

LENT: 40 DAYS OF PRAYER

Week #4: March 13-18

Monday, March 13

Today's Devotional comes from Champ Thornton

Theme: In the Garden of Gethsemane

Scripture: Mark 14:36

And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." (Mark 14:36, ESV)

Reflection: I don't know when I actually became a Christian. It might have been as a six-year-old boy, praying with my mother. It might have been at a youth camp in high school. But I will never forget how the sunshine of the gospel blazed into my heart during a service in my last year of college. My heart was moved as the speaker beautifully described what Jesus's death had accomplished for us, for me. Then the speaker quoted a hymn that I had never heard before, but have never forgotten since. The wording of the song (titled "Faith's Reviving") is a bit antiquated, but the reality that the words point to is never old. Here are the lines that stabbed my heart with joy:

Payment God cannot twice demand—
First at my bleeding Savior's hand,
And then again at mine.

I wept that day and poured out my heart to the Lord. Yet my feelings on that day would have been mere subjective emotions without the objective prayers and tears of Another years before. In the garden on the night of His betrayal, Jesus lifted up His voice in cries and tears to His Father (Hebrews 5:7). He prayed, "Remove this cup from me" (Mark 14:36). Was there any other way for salvation to be achieved? Yet, this was not His ultimate desire. He also prayed, "Not what I will, but what you will." He obeyed the Father for the sake of those who would not. He went to a death He did not deserve so those who trust in Him would enjoy a life they could never earn.

And here my heart was awakened by the dawning of grace—Jesus didn't just forgive my sins. He also paid the penalty my sins deserved—every last bit. There was not a cent left to pay. He drank the cup of God's judgment—the cup that had my name on it—to the very bottom. And now there remained not a drop for me to drink.

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Tuesday, March 14

Today's Devotional comes from Rev. Kyle Benson

Theme: Persecution & Perseverance

Scripture: Luke 8:15

"But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance

Reflection: In life, trials and tribulations of varying degrees befall us all. It is unavoidable. They are tares in the wheat of our existence. They attempt to choke out our resolve and try our patience. They want to crush us and leave us ruined and destroyed on the dunghill. They want to leave us wondering, 'Where is God? How could a kind and loving God allow such persecution?' Do not misunderstand, all persecution is not negative. Some persecutions come in the form of riches and pleasures of life. To quote Edward Mote's hymn Solid Rock, "I dare not trust the sweetest frame..."

Persecutions are those things that turn us away from God. They fill our minds and hearts with emotions both terrible and distracting. They cause us to look to the world for our help and survival. They give us the false notion of self-reliance and not reliance on God for salvation and deliverance. Jesus, in this scripture, is teaching us that we must cling to the Word of God and put our trust in Him in order to patiently endure persecution. Our reliance upon God to deliver us will strengthen us and sharpen our resolve to continue to run the race and not give up.

God sent a person into my life that demonstrated this to me in practicum. His name is Johnnie and he had a spirit of positivity that could not be quelled. While many, if not most, of my school district colleagues (myself included) found the day-in-day-out grind of urban public education difficult to tolerate. It was Johnnie who would say daily (with a smile), "the bitter end is getting sweeter all the time." His outlook on the stresses of the job was that we were day-by-day approaching the summer recess, no matter how far off. His powerful saying showed that he saw better days ahead, a certain eschatological hope even in the midst of a storm. We humans can persevere through anything when we put our trust in God, and, to finish the Mote stanza, "wholly lean on Jesus' name."

Prayer: Lord God Almighty, open our minds and hearts to put our trust in you and not the world in the face of persecution so that we may be able to persevere, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Wednesday, March 15

Today's Devotional comes from Danielle Vota

Theme: Praying for the Lost

Scripture: 2 Peter 3:8-9 (ESV)

⁸ But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Personal Reflection: Our human conception of time is not the Lord's perception of time. In verse 8, Peter might well have been alluding to what David wrote in Psalm 90:4: "A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night" (NIV). The Lord's timing is perfect and his ways are greater than our ways. He never shows up late and he always has a plan. I remember the first time I heard compelling evidence proving how true that is. Rochelle Anderson was teaching an Awana lesson on the 400 years of silence, referring to the time between the Old and New Testament. As far as we know, no scripture was written during that time. Israel was in turmoil being taken over by the Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians, and eventually the Romans. I'm sure the Lord's people cried out wondering where he was and why he wasn't speaking. But the Lord was still with them. He was waiting for the perfect time and conditions to send the foretold Messiah.

