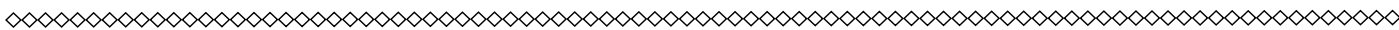




Pastor of the
International
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Sermon Brief
Text: Exodus 40:1-4
Title: Celebrating the New Year
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Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

Curiosity led me to do some checking out of a variety of sources of material. Why do people celebrate the New Year? Is it the same date all over the world? Are there different ways of celebrating it? Then I wondered, How did people celebrate New Year's in biblical times? I couldn't remember any scripture passages mentioning "new year." The interest level grew now with a growing number of unanswered questions.

Checking out the scripture material through concordances, Bible dictionary articles etc. turned up one primary text, Exodus 40:2, where 'new year' is mentioned. Turn with me to this passage in your Bible.

1 The LORD now said to Moses, 2 "Set up the Tabernacle on the first day of the new year. 3 Place the Ark of the Covenant inside, and install the inner curtain to enclose the Ark within the Most Holy Place. 4 Then bring in the table, and arrange the utensils on it. And bring in the lampstand, and set up the lamps."

The English phrase 'new year' shows up only in a few of the more recent Bible translations. The Hebrew text more literally means, "the first day of the first month of the year." Ex. 40:17 indicates that the tabernacle was completed "in the first month of the second year, on the first day of the month." And guess what? This text isn't talking about January 1. Instead, it is talking about the Hebrew month Nisan and the first day of this month. This corresponds to the period of March-April on the Gregorian calendar. Thus the Israelites celebrated their first 'new year' about a year after the Passover celebration at the beginning of the Exodus. The celebration was in close connection to the completed construction of the Tabernacle and the first use of it for worshipping God. This indeed was a very special occasion for these Hebrews as they encamped around Mt. Sinai.

But before the end of the Old Testament era, changes took place. The new year celebration shifted to the fall, and away from the spring. Even some passages in Exodus seem to point this direction.¹ The Hebrew month of Tishrei in September-October gradually became the starting point for the Jewish New Year. The first two days of Tishrei have been celebrated as the Jewish New Year now for many centuries and is called Rosh Hashanah. Thus Jews around the world celebrate the beginning of their new year in late September to middle October. The reasoning for this centers on the Jewish festival of Yom Kippur, 'Day of Atonement,' coming on Tishrei 10. This is the celebration of forgiveness of sins committed during the previous year, and thus represents a fresh beginning of life.

When did January 1 come into the picture? Absolutely no mention of any kind of 'new year' exists in the New Testament. In the Apostolic Era of the first Christian century Christians had no 'new year's' celebration of any kind, apart from Jewish Christians who continued to participate in the Jewish new year celebration in the fall of the year. When one checks the phrase 'new year' in English language dictionaries, a reference to January 1 will surface.² A clue surfaces with the realization that our calendar is the Gregorian Calendar,

¹(a) The extrabiblical Gezer Calendar (ANE^T, p. 320), reflecting the Palestinian calendar during the early monarchy, commences with the months of olive harvest, a fall agricultural activity.

(b) The Festival of Ingathering (*āšîp*) is dated to "the going out of the year" (*bēšēṭ haššānā*) in Ex. 23:16 (cf. RS^V, NE^B, J^B, NAS^B, NI^V, "the end of the year"). In Ex. 34:22 the same feast is fixed at "the turn of the year" (*tēqûpāt haššānā*). These instructions are held to reflect the oldest liturgical calendars. At the opposite side of the annual cycle, the time of year when kings customarily embarked on military activity is identified in 2 S. 11:1 (*pa' 1 Ch. 20:1*) and 1 K. 20:22, 26 as "the return of the year" (*tēšûḇāt haššānā*). A synchronism of 2 Ch. 36:10 with the Babylonian Chronicle, which recounts the appointment of Zedekiah as king in Jerusalem in the month of Adar, confirms the interpretation of this expression as the springtime. See A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (1975), p. 102; but cf. N. H. Snaith, *Jewish New Year Festival* (1947), pp. 32^f, for a dissenting view.

