

Did you make a New Year’s resolution this year? If so, how’s it going? We’re two weeks into 2018 now. Are you still going strong? Or have you fallen back into your old habits that you were so eager to break? I can’t judge you if you have! I don’t even make resolutions anymore because I know how likely I am to fail to follow through with them!

I couldn’t find a trustworthy statistic for what percentage of people are successful at keeping their New Year’s resolutions, but even though the stats vary pretty wildly, I can tell you that even if you’re a person who’s made it this far, it still doesn’t look good for you. One article I found says that only 64% of people manage to stay true to their resolution for the whole month of January, and that by June, only 46% of people have managed to keep it going. Another article claimed that 80% of resolutions don’t even make it to February! Failed resolutions are such a normal thing that it seems we can’t really make it through a January without hearing at least one joke about the gym being crowded for a couple weeks of the year!

There are probably a lot of reasons why it’s so hard to keep a New Year’s resolution. First, resolutions are never really things we would want to do naturally. They’re always challenging things that we know we *should* be doing, but aren’t. We need that little extra boost, “OK, *this* is the year I’m doing it!” Sometimes we make an overly ambitious resolution that we just aren’t able to live up to for physical or practical reasons. Maybe your body isn’t quite ready for crossfire six times a week, or maybe you don’t have an extra 45 minutes every day to set aside for reading.

For every article bemoaning how often people break their resolutions, there are at least a couple articles explaining how to make your resolution last longer. I’ll save you some time and give you the main idea behind most of these articles: the trick is picking a good resolution in the first place. One that is both manageable and realistic, as well as being something you’re passionate enough about to keep! So, whether you’re still going strong on your resolutions, or if you’ve already messed yours up I’d like to propose we all make another New Year’s resolution. Don’t worry if you already have your resolution set for this year—this one won’t get in the way. And if you’ve already given up on yours, or if you’re like me and don’t even bother making one in the first place, this will be one that any of us can keep! Here it is: this year, let’s be like young Samuel and answer God’s call by saying, “Speak, for your servant is listening!”

Any good resolution will have a desired result. If you resolve to read more, you become more knowledgeable. If you resolve to work out more, you become more fit. If you resolve to eat better, you become healthier. This resolution is no different. The benefits are eternal! I can’t think of a more desirable result than eternal life in heaven! Unfortunately it’s hard to make this resolution, just like it’s hard to read more, work out more, or eat healthier. In fact, it’s harder. It’s not just a matter of overcoming your will. The Bible tells us that we can’t choose God. We can’t answer God’s call on our own. Our sinful hearts want nothing to do with him! It literally takes a miracle to move an unbelieving heart! Answering God’s call isn’t just a resolution we can’t keep on our own. It’s one we can’t even make in the first place!

A miracle is exactly what we get! Christians answer God’s call, because it’s God’s call that makes us Christian! We have a special example in the Gospel we heard a few minutes ago. Philip runs and finds Nathaniel to tell him about Jesus, the Savior that they both had been waiting for, and Nathaniel’s first reaction is doubt and disbelief. “Nate! Nate! The Savior is here!” Philip says. “Can anything good come from Nazareth? He’s just some dude!” is Nathaniel’s response. Doubt and disbelief are our natural reactions too, when we look at our Savior on the basis of appearance or our own reason. When Jesus dazzled Nathaniel with a display of his omniscience by reading his mind, Nathaniel saw how he was the fulfillment to God’s promises. We have a fancy church word for the message of good news that God sent Jesus to be our Savior: we call it the Gospel. It’s though the power of the Gospel call that God creates faith. It’s that message of promise that Nathaniel would have grown up hearing. It’s that message that created faith in his heart before he even met Jesus, and it’s because Jesus was the fulfillment of that message that Nathaniel believed.

If you ever feel like God is distant or uninvolved in your life, and you wish that he would work some amazing miracle in your life, just remember that you believe because God is near to you and is involved in your life! God’s gospel call worked that faith in your life! That is no less miraculous and wonderful than Jesus telling Nathaniel his thoughts that day long ago! Christians answer God’s call because the miraculous power of God’s gospel call is what makes them Christian in the first place! We don’t have to make the impossible resolution. God makes it for us!

