

“FORMS OF PRAYER: Help!”

A sermon preached by
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TEXT: Luke 22:39-46

He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. ⁴⁰When he reached the place, he said to them, ‘Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.’ ⁴¹Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed, ⁴²‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.’ [[⁴³Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. ⁴⁴In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]] ⁴⁵When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, ⁴⁶and he said to them, ‘Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.’

My dad was a World War II veteran. As a Navy enlisted man aboard the Haskell-class attack transport USS Sibley, he participated in the Iwo Jima Invasion. The Sibley’s job was to deliver the Marines to their destination. I remember Dad telling me about watching with the rest of the Sibley crew as the Marines twice raised a United States flag on Mt. Suribachi, the second raising memorialized in bronze at the United States Marine Corps Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery.

Dad loved the Navy. He also loved serving his country and had many “war stories.” As part of the Quartermaster Corps, my dad served as a storekeeper. His combat assignment was as a gunner’s mate on one of the 40mm anti-aircraft guns, helping to load and feed ammunition to the gun.

He would tell the story of being under aerial attack during the invasion. The gunner was firing at incoming aircraft when the gun stopped. Dad said he knew intuitively that a live shell was in the chamber and that a “hang-fire” had occurred. Everything stopped as the crew looked at each other. He quickly raised a prayer, asking God, “What do I do?” The gun was hot. The shell was live. The danger of explosion was imminent.

Suddenly, a clear picture of what to do entered his mind. He raised both arms and came down elbows first on the chamber. The round fired, the shell ejected, and the next round loaded. The battle continued.

I have never been in combat. Some of you have and know the dangers therein. One of my dad’s favorite sayings was, “There are no atheists in foxholes.” It was his way of saying that everyone throws up a prayer for help at some time in their life, whether they profess to believe in God or not.

It’s probably not true as a generality, but if you are believer, you have likely prayed a “Help me!” prayer. I’m sure some unbelievers have prayed this prayer.

Backed into a corner, in fear for their life, anxious that the illness or injury they are experiencing may leave them disabled or chronically weak for the rest of their life, overwhelmed by the huge challenge that lies before them, many people use a form of prayer that is quite common in the pages of Scripture.

I would label it the “Help!” prayer.

It is often prayed in two different ways. For the unbeliever, the person who has no faith or trust in God and no connection to God, the “Help!” prayer is the prayer of last resort. The unbeliever who prays this prayer has reached the end of their own resources, the limit of their own abilities. They pray, not because they believe there will be an answer. They pray because they truly believe they have nothing else to lose and perhaps there might be Someone at the other end of that prayer who will answer.

The believer prays this prayer out of a relationship with God. They believe they will be heard. They have a history with the One to whom they pray. This is not the court of last resort. It is familiar ground where they have walked before. You find this kind of language in many of the Psalms.

Most Christians love the Psalms because they speak in terms of personal experience. They are honest, gritty, and existential. They do not mince words. The Psalms span the full spectrum of human emotion from joy to sorrow to anger, even anger with God.

Perhaps Psalm 86 best expresses the “Help!” form of prayer. Hear its words. *“Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy. Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you; save your servant who trusts in you. You are my God; be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all day long. Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.”* (Psalm 86:1-4)

At the same time, the Psalms record that God is faithful to provide the help we need. Many of the Psalms point to God as the source of help and record testimony of the times God provided the help needed. Psalm 124:8 records familiar words, *“Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made the heaven and the earth.”* Psalm 18:6 records, *“In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears.”* Psalm 28:6-7 gives testimony to God’s faithfulness in times of trouble, *“Blessed be the Lord, for he has heard the sound of my pleadings. The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts; so I am helped, and my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him.”*

A final example of this kind of testimony is Psalm 46. This was the Psalm that one of my elders shared at a Session meeting following the heart attack and drowning of the Rev. Khoen Bik The on a church-sponsored whitewater rafting trip on the Youghiogheny River in Ohio, Pennsylvania. Khoen was in my raft and I felt responsible for his death. Grief overwhelmed me for some time.

