



Fresh Prayers for a New Year

Ephesians 1:15-23

Learning from the Past

Insightful bestselling author Malcolm Gladwell encouraged his readers to think back several years to the Wimbledon Ladies' tennis finals of 1993 when Jana Novotna, a Czechoslovakian champion, seemed invincible. Leading 4-1 in the final set and serving at 40-30, she was one point away from winning the game and five points away from one of the most coveted championships in tennis.

Yet the set went badly for her; she folded under pressure. When she was presented with the runner-up trophy that year, she wept on the shoulders of the Duchess of Kent who was presenting the trophy to her.

Jana Novotna faltered at Wimbledon when she began to lose her confidence and mentally over-analyzed her shots. She lost her fluidity. She began to double-fault on serves. She reverted to playing the cautious, deliberate game of a much less experienced player, even though she was in the Wimbledon final.

Five years later, however, Novotna won the Wimbledon Women's final. She had persevered, refusing to go back to where she once was. She had tasted defeat, did not like it, and was determined to learn from her past. She learned what it means to dig deep, to grow. She had become a champion.

When we quietly slipped into 2022, most of us were determined to live up to our New Year's resolutions. Some of us were even determined to go deeper in our faith. But just over a week into the New Year, we may have lost some of our determination. The daily grind and the routine of life have distracted us, and the now malleable priorities of last week have drifted into the past.

“That You May Know Him Better”

If this describes you, please come with me

into the New Testament book of Ephesians and explore the Apostle Paul's prayer, which focuses on what may well be the greatest desire in the Christian life: “that you may know him better.”

In the first major section of chapter one, verses 3-14, we find one of the great prayers of the apostle Paul. His words constitute a single complex sentence, where Paul pours onto the parchment a single continuous cascade of praise and prayer. He neither pauses for breath nor punctuates his words. His heart and mind are exploding with prayerful gratitude and praise at the love and goodness of God. Paul is so captivated, so enthralled, so deeply and profoundly moved, that he is transported to a place of undiluted, concentrated adoration. Generations of seminary professors and scholars have searched for metaphors vivid enough to convey the impact of this opening outburst of praise.

The captivating words of 1:17, “that you may know him better,” draw us into a genuine heartfelt prayer—prayer focused on real people, living real lives, facing real challenges. Such prayer is not only meaningful in its content, but also accessible, warm, and tender in its tone.

In this prayer Paul fully recognizes that the single greatest need of the Christian in any generation is an unrestrained, continuous growth in intimacy with Christ Himself. So let me ask: Is that what you want in your walk with God as you enter a new year? Do you long for a comprehensive, thorough knowledge of Him who loved you before the foundation of the world?

Yet Paul fully understands that desire and passion alone are not enough. So he specifically prays that the Holy Spirit would give “wisdom and revelation” and that “the eyes of your heart may be enlightened.”

Here Paul is praying that God would enrich our relationship with Him in such a way that our understanding of His character and nature would take us into a relationship with Him, enabling us to discern what He is doing in our own lives and the lives of those around us.

When we get to such a point in our lives and look for God to give us the wisdom to see areas in our lives not surrendered to Him, He then begins to convict us and change us.

Praying for the Courage to Change

You may well be reading this and thinking, “Richard, this sounds okay, but over the years I have tried to change my life. I have tried to be more Christ-like, yet I consistently fail. The sin that comes my way lulls me into complacency and apathy. Before I know it, my promises to live for Him have fallen apart. I used to feel bad about this, but now I just avoid any attempt to grow in my faith because I just can't do it.”

Well, if I can be candid for a moment, you are correct. You can't do it. Paul knew that on their own, the Christians in Ephesus could not do it. And we recognize that in our own strength, we can't do it either. That is why Paul reminds us that God has made available “his incomparably great power for us who believe.”

When we find ourselves threatened by the sin we have wrestled with for so long, when we are at the end of our own resources and long for God to intervene, when we are willing to stand firm and refuse to give in, when we fully surrender to Him and prayerfully cry, “Father I can't do this. Help me, rescue me, give me strength!”—it is then that we discover His incomparably great power that strengthens us. It is then that the supernatural power of the gospel works mightily in our lives.

When we stop striving and surrender our every thought and action to Him, He begins to work. Then we begin to know Him better. Then we have stopped trying and are now trusting. When we cry out to Him in unrestrained, deep, complete surrender of our lives, He brings to us the power to change. Then and only then are we utterly dependent on Him.

Novotna learned from the past. Let us in turn learn from His word, be ready to dig deeper, discover the courage to pray for change, and trust in “His incomparably great power.”