During the Greek occupation, the Jews adopted their language, and the Old Testament was translated into Greek. Greek spread throughout the Hellenized world making it possible for diverse people groups to communicate in a common tongue. Before the Roman Empire, most ancient roads were simple dirt paths. They were notoriously unreliable and dangerous. But Roman engineers discovered how to make roads that were safe and durable. By the time of Jesus' ministry, the Roman road system consisted of great highways that would eventually include over 250,000 miles of road system. When Jesus came conditions were just right for the disciples to go out and spread the Good News to all people. They were able to travel quickly and communicate effectively, just as the Lord intended. The Lord was working during the 400 years of silence, even though it was difficult for people at that time to believe it. As we wait for the Lord's return now, we also have moments where we struggle with our faith.

In 2 Peter 3:3-4, Peter is warning about the scoffers who will claim that Christ will not return. But in verse 9, Peter reminds us how the Lord will keep all of his promises in his perfect time and be motivated by his perfect love. We should view the delay in Christ's return as evidence of the Lord's patience, not of his tardiness. In his loving kindness, he is willing to give more time for more people to come to repentance and place their trust in Jesus. He chose us before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4) and not one of his lost sheep will be left behind. We can trust that when Christ returns it will be the perfect time.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to wait patiently for your return. Fill us with your love for the lost and desire to reach them. Guide us to live holy and godly lives, making every effort to be found spotless and at peace with you. Amen. (2 Peter 3:11,14).

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References:

<https://www.gotquestions.org/400-years-of-silence.html>

<https://drivethruhistory.com/roman-roads/>

<https://www.bibleref.com/2-Peter/3/2-Peter-3-8.html>

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Thursday, March 16

Today's Devotional comes from Kristi Pullig

Theme: Suffering

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 1:5

For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

Reflection: For over 30 years, I've lived with fibromyalgia. The worst of my symptoms include debilitating headaches, fatigue, and pain. It's not a fun thing to live with. However, when I think about suffering, the first thing that comes to mind is the way I've seen friends and family suffer. That is what hurts me more than my own afflictions. 2 Corinthians 1:5 reminds us that we share in Christ's sufferings and, of course, we think of the suffering surrounding his crucifixion. I also think of the fact that Jesus came to earth and lived over 30 flesh-filled years which would have included pain, sickness, and hurting as he saw the sufferings of others. In the same way, he sees our suffering.

The second half of 2 Corinthians 1:5 reminds us that we also share in the comfort that comes through Christ. Just as we share in the suffering of Christ's substitution for us on the cross, we also share in the resurrection. In the midst of our sufferings, we need to remember that we serve a God who raises the dead. Our God raises the dead!

One of my favorite statements of Jesus is, "In this world you will have trouble." Why? To me, it's a reminder that Jesus knows about our troubles. Our sufferings aren't a surprise to God and they shouldn't be a surprise to us. That alone comforts me. But what makes this statement so powerful is what surrounds it. John 16:33 states, "I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." The God who raises the dead will raise us as well. When I go through hard times, I remember the end of the story. It ends in victory for those who believe in the God who raises the dead.

When Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, he had faced severe suffering and persecution, almost to the point of death. He also was suffering from some sort of health impairment. Just before 2 Corinthians 1:5, he refers to comforting others in ANY affliction. While we may not be able to relate to the kind of persecution that Paul faced, certainly we can all relate to suffering. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1:9 that the worst of his persecution made him rely on God all the more. So, we also share in Christ's sufferings. This makes me wonder, can we truly experience comfort without suffering?

When we do finally face the end of our life and the end of our suffering, we know the ultimate hope because of Christ's ultimate sacrifice and suffering; a God who raises the dead. God knows our suffering and provides our comfort.

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Prayer: God, you are the source of all life and an all-powerful God. Help us to have peace even in the midst of our suffering. Help us focus more on heaven than on earth. Thank you that Christ has paid the ultimate price for our salvation by suffering and dying in our place. Thank you that you come near and comfort us in our day-to-day suffering. Thank you that just as we share in Christ's crucifixion, we share in the resurrection. Thank you most of all, for overcoming death and giving us victory in eternal life. May you increase and may I decrease today. Amen.

