

Prayers, Patience, and Perseverance

There's an old adage that says there are no atheists in foxholes. Basically, when the bullets start flying and things seem rather dark and terrifying and uncertain, everyone tends to get "real religious" in a hurry. Everyone starts "praying." Of course, we know from our own life experiences that this generally holds true. Courtrooms are filled with praying people. Prisons are filled with praying people. Hospitals are filled with praying people, including a lot of people who haven't prayed in a LONG time, and even people who've never prayed before. It's inevitable. It's predictable. I don't care who you are. When you run up against something that's truly terrifying and way beyond your control—something like sickness that can lead to death—you wind up praying. That said, *do you think the synagogue ruler in our Gospel lesson, whose daughter had just died, was a praying man?* Do you think that in the days and hours preceding his little daughter's death he was a praying machine? What about the sickly woman who had been suffering for twelve years with her medical condition (a condition that basically made her no different than a leper in the eyes of the community)? *Do you think she had prayed a time or two over the course of those twelve long and miserable years?*

There's a reason I lead with this. You see, there tends to be a common *assumption* among Christians that both the synagogue ruler and the sickly woman came to Jesus as a *last resort*. We assume that since the dad was a synagogue ruler that he must have hated Jesus, but... since everything else had utterly failed, and since Jesus did have a reputation for healing the sick and raising the dead, then you may as well give Jesus a try. The same assumption is made about the sickly woman. St. Luke tells us that over the course of twelve years of suffering she spent all her money on every kind of "magic cure" available and imaginable. All of it failed. After twelve long and miserable years, she was still just as sickly, and now she was broke. Might as well give this Jesus character a try, right? You've already tried everything else. What can it hurt?

Here's the deal: NOWHERE in all of Scripture are we told any of this! How do you now they weren't faithfully praying to God throughout all this suffering? Would you be praying ceaselessly if you found yourself in their circumstance? Okay... so what makes you so different from them?

Let's come at this from a different perspective. *Is there such a thing as an "unanswered" prayer?* Of course not! God answers all of our prayers, doesn't He? That doesn't mean He answers all of them the way we would prefer them to be answered, *but He does answer all our prayers*. Sometimes He says "yes." Sometimes He says "no." Sometimes He says, "Not yet. Be patient." Patience... that's probably the most difficult thing for any of us to deal with, isn't it? I'll be

honest: I would rather hear an immediate firm “no” to my prayers than to have to patiently “wait and see.” I’m willing to bet that you’re no different.

Since we’ve already established that the dad and the sickly woman are no different than any of us, let me ask: Is it safe to say that they probably had a bit to learn about waiting patiently in the Lord? Let me help you out. Do you have a bit to learn about waiting patiently and humbly in the Lord? ***How do you learn patience? Answer: By being put in a situation that requires patience!*** Patience is something learned in the “real world.” You don’t learn patience from a textbook. You learn patience by having to be patient.

And that brings up another point. I have no doubt that these two individuals were being taught patience in the Lord. I don’t doubt it for a bit because we all need to be taught patience in the Lord. Here it is 2,000 years later, and it’s through them and their suffering that God is still teaching us to be patient and hold fast to Him. Here it is 2,000 years later, and we’re still learning about God’s miraculous life-giving, restorative power in Christ Jesus all because He didn’t ***immediately*** answer the dad’s prayers and the sickly woman’s prayers exactly the way they would’ve preferred.

You need to give that some thought. If you knew that God was using your suffering and hardship to work the miracle of life-saving faith and salvation in other people, would it change the way you handle yourself? Would you stop all the lamenting? Would you instead pipe down and grin and bear your cross? Would you buckle down and bear that cross in ***humble patience***, finding solace in the fact that God is working all of this for the good of those who love Him? ***Would such knowledge change the way you pray?*** I always say that when you pray, “Thy will be done,” be careful what you’re praying for! If you knew that God was using your suffering to work the miracle of life and salvation in one of your loved ones, would you stop ***selfishly*** praying for ***instant and immediate reprieve***, and instead ask for the necessary patience and endurance to bear that cross whilst God works?

This is why I love the lesson our Lord teaches us in the Old Testament lesson for today. Isaiah records for us the ***impatient lament*** of the few remaining faithful Israelites. Things were bad. Israel (as a people) had gone off the rails. They were a rebellious, adulterous, unbelieving mess. God had been calling them to repentance for centuries, and they had refused to listen. As a result of their rebellious impenitence and faithlessness, they were all going to be hauled off to Babylon as slaves. “*Wake up, Lord! Don’t you see what’s going on here?! Wake up! Do something!*” Sound familiar?