(c) The Sabbatical and Jubilee years commenced in the autumn (Ex. 23:10^f; Lev. 25:9). The latter was announced with the blowing of the ram's horn (Shofar), which in later Judaism was characteristic of the New Year celebration (Mis^h *Rosh ha-Shanah* iv. 1-9).

(d) Some scholars assert that the instruction that the month of Abib (= Nisan) is to be the first month of the year in Ex. 12:2 is a postexilic (P) alteration borrowed from the Babylonians.

(e) The expression "the head of the year" (*rōš haššānā*) in Ezk. 40:1 is identified with Tishri 10, or at least an autumnal beginning to the new year." [Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988; 2002).]

²"**New Year** *noun*, 13th century: **1**: the calendar year about to start or recently started; **2** *a usually New Year's*: NEW YEAR'S DAY, **b**: the first days of a calendar year; **3**: ROSH HASHANAH; **New Year's Day** *noun*, 13th century: the first day of the calendar year observed as a legal holiday in many countries" [*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Eleventh ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).]

which was introduced by Pope Gregory XIII on Feb. 24, 1582. Since then it has become the internationally accepted civil calendar pretty much around the world. Up to that point, the Julian calendar had been used that had its origins in the ancient Roman calendar. The Julian calendar was introduced by Julius Caesar in 46 BCE. The Julian Calendar set up January 1 as the beginning of the new year, and during the Middle Ages celebrations of the start of a new year developed. With the spread of Western culture and influence into the rest of the world the Gregorian calendar, coming out of the Julian Calendar, has also spread the New Year's celebrations to the rest of the world. But these celebrations have not been connected to a religious celebration. In fact, in Roman Catholic Christianity the 'Christian new year' comes on the First Sunday of Advent around the beginning of December. In Eastern Orthodox Christianity, January 1 is a civil New Year celebration while January 14 (Jan. 1 on the Julian calendar) is the religious holiday of New Year.

One has to carefully distinguish between a civil and a religious New Year since the civil new year is typically January 1. But depending on the religion, the religious New Year most comes either in March - April, or else in the fall of the year.

BODY

I. New Year is the chance to worship God

What can we make of this? I would turn back to Exodus 40 and the Jewish Rosh Hashanah as sources of insight for us. For the Hebrew people in Exodus the new year initially became the opportunity to worship God in the Tabernacle. When Moses finished constructing the Tabernacle, God honored this work by His holy presence in the Tabernacle as Ex. 40:33b-38 indicates:

So at last Moses finished the work. 34 Then the cloud covered the Tabernacle, and the glorious presence of the LORD filled it. 35 Moses was no longer able to enter the Tabernacle because the cloud had settled down over it, and the Tabernacle was filled with the awesome glory of the LORD. 36 Now whenever the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle and moved, the people of Israel would set out on their journey, following it. 37 But if the cloud stayed, they would stay until it moved again. 38 The cloud of the LORD rested on the Tabernacle during the day, and at night there was fire in the cloud so all the people of Israel could see it. This continued throughout all their journeys.

God's people had a place to worship God, a place where they could encounter His presence and find His leadership.

The beginning of a New Year presents us with the opportunity to come face to face with our God and to seek His presence and His leadership. The coming year of 2010 will present us with some challenges. And we will need to seek God's face and His leadership as we move forward in ministry to our Lord. The Nisan 1 linking of New Year to Passover reminds us of the supreme sacrifice that God paid in the sending of Jesus to die for our sins on the cross. Thus in Calvary we come face-to-face with the God of this university and discover His grace and gift of salvation.

II. New Year is the chance for new beginnings.

With the Jewish shift from New Year on Nisan 1 in connection to the Passover during the spring to Tishrei 1-2 in the fall with Yom Kippur and the forgiveness of sins, the celebration focused on God's granting every one a new beginning with the 'slate' being wiped clean of sin and guilt for the preceding year.

Of course, the Christian perspective is that with Jesus sacrifice on the cross, our sins for all time have been wiped away and we stand before God covered by the blood of Christ.

14 That is why we have a great High Priest who has gone to heaven, Jesus the Son of God. Let us cling to him and never stop trusting him. 15 This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same temptations we do, yet he did not sin. 16 So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it. (Heb. 4:14-16, NRSV)

So let us celebrate true beginnings and the cleansing of our sins through Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

New Year's -- a special time for worship and for celebration of what we have in Jesus Christ. My prayer is that it will be just that for you this year.