

Prayer: When God seems distant

Message for Sunday, March 18, 2018
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Psalm 22

Children's Message:

Explanation before the Scripture reading:

We are going to read Psalm 51 in the Bible. It's a prayer, written by David, the King of Israel. He had just murdered a man, so that he could take that man's wife for himself. It was a secret, and he thought he could get away with it; but God made sure that the truth came out.

David wrote this prayer immediately after that. He was ashamed of himself. He confessed his sin to God, and asked God to forgive him. God did forgive him, although there were still serious consequences for his crime.

Children's Message: (following the reading of Psalm 51)

Briefly remind children of the Scripture: King David had murdered someone. He was guilty of a terrible sin, and felt awful about it. He prayed for God's forgiveness.

I read about a father who punished his 3-year-old daughter for wasting Christmas wrapping paper. The family didn't have much money, and when he saw that she had used a whole roll of that expensive gold wrapping for a single present under the Christmas tree, he was furious and sent her to her room for the night.

The next morning, the little girl brought the gift to her father and said, "This is for you, Daddy." He was embarrassed by his overreaction the night before; but he blew up again when he found that the box was empty. He yelled at her, "Don't you know that when you give someone a present, there's supposed to be something inside of it?"

The little girl looked up at him with tears in her eyes and said, "Oh Daddy, it's not empty. I blew kisses into the box. All for you, Daddy."

The father was crushed. He put his arms around his little girl, and he begged her forgiveness.

That man kept that gold box by his bed for years. Whenever he was discouraged, he would take out

an imaginary kiss and remember the love of the child who had put it there.

I tell you that story just for this one thing: we all make mistakes. Dads, Moms, pastors, school teachers, and yes even children – we all make mistakes. The key is that we ask forgiveness, and start over again.

Message: "Prayer: When God seems distant"

1) God, I need you

John and Claudia Claxton were deeply in love with each other. During their two years of engagement, John had been transformed from a hard-nosed cynic to someone bubbling with enthusiasm. After they married, it was even better than their dreams.

Less than a year later, Claudia was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease, cancer of the lymph glands. There was only a 50-50 chance of living, and that only after intense therapy: surgery cut her open from her armpit to her belly, taking out every visible trace of the disease. She lay in her hospital bed, stunned and weak. Radiation therapy came immediately afterwards. She aged years in just a few days. Her hair fell out. She couldn't keep food down. Her throat became so swollen she couldn't even swallow, and the doctor temporarily halted the radiation.

While she lay on the cold steel table under the radiation machine, she wondered about God and her suffering. She was a Christian, and she looked forward to visitors from her church, hoping they would help her find answers.

A deacon from her church solemnly advised her to reflect on what God was trying to teach her. "Surely something in your life must displease God," he said. "Somewhere, you must have stepped out of his will. These things don't just happen. God uses circumstances to warn us, and to punish us. What is he telling you?"

A few days later it was a widow who had adopted the role of professional cheerleader to the sick. She brought flowers, sang hymns, and read some happy psalms about brooks running and mountains clapping their hands. Whenever Claudia tried to talk about her illness or prognosis, the woman quickly changed the subject, trying to combat the suffering with cheer and goodwill.

Another woman dropped by, a faithful follower of television faith healers. Exuding confidence, she assured Claudia that healing was her only escape. “God will deliver you if you can muster up enough faith to believe you’ll be healed. Remember, Claudia, faith can move mountains, and that includes Hodgkin’s disease. Simply name your promise, in faith, and then claim the victory.”

Perhaps the most “spiritual” woman in Claudia’s church brought along some books about praising God for everything that happens. “Claudia, you need to come to the place where you can say, ‘God, I love you for making me suffer like this. It is your will, and you know what’s best for me. And I praise you for loving me enough to allow me to experience this. In all things, including this, I give thanks.’”

As Claudia pondered the words, her mind filled with rather grotesque images of God. She envisioned a figure in the shape of a troll, big as the universe, who took delight in squeezing helpless humans between his fingernails, pulverizing them with his fists, dashing them against sharp stones. The figure would torture these humans until they cried out, “God, I love you for doing this to me!” The idea repulsed Claudia, and she decided she could not worship or love such a God.

Claudia’s pastor made her feel she was on a select mission. “Claudia, you have been appointed to suffer for Christ, and he will reward you. God chose you because of your great strength and integrity, just as he chose Job, and he is using you as an example to others. Their faith may increase because of your response. You should feel privileged, not bitter. What we see as adversity, God sees as opportunity.”¹

These people were well-meaning and sincere. But their pep talks left Claudia feeling even worse than before.

