

WATCHNIGHT: JOHN WESLEY'S COVENANT RENEWAL SERVICE

S E E D B E D



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image in us and remakes us into the people
He created us to be in the first place.”*

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-62824-417-5

Series design and layout by Strange Last Name

SEEDBED PUBLISHING

Franklin, Tennessee

seedbed.com

Welcome to a New Year

THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE TEARING off the last page of a calendar and turning to a new year. It brings a clean slate, offering a new start with fresh possibilities. New Year's resolutions will abound. New habits will be attempted. Once again, we will aspire to put our best foot forward.

But before we do that, let's remind ourselves of our back story.

It's an all too human thing to want to be better and to strive for more. We are created in the image of God. The inconvenient truth is that our ancient ancestors determined that bearing the image of God was not enough. They wanted to be God. They were reaching to be God's equals.

And maybe that's our problem—reaching. Isn't that where things went wrong? When our ancestors reached for the forbidden fruit. It wasn't an apple they were reaching for. They were reaching for equality with God. They wanted to be their own god. Then and now, sooner or later, it always leads to epic failure. You see, by definition, God has no equal.

We've been doing it ever since. That's the essence of sin—not trusting in the trustworthy goodness of God. The minute we do that we set out on a course to find another god or worse, to become our own god. We make great humans, but terrible gods. And when we set out on a course to find other gods, we can actually become quite terrible humans.

We were not made to reach for God, but to bow before Him. That's the one place where we discover that God was reaching for us all along. That's who Jesus is—the one who

reaches to us, right where we are. Not only does He reach us, He restores His glorious image in us and remakes us into the people He created us to be in the first place. In short, He reminds us to think like God thinks and to act like God acts and to love like God loves. Scripture gives us an amazing snapshot in Philippians:

Have the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing. And taking on the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness and found in the appearance of a man, he humbled himself and become obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name; that at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

*and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ
is Lord to the glory of God the Father.*

—2:5-II

Did you catch that? He reminds us. By the working of the Word of God and the Spirit of God and the fellowship of one another, Jesus saves us from the broken patterns of this world and transforms us by the renewing of our minds. He transforms our mind, which, far more than our brains, is the innermost place of our lives where our affections and dispositions and aspirations live. This is where our character is formed and transformed. This is where the roots are—from which the fruit comes.

The Bible gets so carried away with the miracle of all this it almost breaks into song:

*“What no eye has seen, what no ear
has heard, and what no human mind has
conceived”—*

the things God has prepared for those who love him—

these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. . . .

for, “Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

—I Corinthians 9–10, 16.

You may be asking, What does all of this have to do with New Year's resolutions? Let me ask you: Would you rather resolve once again to try harder, to do more, to reach higher, to be better (and lighter), only to run out of gas again by Valentine's Day? Or would you rather try something different this year? Our resolutions and resolve aren't bad, just futile.

What if we started out this year on our knees, reminding one another of the mercy, grace, and faithfulness of God? What if we gave up on reaching for the stars and found ourselves bowing down to the ground before

the one true and living God? What if instead of re-firing our confidence in ourselves, we renewed our faith in Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit? What if we began this year with repentance—realigning our minds and hearts and lives according to the things that matter most?

Well, that would be a New Year's revolution.

The little booklet you hold in your hand is designed to do just that—to start the new year with a short but defining practice called covenant renewal. It's where we read Scripture, hear challenges, receive encouragements, make promises, and offer all we know of ourselves to all we know of God. We learned this New Year's practice from John Wesley, who founded and led the revolutionary movement known as Methodism as it began in eighteenth-century England.

—J. D. Walt

A Historical Note about the Wesley Covenant Renewal Service

In 1775, John Wesley introduced a covenant service as an important part of spiritual life in the Methodist Societies. This renewal service was a time for the Methodists to gather annually in a time of self-examination, reflection, and dedication, wholly giving up themselves and renewing covenant with God. Repentance through confession and commitment was a key focus of the service, demanding humility from those willing to submit themselves to the dynamic words stated within the liturgy.

According to Wesley's journal, though the covenant renewal service was held on

various occasions throughout the year, by the end of his life, the service was observed typically on or the Sunday nearest January 1. The covenant renewal service is a practice that continues in churches and Christian communities today, often near the beginning of the new year. It has undergone many revisions and adaptations, but its purpose as an evocative ceremony of commitment to ongoing discipleship and Christ-like character has always remained intact.

