

# Does God Play Favourites?

Message for Sunday, July 5, 2015  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Acts 12:1-17

## 1) Why, God, why?

I used to serve as a volunteer chaplain in the Belleville Hospital, back when I lived in Prince Edward County. During one of those days, I met a couple whose son was a patient.<sup>1</sup> They had brought him in because he had developed trouble breathing, but he soon got better. Still, the staff decided to keep him overnight just so they could keep a close watch on him. That night, before they went home, the parents had prayed for their son. But it wasn't just any prayer.

Their prayer was based on the promise that Jesus gave:

**Matthew 18:19, New Revised Standard Version:**

**"Truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven."**

They had experienced miraculous healing before in their own lives, and they trusted that God would help them here as well. So they prayed that God would heal their son. Completely. And that God would do it before morning.

They lived north of Highway 7. So they made the two hour drive back home, exhausted. But before they went to bed, they phoned their relatives and friends, telling everyone that their son was getting better, and would be home again the next day. Filled with faith and hope, they slept soundly the whole night through.

The next day they returned to the hospital. They were devastated to find that, rather than being healthy and ready to come home, their son had been transferred to the Intensive Care Unit, was in critical condition and was hooked up to life support systems. That's when I met them.

I don't have a happy ending to that story. We talked for quite a while, read the Bible and prayed. But their faith was shattered, and it was going to take more than my brief visit to restore them. I got in touch with the pastor of their own church, who would continue to minister to them long after I was gone.

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<sup>1</sup> To protect confidentiality, I've changed the details of this family. The essential story about prayer is the same.

Maybe you, too, have had a disappointment with God. Maybe your faith has been shattered. One of the least helpful things is when well-meaning friends (or your pastor) give you a pep talk, and then expect you immediately snap out of it.

A couple of weeks ago a church in Charleston, South Carolina was the scene of a horrible massacre. A white man shot and killed nine church members in a Bible study meeting. It was awful. That brought back my memory of a similar mass murder some years before that: the Columbine high school shooting in Colorado. Two students killed thirteen others before shooting themselves.

But here's what I particularly remember about that time: on a TV show two days later, the host was talking with a panel of youth from that school. Towards the end of the show, the host asked them, "So what have you learned from this tragedy?"

As if they had had time to deal with the murder of their friends, and come to some understanding of the meaning of life! The students all dutifully gave answers to his question, because that's how TV works. You watch a show, where people meet a crisis, successfully deal with it, and have a happy ending... all within 30 minutes (20 minutes if you take out the commercials).

Real life is not like that. Real faith is not like that. Growing takes time. If your faith has taken a beating, and you feel like giving up on God, remember this: God has not given up on you. And God's got all the time in the world to work with you, to help restore your trust in him.

## 2) Hot air balloon faith or jet airplane faith?

I thought of these events when I read Acts 12, the chapter we're looking at today. Most of it is about the wonderful things that happened to Peter:

- How King Herod had Peter arrested, and was likely planning to have him executed. This would boost his popularity among the religious leaders, who were trying to stamp out this new religious sect.
- How the people of the church prayed for Peter
- How God sent an angel to miraculously rescue Peter from prison.

It's a wonderful story, a great encouragement to anyone who is facing problems and persecution. There's even a moment of comedy when Peter knocks on the gate of the house where some of the church members meet, and the person who answers the knock is so excited that she runs away to tell the others, without letting him in!

But what about the beginning of that chapter?

**Acts 12:1-2, New Living Translation:**

**About that time King Herod Agrippa began to persecute some believers in the church. He had the apostle James (John's brother) killed with a sword.**

Why did God save Peter's life, yet allow James to be killed? Was Peter a better person? Did God like Peter more? Does God play favourites?

Why is it that today some people live to see their grandchildren, and others die before while they're still children? Why were all of us here born with such wonderful opportunities in life, while so many people in the world are born into situations that you and I would consider utterly hopeless? Why, why, why?

We will never know the answers to those question. Furthermore, the nature of those questions is self-centred. They ask, "Why me?", or "Why us?" When Jesus was facing the cross he prayed:

**Luke 22:42, New Living Translation:**

**"Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will, not mine."**

His prayer started with the focus on himself. But then he turned the focus so that he was looking at God's purpose.

