

## **A NEW YEARS PRAYER**

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Psalm 20. "May the Lord answer you when you are in distress. May the name of the God of Jacob protect you. May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion. May he remember all your sacrifices. And accept your burnt offerings. May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed. We will shout for joy when you are victorious and we'll lift up our banners in the name of our God. May the Lord grant all your requests. Now I know that the Lord saves his anointed. He answers him from his holy heaven with the saving power of his right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses. But we trust in the name of the Lord, our God. They are brought to their knees and fall but we rise up and stand firm. O Lord, save the king. Answer us when we call."

Psalm 20, a New Year's prayer. It's an appropriate prayer for the New Year. It is taken from a time when David in the early part of his rule composes this psalm that the people might sing it when he as king went forth to battle. Verses 1-5 contain the prayer of the people for the king. Verses 6-8 reflect the response of the king to that prayer. And verse 9 is the shout of benediction which all the people raise together.

First our prayer for the future. There are five facets of our prayer for the future that are in these verses before us.

The first is simply a general request for God's protection. "May the Lord answer you when you are in distress. May the name of the God of Jacob protect you." The future.

What kind of a year will 1981 be anyway? From the economic and political and international scene the prospects don't look all that encouraging. I don't see anyone predicting that the millenium is going to start in 1981, the thousand years of peace when the lion will lay down with the lamb. It looks more like the bear is trying to swallow some people up. Will we have continuing economic recession? Maybe even a depression. Will interest rates get worse? Will we have a recovery?

Will on the international situation, Russia invade Poland? Will Iran and Iraq plunge the Middle East into a conflagration? Will one of Israel's neighbors attack it? Will trouble break out somewhere else in the world that none of us at this moment even envision happening? Will the hostages ever come home?

1981. What kind of a year will it be?

And for us here in California. Will this be the year of the earthquake? There is one coming. I hope it comes before our new church is built.

For this church, 1981, is going to be one of enormous transition for us. It'll be a time of change, a time of coping with newer environment, being in a home that is not yet ours. Is this church ready for the transition?

It's a year that has some opportunities to it. Perhaps some thrills. Maybe for you personally the New Year doesn't look so encouraging. Maybe you have some bleak situations facing you right

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now and things don't look like they have a whole lot of prospects for improving. Or maybe things look great and you just can't wait to dig into the New Year.

Whatever perspective we have in facing the New Year this psalm reminds us that no New Year is without its difficulties. It says "May the Lord answer you when you are in distress." I'm encouraged by the fact that it doesn't say *if*. Distress is a part of life. Adversity is a part of going on with things. The key is to know the Lord's presence in the time of distress.

When we look at things politically or economically or internationally it's possible to go back to 1970 or 1960 and it's possible to be just as gloomy about things then as it is now. As bleak as the prospects are now we have to remember when you change a New Year you always tend to say there's the dark side to consider and there's the bright side to consider.

This psalm simply reminds us that when we head into a day of trouble whether trouble for a nation or international or whether trouble economically or trouble personally when we head into a day of trouble, it's not an easy thing to fight battles. We're not to go into any battles, any New Year on our own strength. We're to ask God to help us because only God is adequate for the situation.

King David knew that when he was getting ready to fight a battle with one of his people's enemies. They couldn't simply go into that situation on their own strength. Only God could effectively equip them to do the things they need to do to come through victoriously.

So David gives this general prayer for God's protection. He adds this unique phrase to the general prayer: "May the name of the God of Jacob protect you." Why would he choose the name of the God of Jacob to assure us that God's going to watch out for us in our time of distress? Why doesn't he say the more familiar term, "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Or why doesn't he say the God of Joseph. Why does he say the God of Jacob? Jacob. If there is anybody in the Bible that you don't think God would be pleased to call himself the God of it would have to be Jacob. He doesn't quite seem to have the bearing of Abraham and certainly doesn't seem to have the moral character of Joseph. But the God of Jacob.

Why is Jacob selected? It's an intriguing question. In fact, when David closes his life in 2 Samuel 23:1 you'll find David giving his last words. He starts his last words as a prayer of the Lord by again invoking the God of Jacob. Through a number of the psalms that David writes he refers to God as the God of Jacob. Which meant that evidently from David's point of view he and God have a secret and it was something that he, David, and Jacob had a lot in common. When David went through a situation he said the God of Jacob. The way that God worked in Jacob will be the way he works in me. So he called God the God of Jacob. What is this clue and how can we apply it to our prayer for the New Year for God's general protection of us?

