

Better than a Scorpion?

By
The Reverend Rachel Pedersen
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Psalms 85:1-13

¹ Lord, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. ² You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin. *Selah* ³ You withdrew all your wrath; you turned from your hot anger. ⁴ Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us. ⁵ Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? ⁶ Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you? ⁷ Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation. ⁸ Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. ⁹ Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. ¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. ¹¹ Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. ¹² The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. ¹³ Righteousness will go before him and will make a path for his steps.

Luke 11:1-13

¹ He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”

² So he said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, may your name be revered as holy. May your kingdom come. ³ Give us each day our daily bread.⁴ And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.” ⁵ And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ ⁷ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. ⁹ “So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for a fish, would give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asked for an egg, would give a scorpion? ¹³ If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Jake was 10 years old and he loved church camp. He loved everything about church camp from eating an entire plate of bacon for breakfast each morning to playing capture the flag. He loved trying to stay awake as late as possible so he could sneak out past the counselors. He never quite made it, but he tried. Jake, however, was like many of my fourth graders and did not always enjoy the more contemplative parts of church camp. We had a tradition of giving the students time to journal and pray and reflect on the daily passage each morning before our small group Bible study. Jake began our time of silence with a deep breath that sounded something like this “*groan*.” And then he would contort himself over the log like in sacrifice being offered to the gods and lay there staring at the sky saying, “Is this over yet?” A prayer, I think, but the trees never answered him. Eventually, about 3 minutes into the silence, he would jump up and come over to me and say, “Hey, Pastor Rachel, I have to go to the bathroom.” “I need a water bottle.” “I forgot my Bible.” There was always something.

One day I was sitting trying to model prayerful, thoughtful reflection when I saw him in front of me. He had the most serious expression on his face. And I was genuinely worried that something awful had happened. And before I could do or say anything, he whispered, “It’s about the Bible. I have a question.”

We were reading about prayer, in fact, we were reading Luke 11, and Jake was serious. He said, “The Bible says that God will answer your prayers.” I nodded and he continued, “It says that if you pray for an egg, you will get an egg and not a scorpion.” He looked at me for confirmation. I nodded again and he asked with all earnestness, “But what, But what if you pray for a scorpion? There is nothing better than a scorpion.” Now, I disagreed with him on a number of points. His exegesis was a little suspect, and I’m not really one who prays for scorpions on a regular basis,

but the question was a good one. What happens when you pray for a scorpion? I took the easy path out and I asked him what he thought.

He said, *"I think I need to tell God that I need a scorpion. God probably likes scorpions. I should probably go pray now."* If there was a miracle at camp that year, it was Jake rushing back to his log, opening up his prayer journal, and starting to pray for a scorpion. I wish I could have been a fly on the wall for that conversation between him and God. I bet it was beautiful. There was an earnestness in his response, a casual familiarity, and the way that he determined that God and he had something in common, a common cause. They knew what was important. I couldn't stop watching him for the next 20 minutes as he prayed with all his heart. I kept finding myself returning to the line, "Lord, teach us to pray."

If only Jesus had known. Despite his instructions so carefully captured by the gospel writers, we are still asking that question. How is it that we're supposed to pray? What's a good prayer? Is my prayer enough? Should I even bother with a prayer? If I ask you right now to turn to the person beside you and offer a prayer, what would you do? It's not a matter of resources. We have all the resources you could ever imagine for prayer. There are books filled with prayers: prayers for children, prayers for veterinarians, prayers for every hour of the day. I have a book from the late 1800s that's titled *Outlines for Prayers* that can be adapted for any situation. The title alone made me want to keep it and I've used it once or twice and there are a few situations not covered, but you know it's there. There are books that are happy to teach you how to pray. Books that address our shortcomings in our prayers. Books that teach you how to have a robust prayer life. Prayers that will teach you ancient forms of prayer and thoroughly modern ones. Go online, you can find a prayer that involves jelly beans and some that involve art. The list goes on and on.

There are apps you can put on your phone. There are cubes you can roll across your table. There are even prayers written in the stained glass and on chapel walls. There are books and essays and treatises going back to the very founding of the church that try to explain the mechanisms of prayer, the requirements of prayer, the theology of prayer. And if you want some real fun this afternoon, read Tertullian's essay on "hands lifted in public praise" or Origen's response "to those who think they shall not pray." The church has been wrestling with these questions of how we pray and why we pray for centuries.

We know that it's important, that it's central to our faith. At the start of the Reformation, John Calvin argued that prayer was "the chief exercise of our faith."¹ I could tell you all sorts of ways to pray, offer you words to say, offer you methods, that's not prayer. Prayer is practice, an expression. And that, my friends, is much harder to define. It's even harder to teach. I can understand why the disciples stopped Jesus that day and asked him how to pray. The Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke both include a version of the Lord's Prayer. In the Gospel of Matthew, it's part of the sermon on the mount when Jesus lays out all the things a faithful believer should know. In the Gospel according to Luke, it's different. This passage comes out of a lived experience of the disciples. They are watching Jesus and want to understand what he's doing. It's after he sent the 72 out into the world to teach and minister. It's after he had that conversation with Mary and Martha about how it is we practice our faith. They're watching him and they want to understand. and they say, "Teach us to pray like John taught his disciples."

