

The Pagan Roots of New Year's Resolutions

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WHEN THE MESSENGER of Allah (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) emigrated to al-Madinah, he found the people celebrating two holidays. He asked, “What are these two days?” Someone responded, “These are days we celebrated during *al-Jabiliyyah*.” Upon hearing the origin of these holidays, the Prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) said, “Allah has given you better than them: *Eid al-Adha* and *Eid al-Fitr*.”¹ So, as we see from the action of Allah’s Messenger (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), questioning the origins of holidays, customs, and celebrations is essential. What, then, is the origin of New Year’s resolutions?

In ancient Rome, circa 46 B.C., emperor Julius Caesar made January 1st the beginning of his new calendar. The month was named after Janus, the Roman god of beginnings and endings. The Romans believed that this “two-faced” god looked back at the previous year and forward to the next. Along with making sacrifices to Janus, they also made promises to him to perform good deeds in the coming year. This practice evolved over the centuries. Later, several Christian sects took New Year’s Eve as an opportunity to reflect upon their wrongdoing throughout the year and resolve to change their conduct in the new one. In recent times, this became the secular practice of individuals making resolutions to themselves to change habits or make improvements in their lives. (A recent study, however, found that only about 8% of those who make resolutions said they see them through to the end of the year.) Thus, New Year’s resolutions are rooted in paganism, disbelief, and secularism. The Muslim is free from all of this: free from polytheism, free from imitating the disbelievers. The Muslim hopes to better himself every moment of his life, resolves to change his bad habits each day through acts of devotion and obedience. Allah says,

﴿إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُغَيِّرُ مَا بِقَوْمٍ حَتَّى يُغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنْفُسِهِمْ﴾

“Allah will not change a people’s condition until they change what is in themselves.”
[*al-Ra’d*: 13:11]

Concerning this verse, *al-‘Allamah* al-Sa’di (رَحِمَهُ اللَّهُ) said, “If the worshipper turns from his sinfulness to obedience to Allah, Allah will change his misfortune to good, happiness, delight, and mercy.” Therefore, the believer is mindful to repent—daily—from every wrongdoing. He is also mindful of the power of supplication, “the weapon of the believer,” as Ibn al-Qayyim (رَحِمَهُ اللَّهُ) described it. The Prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) said, “There is not a Muslim upon the earth who supplicates to Allah except that He will grant him [his supplication] or divert an equivalent harm, as long as he does not offer a *du’a* in which there is sin or [offer a *du’a*] to sever family ties.”² This he said of supplication, not these resolutions. So, let the believer remain focused on prayer, repentance, and acts of obedience, things that can truly change his life and condition.



¹ See *Sunan Abu Dawud* (no. 1134). It has been declared authentic by al-Albani in his checking of *Sunan Abu Dawud* (no. 1134).

² Collected by Imam Ahmad in his *Musnad* (no. 22279). It has been declared authentic by al-Albani in *Sabih al-Tarhib wa al-Tarhib* (no. 1631).