What about you? When you face pain and suffering, when things are going from bad to worse, how do you make sense of it all? Where does God fit in the picture?

These are not new questions. In many of the Psalms—about thirty to forty of them!—the person praying is crying out to God for help. Here is a sample; I’ve included just the first verse, to give you a taste of their desperate situations.

Psalm 3:1, New Living Translation:
O Lord, I have so many enemies;
so many are against me.

Psalm 5:1, New Living Translation:
O Lord, hear me as I pray;
pay attention to my groaning.

Psalm 13:1, New Living Translation:
O Lord, how long will you forget me? Forever?
How long will you look the other way?

Psalm 69:1, New Living Translation:
Save me, O God,
for the floodwaters are up to my neck.

Enemies, pain, suffering, groaning, disaster, despair. These are people crying out to God for help. Through many of these Psalms, two things are common.

2) God, where are you?!

Many of the Psalms hauntingly cry out, “God, where are you?!” They face an empty and lonely silence in return. God appears to have abandoned them.

When Jesus was hanging on the cross, his cry of anguish was a direct quote from Psalm 22.

Matthew 27:46, New Living Translation:
At about three o’clock, Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

During World War II, the Jewish people of Europe were systematically persecuted and murdered by the Nazis. After the war, when the survivors realized the full extent of the genocide, many of them asked that question, “Yes, God, where *were* you?” That question still remains today. Christians who toss off glib answers to hard questions would do well to ponder that.

¹ The Claxtons are close friends of Philip Yancey. He describes their journey, including the visitors’ advice, in the first chapter of his book *Where is God When It Hurts?*

Listen to the tone of desperation in Psalm 22.

Psalm 22:1-2, New Living Translation:

My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?

Why do you remain so distant?

Why do you ignore my cries for help?

Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer.

Every night you hear my voice, but I find no relief.

Have you ever prayed like that? Felt that God didn't care about you; maybe there was no God? If so, you are not alone.

The person praying in this Psalm remembers how God came to the aid of others before him.

Psalm 22:3-6, New Living Translation:

Yet you are holy.

The praises of Israel surround your throne.

Our ancestors trusted in you, and you rescued them.

You heard their cries for help and saved them.

They put their trust in you and were never disappointed.

But I am a worm and not a man.

I am scorned and despised by all!

I can hear him saying, "You saved others. But not me. I am just a worm. I am worthless."

I need to tell you now: this Psalm is not written like a Hollywood superhero movie. God does not suddenly appear and make everything right, and everyone lives happily ever after. At the end of this Psalm, we are left hanging, wondering "So, whatever happened? Did he get the help he needed?" It doesn't say.

One of the reasons I consider the Bible to be absolutely trustworthy is that it tells the truth. You may know the story in the Bible about King David committing adultery and murder. In any ordinary book, the powerful people are made to look good; that part would be cut out. The Bible includes it, and a lot of other unsavoury things as well.

Likewise in the Psalms. There are some problems in life to which there simply are not quick and easy answers. Suffering is one of them, and the Psalms don't attempt offer that kind of fluff.

3) Whatever comes, I will trust you, God

So if there isn't a happy ending to this Psalm, then how does it end? Answer: it ends with a new beginning. At the start of the Psalm, the person praying was sounding hopeless. The very act of praying – opening our heart and soul to God – can bring healing of the soul. That seems to be what happened here.

Towards the end of the Psalm, this is what we read.

Psalm 22:26-28, New Living Translation:

The poor will eat and be satisfied.

All who seek the Lord will praise him.

Their hearts will rejoice with everlasting joy.

The whole earth will acknowledge the Lord and return to him.

People from every nation will bow down before him.

For the Lord is king!

He rules all the nations.

There is no hint in the intervening verses that the problem which initiated this prayer is solved. It is more like the person praying has received strength to pick up and carry on. In fact, there is a tone of worship in these closing words. The sense is, "God is in charge. Therefore I need not be afraid. I will put my trust in the Lord no matter what may happen."

I invite you to check this for yourself. Read those other Psalms which I listed earlier, and see how they end. You will find this theme of trust is in all of them.

Is it in you? Will you say, "God, you are in charge. Therefore I am not afraid. I will put my trust in you, Lord, no matter what may happen."

Next Steps:

- ⌋ Don't wait. When tragedy comes, we don't think straight. That's not the time to make major decisions.
- ⌋ Choose now to put your trust in God. He will be your strength and solid ground when troubles come.