You know what Jacob's name means. There were twins in the womb. Esau and Jacob. Esau was first born and Jacob was the second. But Jacob when he was being born grabbed the heel of his brother Esau. And came forth from the womb grabbing the heel of Esau. That's how he got his name – heel grabber. Literally. The name also means deceiver. Surprising though in contrast to that is the promise that God gave to Jacob's mother that the two children in her womb, the younger child would rule the older and the older would serve him. So right from day one that was a promise given for Jacob.

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But Jacob is a kind of person who from his early years never rested sufficiently in God's promises. He was a maneuverer and a manipulator and a wheeler-dealer if ever there was one. He wheeled and dealt Esau out of his birth right. He connived his father Isaac out of the blessing that he was supposed to have given to Esau. When he spent 20 years with his father in law Laban, even though Laban really himself as a wheeler-dealer, Jacob emerged victorious with more wealth when he left. And Jacob was so afraid when he came back after being away from his brother Esau over 20 years that Jacob even at that moment didn't rest in God's protection. That God was indeed leading him back to be reunited with Esau. So he planned a get acquainted gift for Esau when he came back across the river to appease him.

Some people give other people gifts in order to maneuver them into liking them. It makes life a little more pleasant.

After Jacob had sent all of his stuff across the river – his family across the river, he himself remained alone. That night God meant him in a person of a man wrestling with him. All of Jacob's life up to that point had been a life of struggle. He had struggled against his father. He was never the favorite kid. He had struggled against his older brother. He had struggled against his father in law. He was to struggle against many of his children. When he struggled that night with that man who would not let him go except he blesses him, the man finally names him a new name and calls him One who Struggles. Calls him Israel.

This then becomes the one who is identified as the one we're involving – "May the God of Jacob protect you." Why in the world, the man who acted many times like he did not have a God, it'd be Jacob who tried so hard many times to do things on his own. Maybe that's exactly why it's being used. David had to remind himself that there is a Jacob-like character in every one of us that tries to fit circumstances in a neat package plan. If we can just maneuver enough and manipulate enough we can get it all together and everything will go our way. In spite of all that Jacob did, God overrode what he did and God still blessed him and God still cared for him and his whole life would have been a lot better off if he had never tried to maneuver in the first place. God's simply telling us when we turn to him in a time of distress, if you're going to trust me with the problem, let me be the God of Jacob. Cease from your striving and rest in what I can do and what I will do on your behalf.

God is with us in distress. No one of us at this point knows what kind of personal distresses we're going to go through in the coming year. But here is a request for God to protect us no matter what they are.

The second thing that is in this prayer for the future in verse 2 is that there is a specific request designating the source of God's help. "May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion." The sanctuary in David's day is what is called the tent of meeting or tabernacle. It was a temporary shelter, later under Solomon to become the permanent temple. The center of the sanctuary was the Ark of the Covenant in which were the commandments and the mercy seat which stood for God's grace covering his law.

This was symbolically representative of the fact that when God's people were in fellowship with him God protected them and God heard. The psalmist often described God as being enthroned under the cherubim. This simply meant that God was pleased to take up his residence in the holy of holies over the Ark of the Covenant in a central place with his people, protecting them from that center of worship.

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Not only would the help come from the sanctuary but it would come from Zion, from Jerusalem. The capital city, the city of peace. The people were to be confident as they went into battle that God was with them, that they were in confident fellowship with them and that God would grant his help to his people because it was in the character of God to help his people. It's in the character of God.

Where is our sanctuary? There is no Ark of the Covenant for us to meet with. Where is our sanctuary? How can we use this prayer for our own in the New Year?

It seems to be that our sanctuary is not a building like this. Our sanctuary is where we meet with God. It is our time with God in prayer. It is our time with God in the scripture. God is saying to us when you get into a time of distress remember where help comes from. It comes from the sanctuary.

It makes a difference when you go through stress to have a continuity and the basis of being able to come to God in a regular way and say, God speak to me now through the scripture today. Speak to me in my time of prayer with you. And be sustained by God in the scripture.

God hears. Thank God he hears SOS prayers that come when we're in trouble. We haven't communicated with God in days and weeks and months or even years. But how pleased he is that we have a sanctuary in our heart where we meet with him daily and regularly to have fellowship with him and perhaps if we are making New Year's resolutions the greatest priority we could attach to the New Year is to build a sanctuary in our life where we have a special place of meeting with God. In the scripture and in prayer.

When things go wrong we generally know how to get things fixed. If the TV goes wrong, you get the TV repairman out. You don't usually set there and just let it go on. If your teeth needed working on you can call the doctor. You don't just set there with a toothache.

When things go spiritually wrong in our life one of the things that often happens is that we stay a way from the very help. We feel estranged from God. We don't want to come to him. We feel embarrassed. Yet God wants us in the day of distress to find our help coming from the sanctuary of meeting with him.