So what does it look like to live with this resolution? How do we answer God's call, when he seems to be so silent so much of the time? If you're wondering these things, you're not alone. There was a young university student in Erfurt a long time ago named Martin Luther who felt the same way. When he read through the story of Samuel, he desperately wished that God would speak to him just like he spoke to Samuel! If only he could just hear God's voice! If only we could too!

Samuel was a special kid. You probably remember his story because it's so dramatic! His father, Elkanah, was a Levite living in Ramathaim, which was probably sort of near Jerusalem. His mother, Hannah, desperately wanted a child, but was barren. Elkanah was a faithful man, and would bring Hannah along when he went to visit the Tabernacle to worship. One time when they were there, Hannah was praying so fervently and crying so hard that Eli, the priest mistook her for drunk! She promised the Lord that if he blessed her with a child, she would dedicate her baby to him.

Finally, God did bless her with a son, Samuel, and she stayed faithful to her promise to dedicate her child to God. When he was old enough, she brought him to the Tabernacle at Shiloh and he entered the service of Eli. Samuel grew up ministering before the Lord under Eli. This must have been a tremendous blessing, because it seems that the spiritual state of Israel was not particularly good at the time. We hear that the word of the Lord was rare and that God wasn't appearing to prophets in many visions either. (Sounds a lot like how Luther felt, or how we feel today, doesn't it?) Nonetheless, Samuel grew up in God's Word, his faith seems to have made him want to be as close to God as possible! We find him asleep or falling asleep actually in the house of the Lord!

Suddenly, a voice calls out, "Samuel!" He answers, "Here I am!" and runs to Eli to see what he needs. Eli says, "No, no, I didn't call you. Go back to bed!" It happens again. "Samuel!" And again Samuel runs to Eli, "Here I am! You called?" "No, I didn't. Go back to bed." The third time Samuel comes rushing in uncalled to see what he needs, Eli realizes that God must be calling Samuel. "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,'" he says. So Samuel does. This time, when God calls out, "Samuel! Samuel!" Samuel is ready. Now he knows it is God calling to him and he answers the only way a believer can, "Speak, for your servant is listening!"

Luther wished God would talk to him directly, and a lot of times we probably wish that too! I bet you anything that Samuel grew up wishing the same thing! If only God would talk to him like the prophets he read about in the Bible. Then God did! And he didn't recognize it right away! Can we really blame him though? We read that he did not yet know the Lord. He hadn't ever heard the voice of God directly, even though he certainly would have heard about and believed in God and the promised Savior from his childhood on! The big revelation for Samuel was when Eli told him that God was calling him. The great discovery Luther's life was that God spoke to him in the pages of the Bible. That's where we find God calling us too. The reaction is always the same, whether you're Samuel hearing God's voice directly, Luther finding God speaking to him in his Word, or a believer today, reading God's Word yourself. By faith, we all answer, "Speak, for your servant is listening!"

This year we are going to have opportunity after opportunity after opportunity to hear what God says to us. I pray that all of us eagerly take every opportunity to come to church to hear God's call here, to dig deeper into what God says to us in Bible class, and to take time for our own personal study. What an incredible blessing it is to be able to listen to our God! It would be a shame to let any chance go to waste. Sometimes we will not be hard to follow what he has to say to us. Samuel's assignment was definitely no cakewalk! Not only did God call him to be a prophet to Israel and to see Israel tradition from the time of the Judges to the time of the Kings, but his very first task was to pronounce judgment on Eli and his family for his failure to discipline his sons! God calls us to do things that are challenging, scary, unpleasant, and often the opposite of what our sinful nature wants us to do! But it's God's gospel call of forgiveness and salvation that miraculously continues to strengthen our faith, to give us comfort and confidence in our forgiveness, and the motivation to continue living in his will.

Christians, answer God's call! There's just no other choice! There's no better resolution! It's that call that made you Christian in the first place. God calls out to us, "Believe!" and his Word created faith in our hearts! It's that call that gives us the power and eagerness to do his will. God continues to call to us, "Follow me!" and his Word gives you the desire and the ability to live, following his instructions in the Bible! What an amazing thing it is that God would choose to use us as his servants, to call us to him to be his own! God speaks to us in his Word! By his grace, as we go forward into 2018 our answer is the same as Samuel's: "Speak, for your servant is listening!" Amen.