

A Fresh Start
Revelation 21:1-6

Several weeks ago I spent the best part of a day writing a sermon. It was not coming easily. I struggled with it all day long, and it just wasn't coming together. That afternoon I got a call that a member had been taken to the hospital. So, I ran over to the hospital with the full intention of coming back that afternoon and finishing the sermon. But the situation at the hospital took more time than I had planned, and I had an evening meeting scheduled. So, I ran by the house and picked up Becky and went out to eat. The next time I thought about that sermon was the next morning when I got to the office. Of course, when I logged on to the computer, there was a message that it had received an urgent update during the night, and it had to be automatically restarted. I had not saved my work, and when I checked to see if it had been saved by Microsoft Office, there was nothing there. I looked everywhere I could think to look. But finally I had to face the reality. All my work was gone.

So, I started over—but not exactly from scratch. After all, the computer is not the only thing that has a memory. I could remember my main points and the illustrations. To my amazement, as I rewrote the sermon, it all came together.

If the computer had not lost my original manuscript, I would have kept trying to edit it to try to make it work, and it probably wouldn't have. But because the computer lost it, I was given a fresh start. And that's what I needed. I needed a fresh start on that sermon.

We all need a fresh start. Life is difficult. It's a lot harder than writing a sermon. There are so many lessons to be learned. And many of those lessons can't be learned except by trial and error, and oftentimes more error than trial.

It would be nice if we didn't have to learn the hard way. And the truth is that those who are willing to listen do avoid many mistakes. The Bible is filled with advice about how to live successfully and avoid the pitfalls which cause so much heartache and pain. And our parents and teachers and other mentors also have a lot of advice for us. If we will listen, we can avoid many of life's mistakes. However, there are some things you just have to learn the hard way.

From the time my children were small, many of the mistakes they would make in life were pretty obvious to me. I understood their strengths and their weaknesses. I could foresee the problems their weaknesses would probably cause them. Of course I tried to warn them. And I have to say that they did listen to me for the most part. But they simply didn't understand themselves and life well enough to avoid some of the pitfalls I warned them about.

It seems that some of life's lessons you have to learn the hard way. You have to keep falling in that hole until one day you say to yourself, "I'm tiring of falling into that hole. It's painful and inconvenient, and I'm going to try to avoid that hole in the future."

My own personal experience of falling into holes is that you have to fall into some holes many times before you understand that they are a problem, and then you will fall into them many more times before they understand how to avoid it.

Of course, some people never do learn. They just keep going through life making the same mistakes over and over and wondering why they have so many problems.

The reality is that none of us figure out all of life's lessons during this lifetime. We won't fully understand all the lessons life is trying to teach us until we sit with Jesus at the judgment seat.

The Bible tells us that when we die we will go before the judgment seat of Christ. I used to think that the judgment seat was something to be dreaded and feared. I imagined Christ looking down from the throne with righteous anger, condemning me for all my sins. But, as I've have gotten to know Christ, I know that's not his way. When we go before the judgment seat, we will sit down with Christ and go over our lives. Christ will help us to understand why we did the things we did. He will enable us to see clearly the consequences of our choices and our actions. And he will show us what we could have done that would have led to a better life for us and for those whose lives we touched. I'm sure that when we see the mistakes we made and the people who suffered because of our mistakes, we will be tempted to give in to guilt and self-condemnation. But Jesus will say to us, "That's not the purpose of this conversation. I am not doing this to punish you for your mistakes. I died for your sins. You are forgiven. You are about to be offered a fresh start—a new life, an eternity—in which you can use the lessons you have learned from a lifetime of living and making mistakes. The question is, are you willing to learn from your mistakes?"

Revelation tells us that we will be given a new life in a new heaven and a new earth. And this time we will get it right, if we accept the grace offered to us in Christ and learn the lessons of this life.

Of course, there will be some who refuse to admit they made any mistakes. Those will not see any need for a new start, and they will reject the offer. There will be others who will be convinced that they are so hopeless that even a new start wouldn't help them, and they will also reject the offer of a new life.

But those who are willing to recognize their mistakes and accept God's gracious forgiveness in Christ and learn from their mistakes will gladly accept the opportunity for a new life, and they will step into eternity to live a righteous and holy life.

Today, we are remembering those who have learned what this life had to teach them. They have learned how to live. They have learned their lessons, and they have been given a fresh start—a new life in a new world. And that's the truth.

I saw a movie last week entitled "The Invention of Lying." This movie presents the belief in eternal life as a kind, gentle lie told to ease the pain of death. Those who have been in the presence of the Risen Christ know better.

Even before Christ there were those who speculated that surely there must be more to life than these few short years. What a shame it would be if a lifetime of learning about how to live was simply lost when we die. But Christ's resurrection established eternal life as a fact. And those who have been in the presence of the Resurrected Christ know the truth of eternal life.

So, we give thanks for the lives of the saints we honor today. We give thanks for the lives they lived. We give thanks for the lives they are living.

We give thanks for God's patience and grace for us, as we learn life's lessons.

And we give thanks for the hope of a fresh start, when we join the saints to live a new life in a new world.

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