Listen to how God responds. He doesn’t answer with an immediate “yes,” nor does He tell them “no.” He doesn’t even say, “*Be patient, because I’m working long-term here.*” Nope. Instead, He simply directs them to Himself.

*“I—the I AM—I am He who comforts you.” “I am the almighty ‘I Am.’ I’m in charge. I am the Creator. Why are you so afraid of a fellow man; a fellow creation, who is no different than you? This one who has you all worked up is no different than you. Why are you so afraid of someone/something who is like grass in the field—here today and gone tomorrow? **Why have you forgotten your Lord, your Maker? Who are you?** Look around at all of creation. Look up at the heavens. That’s all Me. I made all that, and I continue to uphold and sustain all that (ref. birds of the air and lilies of the field). More than that, I continue to uphold and sustain and provide for all your needs of body and life. Who are you that you would fear this little twit who oppresses you? My faithful children don’t behave like that! Who are you? Who are you that you would fear him more than you fear Me? He can’t even make one hair on his own head gray. He can’t add a single second to his own life, let alone do all that I do. What is his “wrath” that you’re so worked up and afraid about? Where is his wrath? What can he do to you? **NOTHING!**”*

And it’s at this point that God then directs the faithful ones to **humility and repentance and patience**. *“He who is bowed down shall speedily be released. He will not die and go down to the pit, nor shall his bread be lacking (ref. “He who believes in Me shall never die.”) I am the Lord your God, who stirs up the seas so that its waves roar—the Lord of hosts is His name. And I have put My words in your mouth and covered you in the shadow of My hand, establishing the heavens and laying the foundations of the earth... and saying to you, ‘You are My people.’”*

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: I know the world we live in. It’s a mess. It always has been and it always will be until Christ mercifully returns in Judgment. There has always been sickness, greed, corruption, perversity, war, death, and despair. Adam and Eve are the only people in all of history who could honestly look back and remember truly better times. Everyone else can only remember **different**, sin-filled, calamitous times. I don’t know all the specific crosses you’re bearing right now, but I do know that we all have crosses to bear. We all have crosses, and those crosses can often make us **very impatient**. Those crosses can sometime make you feel like you’re drowning, and when you’re a drowning man, **everything** becomes a life preserver. There are times that in our impatience and fear we do look for the quick fix. *“Thy will be done”*... so long as Thy will works according to my timeline and my expectations and demands. Folks: There’s nothing new under the sun. If the problems aren’t new, then neither is God’s unchanging remedy to all our problems.

It is for this reason that I’m not going to do anything different than what our Lord has already done in addressing such **impatience and doubt and despair**. I direct your attention—your faith—to Him. Remember what He has done for His people throughout history. Look to that cross—His cross. Remember and hold

fast to that ever-present proclamation of victory: It is finished! Look to that baptismal font, and remember His promise to you. *“You are My people. You are My beloved child.”* Remember how He Himself has baptized you into His death and resurrection. His victory over sin, death, and the devil is your victory over sin, death, and the devil. ***I know it doesn’t seem that way right now, but be patient.*** The war has already been won. Holding fast to His baptismal promise, we have the blessed assurance that we have all of eternity with Him in Paradise. Whatever you experience on this side of eternity **isn’t even a drop in the bucket!** All of heavenly eternity already awaits you! The absolute “worst” thing that can happen to you on this side of eternity is that you fall asleep in Christ and wake up in heaven. What do you possibly have to be afraid of?

And if you’re still struggling (because it’s somehow different in your case, which it’s not) look to this altar/communion rail. Remember His promises to you. *“As often as you do this, remember what I have said. This is My body. This is My blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sin.”* In the midst of this shadowy valley of death and despair, the Lord of Life is ruling in your midst, not with wrath and terrifying power, ***but with mercy and grace. No matter what this world throws at you, here is Christ. Here is your forgiveness of sins.*** No one—especially God—has ever promised you a cross-less existence on this side of eternity. But you do have the promise and assurance of the forgiveness of sins, now and into all eternity. That’s all that really matters. I pray that this is what really matters to you.

As a matter of fact, I can think of no better way to bring this to an end than by simply closing with the same prayer that St. Paul offered up on behalf of our Colossian forefathers. [Notice how he never prays that their afflictions be taken away!] *“May you be filled with knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, [always] bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, [always] giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light, for He has [already] delivered you from the domain of darkness and transferred you to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom you have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”* Let me remind you again of God’s promise to you: *“You are My people. You are My beloved child.”*

AMEN