Sometimes even pastors need to be reminded of where we are to go when we are overwhelmed, and life gives us out-sized challenges. Hear the opening words of Psalm 46, *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.”*

God is a very present help in time of trouble.

We have many examples of the “Help!” kind of prayer in Scripture. One of my favorites is the prayer of Gideon. You will remember that Gideon was a judge and his story is found in the Book of Judges. The Midianites are warring against the tribes of Israel. Things have gotten so bad that Gideon is threshing grain in a winepress. This is significant because the stone winepress was below ground where he could not be seen. Had the Midianites found him and the grain, he might or might not die, but the grain would certainly be taken.

This is one of those instances of holy humor found in Scripture. The angel of the Lord finds Gideon in the winepress and greets him saying, “The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior.” Gideon is given a

commission by the angel to save Israel from Midian. Gideon is not sure about all this. He wants some assurances. He gets them. When he does, Gideon prays, *"Help me, Lord God! For I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face."* (Judges 6:22) Gideon goes on to destroy the altar of the Canaanite god, Baal, but then, once again, he doubts his commission. He prays for help and a clear sign that God is going to be faithful to His word. Hear his prayer.

"In order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said, I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand as you have said." (Judges 6:36-38)

Sure enough, Gideon wakes up the next morning and the ground is dry. The fleece is wet enough that he can wring a bowl full of dew from it. Surely that is a clear sign. Not for Gideon!

Now he asks God to do the reverse. He will lay out the fleece again and this time he asks that the ground be covered with dew while the fleece remains dry. He awakens the next morning and the fleece is dry. The ground is soaked. Gideon goes forth to take on the Midianites.

Yet, now God challenges Gideon. He has too many soldiers. God whittles them down to three hundred, and with these God gives the victory. Gideon asked for help. He wanted assurances. He got them . . . twice. Gideon could never look back at that battle and think that he won because of superior numbers, his own courage, or pure dumb luck.

He asked God for help. He demanded assurances. He got it all.

Another example of a prayer for help is that of young King Solomon in 2 Chronicles 1. Solomon was twenty years old when he ascended the throne as king of all Israel.

Maturity does not always come with age and twenty-year-olds who have such little life experience that they do not know very much about the way the world works. As I think back to twenty-year-olds I have known (even the one that once looked back at me in the mirror, I am reminded of the saying, "Young people, are you tired of being harassed by your parents? Act now!!! Move out, get a job, and pay your own way while you still know everything!")

Rick Rusaw tells of a time when he and his wife, Diane went to lunch with some friends. Rick said, "It was a little distracting to me, quite honestly - one of the guys in the group kept slurping his soda. He dropped his French fries. He was whining about the food not coming fast enough. He changed what he wanted; he wanted stuff on everyone else's plate. He had to go to the bathroom two times and got ketchup on the table. But it was ok because he was only three. He was celebrating his third birthday that day. When his dad did that, it drove me crazy. But I was willing to cut some slack to the three-year-old because he hasn't grown up yet."

Sometimes the greatest maturity you can display is to know how immature you really are. Sometimes the greatest wisdom you can show is to realize how little you really know.

I think that this was one of the reasons Solomon was known for his wisdom. He knew what he didn't know. Lacking in both wisdom and knowledge, led Solomon to cry, "Help!"

The night of his coronation, God appears to him in a dream and asks Solomon what He should give to Solomon. Solomon replies, *"You have shown great and steadfast love to my father David, and have made me*

succeed him as king. O Lord, let your promise to my father David now be fulfilled, for you have made me king over a people as numerous as the dust of the earth. Give me now wisdom and knowledge to go out and come in before this people, for who can rule this great people of yours?" (2 Chronicles 1:7-10)

James, the half-brother of Jesus would later write, *"If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to you."* (James 1:5)

For the believer, God is an ever-present help in time of trouble. However, the only way to access that help is to ask. Asking for help places us in the position of realizing two things: 1) our own inadequacy and 2) God's grace.