I have to think over this past year where God gave me help from the sanctuary. If I were to select a highlight in my own life in this past year where God meant me from the sanctuary it was in the middle of the Together We Build campaign in October. We'd moved ahead with the effort because we'd sensed it was very much needed. We felt very much in the will of God. Yet there is a matter of moving ahead with something because it ought to be done versus moving ahead with something with a real inner confidence that God is going to work it out. I'll confess now that when we went into the campaign I personally felt that it should be done, it was God's will, but I didn't necessarily have the inner confidence it was really going to succeed. For several weeks I had a real battle in my spirit. Every time I heard something of the slightest negative bent it seemed like it echoed and re-echoed in my mind. I'd twist it way out of proportion. One afternoon kind of in a state between prayer and sleep God quickened my heart with an assurance. I can't describe it. It's mystical. All I can say is God quickened my heart with an assurance that it was going to be well and he was going to work. When I came to preach that next Sunday although you may not have noticed the difference there was a difference in me. I knew it. I

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knew God was there. He in a special way imparted to me grace in a time of need and given me help from his sanctuary.

I'm convinced God does this as we meet with him. That he gives us help. I'd like for 1981 to have this theme over this church. I've never selected a theme verse for the year but I think this year I will. "My house shall be called the house of prayer." We're not going to be in a permanent place this year so I'm not talking about the sanctuary necessarily being a place of prayer though I want it to be that as well. But I'm talking about our lives to be a place of prayer. God this year individually make us people of prayer. Make me a man of prayer this year. Make us a congregation of prayer. Teach us Lord to pray.

Sunday nights we're going to share a series together on beginning to pray and learning to pray. And learning to make our heart a sanctuary of God's presence. This psalm tells us that it is from the place of prayer and the place of confrontation with God that we get our strength and our support. And if we're not getting our strength and support there then we really aren't getting what we need.

The third request for the future is really the basis for the confidence that we have. "May he remember all your sacrifices and accept your burnt offering." That again refers to a period of time that people for the atonement of sin offered blood sacrifices. And represented their life being presented to God by the means of sacrifice.

This psalm as applied to us means when you're facing a time of distress how wonderful it is to recognize in your life the things that are right with God. There's no sin in your life that has gone un-confessed or un-dealt with. But you have made that a matter of bringing it to God.

It is a tremendous relief when going through trial to recognize that no matter what from other persons or the self doubts within there is nevertheless a clean relationship with God. Our sins have been repented of and we are cleansed and purified by the blood of Christ.

So the assurance is here, a confidence that the Lord has met with us. The great support is our assurances from the Lord – "If we confess our sins he's faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

The fourth thing in this prayer for the future is a request for success. "May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed." If we've lived in verses 2 and 3 then we'll have the right desires in verse 4.

Many times we come into scripture and butcher it. We start with the part we like. But if we have met with God in the sanctuary and if we have met with God at the altar, God's going to purify our desires. Remember too that this psalm is a prayer that the people addressed not only to God but to the king. So they're saying to the king, "May God grant you the desires of your heart." If he's a good king his desires are going to be for welfare of the people not selfishly give me this or that. But a welfare for the whole kingdom of which he has been called to administer.

The king's desires will match what is really good in God's eyes. The plans are the day by day choices we make to fulfill our desires. God grant you all the desires of your heart and make your plans succeed. The only way to have desires come to pass is that plans succeed.

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I just finished teaching a course at Southern California College. I'm sure there were many more students that desired to receive an A in the class than did. There's a difference between those who desired an A and those who planned to get an A. In order to have the desire succeed somewhere along the line you've got to plan. God wants us to put legs to our desires.

This, by the way, is where new years resolutions come in. They help give us objectives. Specific things by which we can begin to see our desires come to pass. I am not a negative person at all in resolutions even though I realize the success ratio is poor. If you succeed on one out of five that is one more thing you would have accomplished than if you had set no goals at all.

Five things I want to see God do in my own life specifically this year. The Lord is saying you've got to begin making plans if you have desires. This is a request for success for those things.

The fifth thing that is in this prayer for the future is a promise of celebration. "We will shout for joy when you are victorious and we'll lift up the banners in the name of our God. May the Lord grant all your requests."

Remember the people haven't even fought the battle yet. Theoretically they don't know if they're going to win or lose. But from faith they know that God is going to give them victory so they say when it's all said and done we're going to set up our banners and we're going to have a great celebration.