Presented here is a modern liturgical adaptation of the covenant service. The vocabulary and syntax have been updated to what would be more familiar in the world today. Our prayer is for this resource to be a means of grace for the church, bringing renewal in the hearts and lives of God's children, freely giving everything to God's pleasure and disposal.

—Jonathan Powers

The Service of Covenant Renewal

THE GREETING

Leader: Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations.

People: You are the one true God who reigns forever.

OPENING PRAYER

Leader: Almighty God, You search our hearts and You see every part of us. All our desires are known to You, and from You no secrets are hidden. By the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit, cleanse our hearts so we may

perfectly love You and glorify Your holy name. We pray this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Leader: Now as God's dearly loved children, let us pray together:

People: Our Father, who art in Heaven
hallowed be Thy name.
Thy Kingdom come.
Thy will be done,
on Earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass
against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the Kingdom, and

the power and the glory, forever.
Amen.

THE SCRIPTURE LESSONS

DEUTERONOMY 6:4-9

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

2 KINGS 23:1-3

Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the temple of the LORD with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the LORD. The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the LORD—to follow the LORD and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant.

PSALM 1: 1-6

Blessed is the one

*who does not walk in step with the
wicked*

or stand in the way that sinners take

*or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of
the LORD,*

*and who meditates on his law day
and night.*

*That person is like a tree planted by
streams of water,*

*which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.*

Not so the wicked!

*They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.*

*Therefore the wicked will not stand in
the judgment,*

nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

*For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.*

I PETER 1:13–25

Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”

Since you call on a Father who judges each person’s work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. For you know that it was not with

perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For,

*“All people are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers
of the field;*

*the grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of the LORD endures
forever.”*

*And this is the word that was preached
to you.*

JOHN 15:1-8

*“I am the true vine, and my Father is
the gardener. He cuts off every branch
in me that bears no fruit, while every
branch that does bear fruit he prunes
so that it will be even more fruitful. You
are already clean because of the word I
have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I
also remain in you. No branch can bear
fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine.
Neither can you bear fruit unless you
remain in me.*

*“I am the vine; you are the branches.
If you remain in me and I in you, you*

will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."

MARK 1:15

"The time has come," [Jesus] said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

THE PROCLAMATION

Leader: Dearly loved brothers and sisters, the Christian life is a life found in Christ,

redeemed from sin, and consecrated to God. We are those who have entered into this life and have been admitted into the new covenant of Jesus Christ. He is the Mediator of this covenant. He sealed it with His own blood so it would last forever.

On one side of this covenant stands God, who promises to give us new life in Jesus Christ, the Author and Perfector of our faith. Every day God proves His goodness and grace to us, showing us that His promise still stands firm.

On the other side, we stand as those who promise to no longer live life for ourselves but instead to only live for Jesus Christ because He has loved us and given His life for us.

There are times in our lives when it is important for us to remember and reaffirm our promises and vows. In this same way, we come today to renew our covenant with God. Many generations have done this before us. Today we make the covenant our own, renewing with both joy and sincerity the covenant that binds us all to God.

THE CONFESSION

Leader: We are those who seek to live as true disciples of Jesus Christ, but sometimes we fall short. Let us now examine ourselves before God, humbly confessing our sins, and submitting our hearts so that we do not deceive ourselves and cut ourselves away from God. Let us pray.

People: Father God, You have set forth the way of life through Your Son Jesus Christ, whom You love dearly. We confess that we have been slow to learn of Him and have been reluctant to follow Him. You have spoken and called to us but we have not listened. You have revealed Your beauty to us, but we have been blind. You have stretched out Your hands to us through our friends, but we have passed by them. We have accepted Your gifts and offered little thanks. We are unworthy of Your unchanging love.

Leader: We now confess to you our sins.

Please forgive us for the poverty of our worship ...

for the selfishness of our prayers ...

for our inconsistency and unbelief ...

for the ways we neglect fellowship
and Your grace ...

for our hesitation to tell others about
Christ ...

for the ways we deceive others.

