



*Memories of My Mother  
By Helen*

**A New Year's  
Prayer**

Our first New Year's together I learned a very valuable lesson as to why my husband, the itinerant preacher, Alexander Rich, fairly never worries.

I suppose that technically we were still newlyweds, but all of our indivisibly peculiar and unique ways were relatively, comfortable between us by then. As our first New Year celebration came upon us I recall that my husband was preparing his New Year's sermon that he would give one or two days after the New Year. Being curious, as I always loved and still love his teaching I distinctly remember coming upon him, rather sudden like, while he sat at his desk, reading his Bible and making notes.

Wrapping my arms around him from behind I asked him what we would do for New Year's. "I've always viewed it as a special time, a renewal, and, well, this is our first New Year's together, so I wonder what kind of a tradition we shall have."

Turning around to me Alexander sat me on his lap and asked me about my previous New Year's experiences.

"Well," said I, "to be honest my love, the most fulfilling and meaningful part of the New Year always comes after the New Year's party."

I then sat down at his feet and laid my head upon his lap and continued, "You know that my parents, every year hold a large party, but it always makes me uncomfortable for I wonder about their motivation."

My mother and father, Hatch and Geraldine McCready always made a large production out of New Year's Eve, but I always suspected that it was so that they could bring more people into their mercantile shop. It was sales-related, never intimate or meaningful. It was business and not very good business at that, in my opinion.

Before long, I was rattling on and on, so I lifted my head, turned it and looked up to my husband's face. He had a knowing smile, which caused me to hesitate. So, I smiled a little embarrassed, and asked him to tell me about his New Year's Eve or Day experiences, commitments, and resolutions.

"For the life of me Alex, I cannot ever remember you talking about your New Year's Resolutions any of those years you spoke at our church."

Smiling even wider he just said, "Because my resolution, if you will call it that, my singular resolution is nothing too amazing and is the same every year."

### **A New Year's Prayer**

With great amazement, I saw into a deep crevasse of my husband's inner workings. I've always known that he does not worry. I've always known that he is a man of Prayer. But until that New Year's Eve day I had always wondered, does his lack of worry come as a result of his prayer life or has his prayer life come because of worry in his life? I was completely wrong on both accounts.

As I sit here writing this memoir for our 20th wedding anniversary, there are numerous ways in which I still have the same feelings about Alex that I have always had. Let me give you an example, whenever Alex and I do our devotional together, and forgive me for we don't do all of our devotions together, depending upon our schedule, we will determine the night before if we are able to do a devotional together the next morning.

Nevertheless, when we do them together, there is a special anticipation that I have in my heart, and I wonder, "what is my husband going to bring out of the word today?"

It is amazing to me that I still think this way about my husband, even after 20 years. I am also expectant, just like the congregation is when on Sundays I hear him preach. And for me the intimacy in our marriage is expressed and experienced in my anticipation of what he's going to share.

Is that too intimate for me to share in this memoir?

So, imagine my surprise on New Year's Eve, our first one together, mind you, when it went so much different than what I had expected.

Alexander turned back to his desk to grab his Bible and then returned to me. He opened it to the very beginning and then said, "my love, I have my own tradition that I would like to share with you, but I fear that it will fail in comparison to your parent's lovely parties."

He continued, and I sat there anticipating that I would be mesmerized by his story telling.

He said, "Precious, many, many years ago, on December 30<sup>th</sup>, 1862, after being in a Northern Prisoner of War Camp for a full three and a half months I gave a message that forever changed the way I celebrate New Year's. You may remember that my regiment was captured by the North in the Battle of Antietam, the worst single day's death in all wars ever, I think they are now saying, my love.

Well, the next three and a half months were the worst of our lives. We had no idea how to respond to being in captivity, and I knew the men expected me to supply some Godly encouragement."

"Preacher," General Marks called out as he came into my tent that Saturday.

I interrupted again, "that is Bro. Marks from Dry Branch, right?"

"Yes, my dearest." He went on, "Bro. Ted Marks. He entered into my tent and asked about my message. This is when I began to realize that church to General Marks was not merely a ritual, it was, and still is, a time of corporate renewal."

Bro. Marks said something to the effect of, "The men are in need of encouragement Alex. I am in need of encouragement too. I know that the Good Book has plenty of encouragement. Where do you plan to teach from . . . "

I'll never forget the ungodly and indignant thought that went through my mind, Gretchen. I wanted to ask him, "why sir, will you dictate what I say?"

My eyes got so large when I heard Alex confess this to me, for that is not my respectful husband.

He continued, "I am so happy I held my tongue, for General Marks went on and said, "I want to be praying for you son."

"I believe those words from General Marks, Gretchen, began to endear our spirits together. And you know the relationship we have now."

"Yes," I said. "He is part of your team of prayer partners. You call yourselves the Sons of Thunder, right?"

He chuckled and even turned a slight shade of red, and then he continued. "Gretchen, I said to General Marks, I honestly have no idea what I will say tomorrow. I am stuck on Genesis 1:1, and the first four words of it at that. I have been stuck here since yesterday.

I paused and then he pulled on his beard and said reflectively, "In the beginning God . . . "

He and I both said nothing and then after a long while he reflected, "In the beginning, huh?"