Here to me is the positive nature of faith in our lives as we face the year. We believe it's going to be a year of meeting with God. I don't know of any team that in preparing for an athletic contest believes that they're going to lose before they enter the game and have any success. If you believe you're going to lose before you start the game it's over! The Lord wants us to anticipate the victories that he's going to give us in these coming months and years. The promise is made that when God gives the victories then we're going to raise our banners. The psalmist is saying the people of God ought to have banners. God's going to bring us through.

Verses 6-8 is the king's response to the tremendous faith of the people. Faith begets faith. Doubt begets doubt. Unbelief begets unbelief. Trust begets trust. The king picks up on what the people have said. When he gets done with the people reciting God's promises to him he says, "Now I know the Lord saves his anointed." He's the anointed one – the king. He answers from his holy heaven with his saving power of his right hand."

Here David is expressing confidence a victory even before the battle. Then he says, "Some trust in chariots, some in horses. But we trust in the name of the Lord our God." In the Old Testament the law prohibited the children of Israel from maintaining a standing army – Deuteronomy 17:16. They could only get people to serve when there was an emergency. They were told also to trust in the Lord for their defense and their victory. Deuteronomy 20 and 33. That's kind of a scary thing. If the incoming president were to announce, "We're going to disband the standing army of the United States and we are going to trust in the Lord for our defense and victory." People would begin impeachment process probably against him. That's insane. You need military hardware, military might. But the scripture understands that moral might is always superior to external might. And that dependence upon the Lord is the greatest thing to be had.

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The most dreaded war machines in David's day were the chariots. Israel had no chariots. The chariots of the enemy had size on them, or long blades that jetted out from the wheels that could mow a standing army down like grass. Israel didn't have a chariot in David's day. The foot soldiers normally in looking at the chariots would be scared out of their minds. Yet in David's time we learn that David took literally hundreds of chariots captive because the Lord was with him. So he recites this prayer on behalf of the people that our trust is not in something external like horses and chariots. But our trust is in God.

We often tend to base our own happiness on what someone else has and the Lord says don't do that. Base it upon what I am doing for you.

We don't have what belongs to someone else. We only have what God has given to us. God says "Be content in that. Relax in that. Trust in that. Don't look to something externally for your support, look to me for your support."

It's one thing to believe in an intellectual sense that God is going to be with you in the year ahead. It's quite another thing to literally place your life in his hands and trust him that he is going to work things out for your good and for his.

Verse 9 gives the shout of response. "Lord save the king!" This is where the British Empire gets the phrase "God save the king," right out of Psalm 20:9. Our king is no longer David. Our king is David's Son. He laid down his life for us. He totally trusted in the Father. He therefore in the words of verse 8 has risen up and stood firm. God has saved the Messiah, the anointed one. In the Old Testament days when Israel went into battle the safety of the king was paramount. If the king were captured the battle was over and the nation reeled in defeat. Everybody was affected by what happened to the king. If the king succeeded everybody succeeded.

This is the picture the New Testament gives us in the person of Jesus Christ. He is our king and he has succeeded. Romans 8:32 tells us "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things." Because God has granted success to Jesus he will graciously give us all things with him. In light of what God does for the king, Jesus, we all have salvation. We all have the fuller life. God assures us in this psalm of his presence with us in the New Year.

Let us believe that God is with us in these future days. Let's not be pessimists. Let's not be people who push a panic button. But let's believe that God has walked ahead of us in this new year to prepare the way for us, that we can trust him with the future and that when the year is over should Jesus tarry and should we be in the land of the living we'll raise up our banners and give thanks to God.

There may be some here today, our Lord, who are presently in distress. May you answer them. There may be some here today, Lord, that have tried their best to work a situation out and have not been successful. May you be to them the God of Jacob who works beyond what they can do. There may be some here who really long in their heart to build a sanctuary of relationship with you. And to find a regular time in this new year of meeting with you daily for prayer and for the study of scripture and for you to speak to them. God grant that even life long pattern of absence from you in this daily way can be broken and that in this New Year you will send help from your sanctuary and grant support from your word. May there be if there be in clutter in our life from this year the clutter of sin, of un-

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forgiveness, may you remember our sacrifice which we make now to you and cry out, “Forgive me of my sin. Restore a clean heart and a right spirit within me. Let me begin this New Year not dragging any of the past garbage from the previous year into it. Create in me, O God, a clean heart.” Lord, there are many desires represented among each of us here. Things we want for you to do for us, things we want to see happen in our families, things we’d like to see happen in this church, things we’d like to see happen in the world. God grant the desires and help us to have the faith and discipline to lay the kinds of plans that will make the desires in your hand come to pass. Let us look at the coming days from the eye of faith. Help us, Lord, to set up in our heart a preparation for a celebration of victory because you lead your people from triumph unto triumph. We thank you for your presence and your blessing upon our lives. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.