

THE CROSS AND PRAYER | SPLINTERS | MARCH 8, 2020

Text: 2 Corinthians 12:8-9

Prayer is an important part of the Christian faith as it brings us into alignment with God and connects us to Him in deeper ways. But what happens when praying becomes difficult? What happens when we pray long and hard for something and the response we get from God is not what we expect or hope for? What do we do when our prayers, that were once full of faith and Spirit-led power, have become stale and boring?

*Right from the start, I want to say that if praying has become hard, for whatever reason, be it discouragement, disappointment, or spiritual dryness, I want you to know that **you are not alone and that what you are experiencing is normal**. In fact, you and I are in good company with many of the greatest Christian icons of this age; people like John Wesley and Mother Teresa, both of whom were open and honest about the difficulties they faced in prayer.*

In our text Paul is describing an experience he had in prayer where he asked God to remove a thorn in the flesh and got a response he wasn't expecting...God said "no".

GOD IS **CLOSER** THAN WE THINK

- It's easy to see God's response to Paul's prayer as somewhat cold and indifferent, like he's keeping Paul at arms length but that's not the case at all. According to Biblical scholar N.T. Wright, this response "was one of the most comforting, reassuring, healing, and steadying 'words of the Lord' ever recorded.
- **"My grace is all you need"** Grace is the favour and love of God in action. It's receiving what we don't deserve. We are given the gift of Jesus himself and we receive the gift of his constant love, care and support. Jesus gives us what we need but he does even more than that. When we walk out our cross with Jesus daily, he builds beauty in us and in our lives. And the wonderful thing about grace is that it's new every morning.
- **"My power works best in weakness"** When we recognize that we are at the end of ourselves it opens us up for God to do His powerful work in and through our lives. Paul's weakness made room for God's power.

- God didn't remove the thorn, but he did step into Paul's pain, fill him with His power and, by His grace, carried him through.
- When Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, the cross was in full view. He knew what was coming and was in great distress. In this state Jesus prayed, "Father, if you are willing please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet not my will but yours be done." We know from Mark's gospel that Jesus (like Paul) prayed this prayer three times. In this instance, God was silent. In Jesus' greatest time of need God didn't utter a single word.
- The silence of God. Maybe you have or are currently experiencing God's silence. Maybe there was a time in your life when you heard the voice of God daily but lately, all you seem to hear are crickets. When you pray you feel like God is a million miles away and you don't know why. You start to ask: Am I doing it wrong? Is there sin in my life that I'm not aware of? Maybe I'm just not as close to God as I thought I was. But then what about Jesus? What did he do to experience God's silence? The silence of God doesn't mean that we're doing something wrong, it means that God is up to something. We know that while Jesus was praying, an angel from heaven appeared and strengthened him. God may not have been verbally present, but He was present. He gave Jesus exactly what he needed in the moment...strength. In the times when we feel the most abandoned by God, those are usually the times he is the closest to us.
- See Footprints poem in resources.
- God is closer than we think.

*GOD IS **BIGGER** THAN WE THINK*

- Paul was persistent in his prayer to remove the thorn, but after the third try, Paul's attitude toward the thorn shifted. He went from, "God, please take this thorn in my flesh away!" to "Hey, everyone! Check out my thorn!" What changed? His perception of God. He became aware of how big God actually is.
- "There is a human bent in all of us to make God in our own image" (John Mark Comer)
- Sometimes, in prayer, we reduce God to our own understanding of him and how He should act in our situation rather than letting Him be who He actually is.

When this happens it usually ends in disappointment in God (because he's not doing it our way)

- Drawing our attention back to Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane "Yet, I want your will to be done, not mine." This is a prayer of submission. Jesus is reaffirming his commitment to the divine plan. He wasn't just resigning himself to God's will; he was embracing it. Perhaps, this prayer of Jesus should become our daily prayer. In saying, "I want your will to be done, not mine" we are letting go of control (which can be hard). We are choosing to trust the God who is, not the God we *think* He is. We're allowing God to do what He wants in our situation, not what we want.
- 1 Corinthians 13:9 Paul writes, "Our knowledge is partial and incomplete, even the gift of prophecy reveals only a part of the whole picture." As humans we see in part and know in part, but God sees and knows the whole, and on top of that, He is good and full of love for us. So we can trust Him.
- God is bigger than we think.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

- **Don't panic.** We are not alone in this. We are in the same boat as people like John Wesley, Mother Teresa and the Apostle Paul!
- **Just keep swimming.** Just keep praying, even if you don't feel like it. John Chapman (Roman Catholic priest and writer from the 20th century) once wrote, "There are only two things you need to know about difficult times in prayer: One, pray as you can, don't try to pray as you can't and the second is the less you pray the worse it gets." When praying becomes hard, find what works! Find those structures and patterns that keep you moving forward. Pray through the Lord's Prayer or the Psalms
- **Lean into the body of Christ.** We are not meant to be little "islands" scattered about; we were created for relationship and in the hard times, we need to lean into those relationships. Rowan Williams "When things are difficult we ought to be able to say to our fellow Christians...hang on for me, hang on with me and hang on to me. That's the body of Christ at work. Hang on for me...I can't make much sense of this right now but maybe you can and I'm going to look to you for some faithfulness and some help, I'm going to look to you to show me a bit of what God's like; to show me a faithfulness and a generosity that reminds

me of the God I'm supposed to believe in. Hang on with me, let me know that we belong together in a shared journey. Share your experience with me too! Hang on to me, say prayers for me and be a listening ear."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can you relate to Paul's prayer experience? How so?
2. Have you ever experienced the silence of God? How did you handle it?
3. John Mark Comer writes, "There is a human bent in all of us to make God in our own image." Do you agree with this? Can you see how you have done this?
4. Praying "Not my will, but yours be done" can be a scary and dangerous prayer. How so?
5. What do you usually do when praying is hard? What can you do?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES (if applicable)

God Has A Name by John Mark Comer

Footprints Poem

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed
he was walking along the beach with the LORD.

Across the sky flashed scenes from his life.
For each scene he noticed two sets of
footprints in the sand: one belonging
to him, and the other to the LORD.

When the last scene of his life flashed before him,
he looked back at the footprints in the sand.

He noticed that many times along the path of

his life there was only one set of footprints.

He also noticed that it happened at the very
lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he
questioned the LORD about it:

"LORD, you said that once I decided to follow
you, you'd walk with me all the way.
But I have noticed that during the most
troublesome times in my life,
there is only one set of footprints.
I don't understand why when
I needed you most you would leave me."

The LORD replied:

"My son, my precious child,
I love you and I would never leave you.
During your times of trial and suffering,
when you see only one set of footprints,
it was then that I carried you."