

AFTER CHRISTMAS, WHAT?

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This is the season of jingling bells and jangled nerves. The rush and expense of the holidays often leave us with little time to do what Mary did — to ponder these things in our hearts. We become too preoccupied to think.

The University of Maryland Medical Center has addressed what it calls the Holiday Blues on their Web site. What are the holiday blues?

“The holidays are supposed to be a joyful time of good cheer and optimistic hopes. Yet, it is not unusual for many of us to feel sad or lonely during the holiday period — a condition that has come to be called holiday blues or holiday depression.

“While they may be intense and unsettling, holiday blues are usually short-lived, lasting for a few days to a few weeks prior to or just after the holiday. The good news is, holiday blues usually subside after the holiday season is over and daily routines are resumed.

“There is a long list of recommended Do’s and Don’ts for managing your holiday blues. The most important things to remember are: it’s a normal response to a stress-filled time of the year, and you don’t have to suffer unnecessarily. Find someone to talk with who can help you through this difficult time — a family member, friend, member of the clergy, or a physician or professional counselor.”

Then there’s the also-normal After-party Letdown. Last-minute running around has depleted your adrenaline. Your body is exhausted from eating and drinking more than usual and consuming extreme amounts of sugar and fats. And your mind is numb from the noise and excitement. At last everyone has gone, or you’ve finally returned home, and you sink down into your easy chair to catch your breath while the ringing in your ears subsides. But inside, your heart and mind just keep on sinking.

After Christmas is over, then what?

1. Clean up.

Christmas is seldom just what you imagined or hoped it would be in every detail. Jesus Himself was born in a barn and slept in a feeding trough, surrounded by barnyard animals. There’s always stuff to clean up — dishes, wrappings, broken ornaments, pine needles.

Take stock of your year — How did you do at obeying the Holy Spirit? How did you do at controlling your temper? How did you do at forgiving others just as Jesus forgave you?

What do you have to clean up mentally?

What do you have to clean up relationally?

What do you have to clean up spiritually?

Psalm 15 (NLT)

¹ *Who may worship in your sanctuary, LORD?*

Who may enter your presence on your holy hill?

² *Those who lead blameless lives and do what is right,
speaking the truth from sincere hearts.*

³ *Those who refuse to gossip
or harm their neighbors
or speak evil of their friends.*

⁴ *Those who despise flagrant sinners,
and honor the faithful followers of the LORD,
and keep their promises even when it hurts.*

⁵ *Those who lend money without charging interest,
and who cannot be bribed to lie about the innocent.
Such people will stand firm forever.*

After Christmas is over, then what?

2. Rest up.

The dishes are finally done, the floor is finally cleared, the leftovers are put away. It's time to rest. You deserve it. You need it.

You've asked God to forgive you and you've forgiven others. You've told others that you love them. You've prayed and you've given.

Now rest up. You probably have to return to work between Christmas and New Year's Day, but also take some time to rest in the Lord. Take a breather from the "driver's seat." A new year is coming; it will be here in a short week. What will be different in 2011? What *could* be different?

Real and lasting change always begins with the Lord. Make Him your confidant. Tell Him what's in your heart. Tell Him the best you can imagine. Tell Him what you're willing to do. Tell Him what you're afraid of. Ask Him what He's willing to do for you.

Make room for a Sabbath in your life — a time to sit or walk with the Lord, feel His presence, hear His voice, receive His strength and be refreshed — or at least listen to the rain against the glass and feel the breeze on your cheek and watch the clouds form and pass. Just be still... and know that He is God... your God. He can take care of you in the coming year, and He will.

After Christmas is over, then what?

3. Face up.

When a year closes out and the hustle and bustle of the holidays have passed, we often have just enough time to think about the New Year as a new beginning. It's wonderful to reevaluate what's most important in our lives and to determine what deserves more of our attention.

Thank-you cards need to be sent, or New Year's cards to make up for the Christmas cards you never got around to. The Christmas decorations need to be taken down and put away for another year. If you have kids, school will soon resume. Credit card bills will be arriving in a couple of weeks... should you be setting aside something every week to prepare to pay them? 2010 taxes will be due in a few months... are your records in order? Do you see why you need that rest?!