What if we change the focus of these questions away from ourselves and instead ask, "What is God's will for this situation? How can we be of service to God and others, given the circumstances we find ourselves in?" *Repeat the above; it's long, but it's important.*

I want to suggest those kind of questions are a lot more useful than asking "Why?"

Someone once described two kinds of faith: (i) Hot air balloon faith is the kind of faith that moves wherever the wind blows it. It has no power of its own, and is totally dependent on circumstances. On a good day, everything looks wonderful. On a stormy day, this person trembles with fear. (ii) Jet airplane faith is the kind of faith that has a direction and purpose. It has its own source of power — the Holy Spirit — and thus keeps going no matter what situation the person is in.

If you're facing persecution because of your Christian faith...

if you've just received a diagnosis of inoperable cancer...

if you came home and found a good-bye note from your

spouse...

what kind of faith would you like to have?

### 3) Trust and obey, for there's no other way

There's a wonderful song that teaches the truth that I'm talking about. One of the verses goes like this:

Not a burden we bear, not a sorrow we share,  
But our toil he doth richly repay;  
Not a grief nor a loss, not a frown nor a cross,  
But is blest if we trust and obey.

Trust and obey, for there's no other way  
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

The apostle Paul endured much hardship. He was writing a letter of encouragement to one of the churches he had started, and he used his suffering as part of that encouragement. Here is part of what he wrote:

**2 Corinthians 4:1-2, 5, 8-9, 16-18, New Living Translation:**

**And so, since God in his mercy has given us this wonderful ministry, we never give up. We reject all shameful and underhanded methods. We do not try to trick anyone, and we do not distort the word of God. We tell the truth before God, and all who are honest know that...**

**We don't go around preaching about ourselves; we preach Christ Jesus, the Lord. All we say about ourselves is that we are your servants because of what Jesus has done for us. ... We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed and broken. We are perplexed, but we don't give up and quit. We are hunted down, but God never abandons us. We get knocked down, but we get up again and keep going....**

**That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are quite small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us an immeasurably great glory that will last forever! So we don't look at the troubles we can see right now; rather, we look forward to what we have not yet seen. For the troubles we see will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever.**

When we put our faith and trust in Christ, then the events around us cannot harm us. They may hurt, and they may — and do — hurt deeply; they may even kill us. But they cannot cause us any lasting harm — when we look at life from the perspective of eternity.

Here's a story to show what I mean. A boy was progressing well in learning to play the piano, and his mother wanted to encourage him even more. Together they went to a concert by the famed pianist Paderewski. After they were in their seats, the mother spotted a friend in the audience, and walked down the aisle to greet her. The little boy seized the opportunity to explore the wonders of the concert hall. He got up and went exploring, eventually coming to a door. Beyond that were some stairs... When the house lights dimmed and the concert was about to begin, the mother returned to her seat and discovered that her son was missing.

Before she could do anything, the curtains parted and spotlights focused on the impressive Steinway grand piano on stage. In horror, the mother saw her little boy sitting at the keyboard, innocently picking out "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." At that moment, the great Paderewski made his entrance, quickly moved to the piano, and whispered in the boy's ear, "Don't quit. Keep Playing." Then leaning over, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in the bass part. Soon his right arm reached around to the other side of the child and he blended in a new harmony using the high notes. Together, the old master and the young novice transformed a frightening situation into a wonderfully creative experience. The audience was thrilled.

That's a picture of how it is with our Heavenly Father. On our own power, we can do some fine things. Even great things. But with the touch of the Master's hand, what we produce with our lives can be truly wonderful.

When you are in a situation where you feel overwhelmed, listen carefully. You can hear the voice of the Master, whispering in your ear, "Don't quit. Keep playing." Feel his loving arms around you. And then keep on playing.

#### **Next Steps:**

- Difficult, even impossible, situations will come in life. That's normal.
- Pray with faith: "God, even though I am confused and doubting, I still put my trust in you. Use me however you need me."
- Instead of asking the unanswerable "Why?", ask questions which put our faith into practice:
  - "What can I do in this situation?"
  - "How can I be of service to others?"
- Read Acts 13 in preparation for next Sunday.