)

God made man, both male and female, in His own image, and so man was the pinnacle of His creation. God said to them, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” (Genesis 1:28) God blessed mankind with fruitfulness, and gave them dominion over the rest of creation. The Scriptures say, “And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.” (Genesis 1:31) God brought order to the chaos of the creation. God the Father, by the agency of His Son and Spirit, created the world, and it was all that He desired it to be. It was perfect.

God created a perfect world, but man, by his sin against His Creator, ruined it. God commanded Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and He warned him that, if he should eat of it, then he would die. Adam rebelled against God, and ate of the tree. So, as God had threatened, Adam died. God cut Adam off from Himself, the source of life, and correspondingly, from the tree of life, the sacrament of God's covenant with Adam. When Adam sinned, it was not he alone that died, however. When Adam sinned, mankind sinned, so mankind died. Saint Paul wrote to the Romans, "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." (Romans 5:12) Every man, therefore, comes into the world "dead and trespasses and sin." (Ephesians 2:1) Every man comes into the world with both guilt and corruption. Every man comes into the world guilty before God, and sinful through and through. Adam's first son, Cain, murdered Adam's second son, Abel. Within a few hundred years of the death of Adam, the sinfulness of mankind became intolerable to God. The Scriptures say:

And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart... The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. (Genesis 6:5, 6, 11)

Men were so wicked that everything they thought and every desire was always evil. They were so corrupt that they were always violent, always hurting each other. They were so depraved that God regretted making them, and would destroy them all, except for Noah and his household. So, God sent a great flood upon the earth. The Scriptures say, "All the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened." (Genesis 7:11) God opened the heavens, and from the heavens the waters of judgment were poured out upon the earth. After the rains stopped, Noah sent a dove out of the ark. When the flood waters had subsided, the dove returned to Noah with an olive leaf. (Genesis 8:6–11) Of course, the dove is a symbol of the Spirit of God, and the olive leaf a sign of peace. God would have peace with mankind, and His Spirit, who created the world, would renew it. After the flood, God said to Himself, "I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done." (Genesis 8:21) Mankind were still sinful, but God would not destroy them. Noah stood as the new progenitor of mankind, and as God said to Adam, so He said to Noah and his sons: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth." (Genesis 1:28) As in the beginning of creation, so in this new beginning of the world, God desired that the world be filled with people. God said to Noah and to his sons:

And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you; And with every living creature that is with you, of the fowl, of the cattle, and of every beast of the earth with you; from all that go out of the ark, to every beast of the earth. And I will establish my covenant with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth. (Genesis 9:9–11)

God made a covenant with Noah, and Noah's sons, indeed with every living thing, and in that covenant He promised never again to destroy the world. God baptized the world, cleansing it, and giving it a new beginning.

God promised not to rid the world of men, but He did not rid men of sin. Men remained both guilty and corrupt. So, God would redeem mankind. He would forgive their sins, and teach them to be righteous. He made a covenant with the nation of Israel, and in that covenant He gave them a system of animal sacrifices to atone for their sins, and He gave them His moral law to show them how to do right. Yet, this covenant, glorious as it

was, was inadequate. It was inadequate because the blood of animals cannot really atone for the sins of men, and because the moral law of God does not empower men to keep it. So, the Israelites continually sinned, and in this were no better than other nations. Indeed, they worshiped the gods of other nations, and they committed the same abominable sins. They were a shame to God. Israel were to be an example to the nations, so that the nations would also worship and serve God, but, because of Israel's sins, the other nations blasphemed God. So, God would make a new covenant with them, a covenant in which they would have real atonement for their sins, and power to keep God's law. Through Ezekiel the prophet, God said to the Israelites:

Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. (Ezekiel 36:25–27)

God would give His people what they needed: forgiveness of sin, and power to do right. He would wash away their sins, and He would put within them His Spirit who would cause them to obey His law. He would accomplish all this through His only-begotten Son.

Mark wrote in his gospel:

John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins. And John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey; And preached, saying, There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost. (Mark 1:4–8)

John the Baptist was sent by God to preach to the people that if they would repent of their sins, and be baptized, then God would forgive their sins. Many people did confess their sins, and were baptized by John. John was a prophet, but He made sure that the people understood that their faith should not be in him, but in another. He told them that one was coming who was mightier than he, one who was so much greater than he that John was not fit to loosen his sandals. Those who repented of their sins John baptized with water as a sign of their cleansing. Yet, the One of whom John spoke would baptize them with the Holy Spirit. He would pour out the Holy Spirit upon His people so that they would be cleansed of sin, and empowered to do right.

Saint Mark continued:

And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him: And there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. (Mark 1:9–11)

One day Jesus came to John to be baptized by him in the Jordan river. After Jesus came out of the river, He saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit of God, in the form of a dove descending upon Him. Then He heard His Father in heaven say, "Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." In the Great Flood, the heavens

opened, and from them descended the waters of judgment. When Jesus, in obedience to God's command, was baptized by John, the Holy Spirit came upon Him to empower Him to complete the difficult mission on which His Father in heaven had sent Him. It is this same Spirit that Jesus would pour out upon His people to empower them. God the Father knew the heart of His Son, that His heart is true, and that He obeys from the heart, and that He would accomplish His mission. So, God loved His Son, and with Him was greatly pleased.

After Jesus died, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven, He did from that place pour out the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, and so baptized His disciples with the Spirit, as John said He would. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit began a new work of creation in which they would forgive men's sins and renew them in righteousness, empowering them to obey the law of God. Saint Luke, in his Acts of the Apostles, recorded an event that occurred around twenty-five years after Pentecost:

And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples, He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism. Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied. And all the men were about twelve. (Acts 19:1-7)

Saint Paul, on his third missionary journey, came to Ephesus, and there he found some Jewish followers of Jesus. He asked them if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed in Jesus, and they answered that they had not heard that the Holy Spirit was given. Saint Paul asked them what baptism they had received, and they said John's. So, Saint Paul explained to them the ministry of John the Baptist. John was not the Christ, as he publicly admitted. John baptized penitent people with water as a sign of their cleansing, but He told people to believe in another, One who would succeed Him, One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, and this one is Jesus. Jesus is the Christ in whom men are to believe. So, when these men understood that Jesus is not simply a teacher, but the Christ, they believed in Him, and received Christian baptism. When Saint Paul laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came upon them and they received the gifts of the Spirit. These Jewish Christians believed and were baptized in the time of transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant. That time of transition was bound to come to an end, but not until all the elect were saved. As Saint Peter wrote, "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9) One generation after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, Jesus caused the Roman army to destroy the city of Jerusalem and the temple there, and so brought an end to the old dispensation of Moses. Since that time, all those that receive Christian baptism receive Jesus, and so receive His Spirit, and by His Spirit He renews them and empowers them to obey Him. Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." (2 Corinthians 5:17) In the first creation, God by His Spirit brought order out of the chaos of the material world. In the new creation, God by His Spirit brings order out of the chaos of the spiritual world, and He will finally perfect those who believe in Jesus.

Let us understand that God is the almighty Creator and Renovator. Let us believe that Jesus is the Christ, the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. Let us always keep in mind that we are in Christ a new creation.

Unto the Father, and unto the Son, and unto the Holy Spirit, be ascribed in the Church all honor and glory, might, majesty, dominion, and blessing, now, henceforth, and ever. Amen.