By God's design, each of us is shouldered with responsibilities to manage, for this is how our character is stretched and shaped and developed. The person you are becoming — the person you were designed to be — is growing within you. If you are ever to be seen or known and appreciated on the outside, you must first grow up on the inside. This is the result of enduring pressures, and stretching our faith in Christ in the face of life's challenges.

A new year *will* come. And with it, a fresh share of grace for the journey. **Prepare yourself like a grownup.** I said, "Rest," not retreat. Don't bury your head in the sand. Don't just pray for Jesus to take away all difficulties; instead, pray that He will be with you to strengthen you for every challenge. At the end of next year, you want to graduate, not to be held back another year because you didn't do the necessary work.

Get ready.

1 Corinthians 15:58 (NLT)

So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless.

After Christmas is over, then what?

4. Look up.

The New Year also reminds us that God gives us a fresh start — not just annually, but daily.

Lamentations 3 (NLT)

²² *The faithful love of the LORD never ends!*

His mercies never cease.

²³ *Great is his faithfulness;*

his mercies begin afresh each morning.

Genesis 13 (NLT)

¹⁴ *The LORD said to Abram, "Look as far as you can see in every direction—north and south, east and west. ¹⁵ I am giving all this land, as far as you can see, to you and your descendants as a permanent possession. ¹⁶ And I will give you so many descendants that, like the dust of the earth, they cannot be counted! ¹⁷ Go and walk through the land in every direction, for I am giving it to you."*

A fresh start in grace deserves a fresh response in faith. Lift up your face and claim the land you hope to possess; claim all that you believe God has promised to you. What have you walked through? What have the soles of your feet traversed in the past year? Claim the spoils of the battles you have waged. Claim the results of God's grace. Hold fast the ground you have gained so far.

One man said to his friend: "Say, you look depressed. What are you thinking about?"

"My future," was the quick answer.

"What makes it look so hopeless?"

"My past."

Jesus came to make a break between your past and your future, and to give you a future and a hope that you could not see before.

Dr. Warren Weirsbe wrote, "Do not say, 'Why were the former days better than these?' You do not move ahead by constantly looking in a rear view mirror. The past is a rudder to guide you, not an anchor to drag you. We must learn from the past but not live in the past."

Remember that, in Christ, your short-term losses are usually part of your long-term gains. Three steps forward and two steps backward still results in one step farther forward than before. If you take the "long look" back (not just the short one) you'll probably recognize how you've grown spiritually since last year, even if circumstances aren't smooth right now. To be honest, sometimes it's *because* circumstances aren't smooth right now! God comes to us *in the storm* and eventually takes command of the wind and waves.

Matthew 14 (NLT)

²² Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, while he sent the people home. ²³ After sending them home, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone.

²⁴ Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. ²⁵ About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, "It's a ghost!"

²⁷ But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Take courage. I am here!"

²⁸ Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water."

²⁹ "Yes, come," Jesus said.

So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.

³¹ Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. "You have so little faith," Jesus said. "Why did you doubt me?"

³² When they climbed back into the boat, the wind stopped. ³³ Then the disciples worshiped him. "You really are the Son of God!" they exclaimed.

We were just intending to take a short trip across the lake... Then it looked like we might not make it at all! A strong wind challenged all forward progress, and the rolling waves threatened to capsize our vessel and send us to the bottom of the sea. Through the night hours (for what seemed like an eternity) we struggled to keep our boat afloat. When we thought things could not possibly get worse, we were suddenly terrified by the nightmarish vision of a man walking toward us... on the water! But it turned out to be Jesus.

"Don't be afraid," He said. "Take courage. I am here!"

He promised never to leave you, nor forsake you. He will be with you for the rest of your life. Don't be afraid.

And you can be there for others when they are struggling. Sometimes, that's just how Jesus shows up — through you! And it doesn't take much to change a person's day for the better.

I agree with the person who said, "Hugs are not only nice; they're needed. Hugs can relieve pain and depression, make the healthy healthier, the happy happier and the most secure among us even more so. Hugging feels good, overcomes fear, eases tension, provides stretching exercise if you're short and stooping exercise if you're tall. Hugging does not upset the environment, saves heat and requires no special equipment. It makes happy days happier and impossible days possible."

So, as the New Year approaches, I urge you to clean up, rest up, face up, and look up. Then, you can step up to all that the Lord has planned for you and for us in 2011.