People: Forgive us for when we waste time
and when we misuse the gifts You
have given us. Forgive us for when
we have made excuses for the
wrong things we have done and
when we have purposefully avoided
responsibility.

Leader: Forgive us that we have been unwilling to overcome evil with good and that we have not been ready to carry our cross. Forgive us that we have not allowed Your love to work through us to help others and that we have not made their suffering our own. Forgive us for those times when instead of working for unity we made it hard for others to live with us because of our lack of forgiveness, inconsiderate judgment, and quick criticism.

People: Forgive us for when we have not tried to reconcile with others and when we have been slow to seek redemption.

Leader: Forgive us also for these sins that we silently confess to you now.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE AND PARDON

Leader: God, the Father of all mercies, is faithful to cleanse us from our sins and restore us to Christ's image. Praise and glory be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Amen.

THE INVITATION

Leader: Let us gathered here before the Lord now in covenant commit ourselves to Christ as His servants. Let us give ourselves to Him so that we may fully belong to Him. Jesus Christ has left us with many services to be done. Some of these services are easy and honorable, but some are difficult and disgraceful. Some line up with our desires and interests;

others are contrary to both. In some we please both Christ and ourselves, but then there are other works where we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.

Jesus Christ, we offer You this prayer.

People: Let me be Your servant. Let me follow Your commands. I will no longer follow my own desires. I give myself completely to Your will.

Leader: The power and strength to live as true servants is given to us in Christ. We accept the place and work that He gives us, acknowledging that He alone will be our reward.

People: I am not my own. I am Yours alone. Make me into what You will. Rank me with those You will. Put me to

use for You. Put me to suffering for You. Let me be employed for You. Let me be laid aside for You. Let me be lifted high for You. Let me be brought low for You. Let me be full or let me be empty. Let me have all things or let me have nothing. With a willing heart, I freely give everything to Your pleasure and disposal.

Leader: Christ is Savior to those who are His true servants. He is the source of all salvation to those who obey. To be His servant is to consent fully to His will. Christ accepts nothing less. Christ will be all in all, or He will be nothing.

Now confirm this truth in holy covenant. Make it a reality in your life in these five ways:

First, set apart time in your day, more than once, to be spent alone with the Lord. Seek to perceive God's special care for you and gracious acceptance of you. Carefully think through the words of this covenant and its conditions. Examine your heart, even if you have freely given your life to Christ. Name the sins in your life. Reflect on whether you are willing to choose Christ's holy laws and strict commands. Be sure you are clear in all of these so you do not lie to God!

Second, uphold a serious spirit of holy awe and reverence.

Third, claim God's covenant. Do not trust in your own strength and power but rely upon God's promise of giving grace and strength. In this

way, He will empower you to keep your promise.

Fourth, be determined to be faithful. You have given your heart and life to God. You have opened your mouth to dedicate yourself to the Lord. With God's power, never go back to your former way of living.

And last, be prepared to renew your covenant with God. Fall on your knees. Lift your hands. Open your hearts.

THE COVENANT PRAYER

Leader: Let us pray together:

People: My righteous God, for the sake of Your Son Jesus Christ, see me now

as I fall down before You. Forgive my unfaithfulness when I have not done Your will. You promise mercy if I turn to You with my whole heart.

Leader: God requires that you rid yourself of every idol in your life.

People: From the bottom of my heart, I here and now renounce every idol in my life, covenanting with You that I will not commit any known sin. By turning against Your will I have turned my love toward the world. In Your power I will watch for any temptation that will lead me away from You.

Leader: Through Jesus Christ, God offers to be your God again, if you allow Him to be.

People: Before all heaven and earth, I here and now acknowledge You, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as my Lord and God. I vow to give all of myself, body and soul, to be Your servant and to serve You in holiness and righteousness all the days of my life.

Leader: Jesus Christ is the only way and means to God. God has given us Jesus as the way and means to salvation.

People: Jesus, I here and now accept You as the only new and living Way. I join myself in covenant with You. I come to You hungry, sinful, miserable, blind, and naked, unworthy even to wash the feet of Your servants. With all my power, I accept You as my Lord and Head. I renounce my own unworthiness, and vow that You are the Lord, my righteousness.

I renounce my own wisdom and take You for my only guide. I renounce my own will and take Your will as my law.