And I interrupted, "No, sir. In the beginning God. And that's where I get stuck, General"

We both paused again and as he turned to leave he simply said, "I sure wish that I put God first in

everything in my life Alex. Keep it up son. I know you will encourage us.

“And with that He was gone, Gretchen. And so, I sat there, pondering those four words, repeating them, meditating on them, and looking at them from every possible angle.”

He then paused his story and lifted me to look into his eyes and said, so very soberly, “Gretchen, the men and I, some of them your neighbors in and around Jeffersonville had been in miserable weather since just days after we arrived there. It was an early winter that year, which matched our mood and I knew that I needed to bring a word of encouragement to them, especially now and especially after the General had asked me specifically.”

He continued thoughtfully, “I always considered them my men, for they were, in a sense. While I hail from the North, God called me to do my pastoring in the South.”

I squeezed his legs as I still rested upon them and said, “And I am so glad He did my darling.”

Alex bent over and kissed me atop my head and said, “me too honey. Me too.”

He then continued, “The reason I was even in Genesis chapter one was because I had finished my quarterly reading through the Bible, and had finished it a couple days early. So, on Friday December 28<sup>th</sup> I restarted my reading through the Bible plan, which always begins

with Genesis 1:1, 'In the beginning God . . . 'and I stopped right there Gretchen.

"I remember it being Friday Gretchen, because it was two days before I would give my message." He stopped and smiled as he often does when he tells his stories. You can see that he is observing in his mind's eye what he is expressing with his words.

He went on meditatively, "I had no idea why I stopped, but I had studied the Bible long enough, and allowed for the tugging of the Holy Spirit into my life enough times that I could see I needed to linger here, in the Word and in prayer with the Lord.

"And I lingered, and I lingered, and."

I cut in, "you lingered," and we both chuckled.

"Darling," he went on, looking into the past again, "I lingered on those four words for two days.

I would say Gretchen, that those two days impacted my life greatly, not because they changed my life, but because they helped me put into words my belief and trust in The Almighty. So, after two days of reflection I got into the makeshift pulpit, looked the men straight in the eye and simply said, "our lives are like the ill-favored and lean-fleshed cows of Pharaoh's dream.<sup>i</sup> That means, sickly and thin, like you and I."

I stirred immediately upon hearing these words from my beloved. He knew my mind for he said, "Slow down my wife, I will make you proud, but I must confess something before I go on. May I?"

“Surely.” I said.

“I was too scared to look directly at General Marks after I had said that.” And we both laughed.

And then he continued. I told the men that our lives are like those cows, but Joseph’s God, our God brought what? Do you remember? God brought seven years of great abundance.<sup>ii</sup> And why did He do that?

Some of the men started to grumble and I knew what they were thinking Gretchen, so I continued. You men are wondering if I think we will be here for seven more years? And a number of them chuckled.

“No, no, not at all,” I continued. “I believe that the God who was there in the beginning, who knows tomorrow as if it is already completed, gave us an illustration whereby we may remember His greatness.”

As they all looked expectantly at me I said, “I have spent the last two days in the first four words of the entire Bible, ‘In the beginning God.’ And do you know what I realized? Two days and a new year starts, and I need to commit myself to making sure that God is at the beginning of everything. I realized that if everything I do, I make sure that God is at its beginning, then I cannot go wrong with anything. I may end up in bonds like Joseph,” and a number of the men laughed, even the General. “But God is sovereign and powerful, and He is trustworthy, to you and me, just like He was to Joseph.

“Here’s my encouragement to you men,” I went on. “Begin this New Year with a singular commitment, that you will not begin a single task, nor begin a single thought, without it first beginning with God. If God were in the beginning of everything we do or say or think, we are in good company, God’s company.

“My love,” Alex said to me, looking down into my eyes, “I have found that if my entire year is based on this simple principle, that everything I do, or say, or think, begins with God, then I am in good company because I am in His company, even when I am by myself, in the woods, on my way to another church.”

I nuzzled closer to him and said, “you mean when you and I are in the woods heading together to another church.” And we both laughed.

But this is what I have seen in Alex. He has set his mind to begin everything with God. This simple principle impacts every area of his life, not just his Christian Life, but his entire life.

As he sat there at his desk in silence, his beard and his chin resting on his chest, I pondered. I never heard this verse in Genesis 1:1 that way before, but now, even after twenty years I can tell you that I never hear it any other way.

If, in the beginning of everything is God then why do we worry about anything? In fact, why do any of us worry about anything? Why are we so concerned about everything? Whoops, I need to slow down. I’m preaching now, and that is Alex’s role.

After a few moments, he lifted his head and said to me, “Gretchen, my wife and my love, this is the way I want to live this next year with you. My hope and prayer has been that you will want to live this way also. I want my entire year to be centered around this first portion of the first verse of the first book of the Bible, ‘In the beginning God.’”

Of course, I smiled at him and then laid my head back onto his lap, my eyes filled with tears of love for I knew that a new, New Year’s tradition had just begun.

And he continued, “my love, I have found that if my entire year is based on this simple reality that I put God in the beginning of everything, then I do not have to fear anything. I may not always know what is going to happen. But I don’t need to, because I know God, the One who was there in the beginning.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 41:3 (KJV)

<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 41:29

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