Asking for help is never the same as asking for a miracle. There are occasion in Scripture and throughout history of prayers for help that are miraculously answered. Most of the time, though, this is not the way that God chooses to work.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of the best-selling book, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, writes, *"People who pray for miracles usually don't get miracles... But people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember what they have left instead of what they have lost, very often find their prayers answered. Their prayers helped them tap hidden reserves of faith and courage that were not available to them before."*

The Scripture lesson for today is a good example of this. Jesus is in his last hours on earth. He has celebrated his final Passover with his disciples. Now he goes to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Despite everything Jesus has taught them, blinded to the true meaning of the broken bread and the shared cup they have just experienced, the disciples are obviously not prepared for what lies ahead. They are tired. They are sleepy.

Jesus is in anguish. He knows what lies ahead. The cross looms before him. Each moment it seems to get larger and larger in his mind. He asks the disciples to stay awake and pray with him. In minutes they are asleep.

Jesus prays a classic "Help!" prayer. *'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.'* *[[43Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. 44In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]] uke 22:42-44)*

The cup is not taken away. The cross is not avoided. Yet, God responds by sending strength and courage. The angel, a messenger of God, ministers God's power in the form of the bravery to submit to and do God's will despite overwhelming suffering. Victory only comes by trusting that the prayer for help is fully answered, even when the answer doesn't remove the danger, pain, or trial. God's help is not always in the form of miracle, not always in the form of escape from trial, and not always in the form of avoidance of suffering. Sometimes the help we need and the help God provides are the resources necessary to pray, *"Even so, Lord, Thy will be done."*

The Gospels record that the next day, Jesus, hanging on the cross, cries out to God in the words of Psalm 22, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* That Psalm goes on in the next verse to say, *"Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night but find no rest."* (Psalm 22:2) For a short period of time, Jesus felt abandoned and that there was not help for him. However, if you read further in Psalm 22, the Psalmist raises another plea, *"But*

you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid! Deliver my soul from the word, my life from the power of the dog! Save me from the mouth of the lion.” (Psalm 22:19-21)

We know how the story ends. Jesus dies and is buried. It looks to all the world as if his plea for help has gone unanswered. God didn't show up. He is just another innocent man ground up by the justice system who has gone to a horrible death.

But wait! Something has changed in three days. Friday's defeat is swallowed up in the victory of Easter's open tomb. Jesus' trust in God allowed him to cry out to God for help. God has helped, but not in ways we could easily discern. Death is swallowed up in victory! Jesus' example gives us hope and demonstrates that whether God is first resort or last resort, God is a promised source of help to those who cry out in time of need.

During his days as president, Thomas Jefferson and a group of companions were traveling across the country on horseback. They came to a river which had left its banks because of a recent downpour. The swollen river had washed the bridge away. Each rider was forced to ford the river on horseback, fighting for his life against the rapid currents. The very real possibility of death threatened each rider, which caused a traveler who was not part of their group to step aside and watch. After several had plunged in and made it to the other side, the stranger asked President Jefferson if he would ferry him across the river. The president agreed without hesitation. The man climbed on, and shortly thereafter the two of them made it safely to the other side. As the stranger slid off the back of the saddle onto dry ground, one in the group asked him, "Tell me, why did you select the president to ask this favor of?" The man was shocked, admitting he had no idea it was the president who had helped him. "All I know," he said, "Is that on some of your faces was written the answer 'No,' and on some of them was the answer 'yes.' His was a 'Yes' face." ⁱ

Jesus knows our need. He has experienced the fear and anguish of a prayer for help. He has a 'Yes' face. His face reflects the 'Yes' face of God.

Never hesitate to pray for help. Help will come. Perhaps it will not always appear as the help you had hoped for, but it will always appear as the hope you need.

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. Amen.

ⁱ Charles R. Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening*, Word, 1990, p. 6, [quoted from "The Vital Balance" by Dr. Karl Menninger, M.D., with Martin Mayman, Ph.D. and Paul Pruyser, Ph.D. (New York, Viking PRes, 1961), p22]