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Friday, March 17

Today's Devotional comes from Robin Woodworth

Theme: Reminder of What God Called Us to Increase/Decrease

Scripture: Isaiah 12:2

"Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD himself, is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation."

Reflection: This chapter in Isaiah begins with, "In that day..." In the previous chapter Isaiah prophesies about Jesus: a branch from the stump of Jesse! The Israelites are called to praise God for the Savior He promises to send while remembering God's power in defeating and rescuing them from their powerful enemy: the Egyptians.

In a devotional from gospel singer Kirk Franklin he states, "Fear makes the believer have spiritual amnesia, causes us to forget what God has done so that we are in a state of being afraid of what He can do, because we have unplugged ourselves from the history of God."

Christ has already come and defeated the enemy, so we do not have to be our own strength; the Lord, the Lord himself, is our strength. Jesus has already run the victory lap. We are not fighting for victory; we are fighting because we already have the victory! When we step back and allow God to fight our battles, He will be our defense or song as it is translated in several versions. To me, song implies worship...we can walk forth in battle worshiping with our whole being! When we feel weak, let us remember the words of Jesus in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." God alone is my salvation. We must trust Him to work on our behalf with whatever challenge, worry or burden we are trying to carry on our own. Only in His strength can we move forward to use the talents He has given us, increasing our faith in Him, decreasing faith in self.

When our boys were young, a favorite activity was to create armor out of the cardboard from the bulk Frosted Mini Wheats boxes. Helmets and shields were crafted for battle. I kept one of those shields for quite some time as a reminder of the bravery modeled in child's play with a shield in hand! When we choose to wear the helmet of salvation trusting in Jesus, we are called to take up the shield of faith (Ephesians 6:16-17) with which we can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one!

Today read and re-read Isaiah 12:2 as our battle cry and let us take some moments to craft or draw a shield as a reminder to put our total trust in our mighty Savior! As we look to decrease our distractions and increase our dependence on Jesus let us rest in the victory won and His will to be done!

"In the darkness something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing...the most beautiful noise he had ever heard. It was so beautiful he could hardly bear it...It was the Lion. Huge, shaggy, and bright it stood facing the rising sun. Its mouth was open in song..."
Excerpts from The Magician's Nephew by C.S. Lewis.

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Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you for your gift of salvation, the victory won! Thank you for being my strength and shield. May I sing your praises daily! Amen.

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Saturday, March 18

Today's Devotional comes from Bethany Parnell

Theme: Hearing from God in solitude

Scripture: Isaiah 30:15

"For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength. But you refused."

Reflection: My life is loud. We used to have a sign in our house that read "Home is where the noise is." (I recently changed it to say "Simmer down" in high hopes some people will take it to heart.) In our family of six there is almost always a need waiting to be met, a question waiting to be answered, and a mess to clean up. It's easy for me to forsake rest and keep running. "Quietness and trust" don't clear the sink of dishes. I often find myself totally depleted and at the same time striving to "do better." I like the way the Message paraphrases our focus verse for today:

God, the Master, The Holy of Israel,
has this solemn counsel:

"Your salvation requires you to turn back to me
and stop your silly efforts to save yourselves.

Your strength will come from settling down
in complete dependence on me—

The very thing you've been unwilling to do."

Your strength will come from settling down. I've found that forsaking rest and dependence on God is like living with paralysis and refusing to use a wheelchair. Imagine a woman dependent on a wheelchair to move throughout her life. She wakes up and decides to leave it in the corner of her bedroom for the day. Can you imagine the process of getting to the kitchen for a cup of coffee? How about getting from the car to the office?

I can crawl through life, drowning in the noise and demands of the day, or I can return to the source of life. I can simmer down and trust the voice of the Father that I'm finally quiet enough to hear. When I make this practice a priority my entire life changes. A wheelchair represents freedom to its user.

Practice: Where do you meet with God? Is it on a walk through your neighborhood, maybe in the garden where your hands meet the earth? Maybe you light a candle and sit in that special place in your home. For me it's watching the sun rise a few minutes before my kids. Throughout the season of Lent I encourage you to find that quiet place of connection with God and listen for his voice.