Leader: Christ has told you that you must suffer with Him.

People: Jesus, I here and now make this covenant with You and accept whatever comes in life. Through Your grace I promise that neither life nor death will separate me from You.

Leader: God has given holy laws as the rule of your life.

People: I here and now willingly take on Your yoke and burden. All Your laws are holy, just, and good. I accept them as the rule for my words, thoughts,

and actions, promising I will strive to order my whole life around Your direction. I will not allow myself to neglect anything I know to be my duty.

Leader: The Almighty God searches and knows you, even the thoughts of your heart.

People: O God, You know that we have made this covenant today in sincerity, without deceit or reluctance. If You find anything false in us, guide us and help us to set it right. And now, glory be to You, God the Father. From this day forward, I shall look upon You as my God and Father. Glory be to You, God the Son. You have loved me and washed me from my sins in Your own blood. From this day forward, I shall look upon You as

my Savior and Redeemer. Glory be to You, O God the Holy Spirit. By Your almighty power, You have turned my heart from sin to God. From this day forward I shall look upon You as my Comforter and Guide. O mighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you have now become my covenant Friend. And I, through Your infinite grace, have become Your covenant servant. You are mine and I am Yours. So be it. May this covenant that I have made here on earth be ratified in heaven. Amen.

DISMISSAL WITH BLESSING

Leader: May our God, who establishes covenant relationship with those who seek to enter the kingdom, be with you always. May Jesus Christ, who seals the new covenant with His

blood on the cross, bring you peace.
May the Holy Spirit guide your life
both now and forever. Go in peace
to serve the Lord!

People: Amen.

Fifteen Ways to Use This Resource

1. Host a Watchnight service at your local church on New Year's Eve. After a covered-dish supper (a.k.a. potluck), gather everyone and do the covenant renewal service as a community.*
2. Gather your family around the lunch or dinner table on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day. Appoint someone to be the leader for the service. Appoint others around the table to read the Scripture readings and walk through the covenant renewal together.
3. Set up a video conference call (FaceTime, Skype, etc.) with friends or family across the country and walk through the covenant renewal service.

4. Host a New Year's Eve gathering with friends and engage the covenant renewal service together.
5. Take the covenant renewal service into your prayer closet at home and pray through the service in secret before God. See also Matthew 6.
6. Lead a local church congregation through the covenant renewal service during your Sunday service on the first Sunday of the New Year.
7. Engage the covenant renewal service with your small group, Sunday school class, Class Meeting, or New Room Band.
8. Order a bulk supply of these Seedling books and pass them out to your church.
9. Hand deliver copies of this Seedling book to elderly people who can't easily get out of their homes or who live in assisted living facilities or nursing homes.
10. Order a bundle and distribute them at the local jail or prison.

11. Get a supply of Covenant Renewal Service Seedlings and sneak them into the stockings on Christmas Eve.
12. In the quiet week between Christmas and New Year's mail a Covenant Renewal Service Seedling to family and friends you weren't able to see over the holiday. Enclose a note of New Year's blessing.
13. Tuck a Seedling into your Christmas card envelopes this year. It will add to the postage but be totally worth it!
14. Keep a supply of these in your car and be on the ready to sow them extravagantly as the Spirit leads you.
15. Your turn. Share your ideas and creative applications with us at:
farmteam@seedbed.com.

*Download “Wesley Prayer (Come Like A Fire)” by Mark Swayze from iTunes or listen to it on YouTube. Check out the instructional videos on how to lead the song in corporate worship along with chord charts, etc.

Visit seedbed.com/watchnight for additional help with worship design and other implementation resources.

THE SOWER'S CREED

Today,
I sow for a great awakening.

Today,
I stake everything on the promise of the Word of God.
I depend exclusively on the power of the Holy Spirit.
I have the same mind in me that was in Christ Jesus.
Because Jesus is good news and Jesus is in me,
I am good news.

Today,
I will sow the extravagance of the gospel
everywhere I go and into everyone I meet.

Today,
I will love others as Jesus has loved me.

Today,
I will remember that the tiniest seeds become the tallest trees;
that the seeds of today become the shade of tomorrow;
that the faith of right now becomes the
future of the everlasting kingdom.

Today,
I sow for a great awakening.



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