¹ John Calvin *Institutes of Religion* III.XX.

Scripture doesn't tell us about the motive behind the question: if that unnamed disciple was curious about Jesus's take on prayer, or if they thought it might give them special access to Jesus's power, or if they were hopeful that Jesus might just have an easier way to pray because the ways they've tried before just didn't work for them. Don't forget the disciples knew about prayer. Prayer had already been a part of their lives. Prayers marked the hours of the day from their rising up to their lying down. They knew that there were prayers that must accompany an offering. They knew that there were prayers that had to be said through the lips of a high priest. Prayers could be dangerous. After all, what if you asked for the wrong thing? What if God turned God's face away from you forever? What would happen then?

So, they ask Jesus to teach them, and Jesus does. Take a moment and notice all the things that Jesus doesn't say about prayer. He doesn't say anything about how holy or how pious the person must be when they offer a prayer. He doesn't say anything about what type of prayers can be offered. He doesn't even give limitations on what can be prayed for. He doesn't describe a robe or a rite. There's no secret incantation. There's no assurance that if the sequence is followed, then the problems are solved. Jesus tries to move the disciples away from the form into something else.

When writing about this passage, spiritual sage and guide Richard Foster explained, "Jesus teaches us that prayer involves just ordinary people bringing ordinary concerns to a loving and compassionate father. There is no pretense. We don't have to pretend to be more holy, more pure, or more saintly than we actually are. We do not try to conceal our conflicting and

contradictory motives from God or ourselves. We posture ourselves and we pour out our heart to the one who already knows us.”²

Jesus knew that we would find new ways to pray, though I don't think he ever thought about jelly beans. But that's not what Jesus was teaching about. Jesus was showing us the freedom that we can find in prayer; the invitation to be free from words or from propriety, from worry. Jesus teaches us to speak to God using the familial and relational term “abba” father. There's no honorific, no almighty, powerful, majestic, magnanimous. There's no long speech about the ongoing work of God, or a recitation of God's great actions in time. This is not an inferior bowing low as they seek an audience with the emperor. It is a child telling their parent about the day and about their hopes for tomorrow. When Jesus tells us to use that familial term, that familiar term “Abba,” Jesus gives us not only the permission to speak to God in such informal ways, but the expectation that that's how God wants us to speak. An expectation that we can call upon the one who is above all and through all and in all like a friend and a father. Thomas Merton reminded his fellow contemplatives in 1968 that “it's a risky thing to pray and the danger is that our prayer gets between God and us.”³

The great thing about prayer is not to pray, but to go directly to God, to remember the relationship we're invited into, not the perfect words that we have written down. That direct address frees us from stumbling over the right words or topics or rites and seek relationship.

Of course, we have the words from the Lord's prayer to guide us, and they will continue to do so. But they are a model, a beginning, not an end. The

² Richard Foster *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* pg. 16.

³ David Steindl-Rastmas *Recollections of Thomas Merton's Last Days in the West*.

prayer models that we talk to God about everything, about our needs, our hopes, our fears, our failures. That God is comfortable when we put all of that on the table. That we don't push God off into what Henry Nouwen describes as “a pious little niche in some pious little corner of our lives where we only think pious and thoughts and experience pious feelings. No, God steps into our lives. our whole lives, our whole thoughts, beautiful or ugly, high or low, proud or shameful, sorrowful or joyful, all of those pieces of us can be brought into the presence of the one who calls us by name.”⁴

Jesus tells us that when we pray, we bring our whole selves to the task. He doesn't waste time on the mechanisms of prayer, but he does tell us to be persistent. Jesus reminds us that we are free from propriety because when you're talking to a friend, when you're talking to a father, you don't need to pull back. Instead, he tells us to be persistent, to knock and to search and to seek. To be the annoying friend who shows up at midnight asking for bread, who sends a text even when the notification says “has notifications silenced.” It's the person who knocks on your door right after you turn the porch light off. Jesus tells us to be that person with God, to be obnoxious in our prayers. I don't know about you, but I find it easier to be nihilistic in my prayers rather than obnoxious. Simply throw my hands up and say, "There is suffering and there is war and there is sickness and sorrow and grief." But Jesus doesn't accept that. He tells us that we're supposed to hound God with the injustices of the day. To go to God with the fear that there isn't enough bread to last the night instead of rummaging through our

⁴ Henry Nouwen *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer & Contemplation*. Pg. 67.

cupboards. God doesn't allow us the comfort of acceptance. Jesus tells us to bang on the door and shout at midnight.

It's the prayer that's modeled in Psalm 85 when the people cry out and say, "How long?" And then they don't stop. They keep demanding of God this new kingdom that God had promised. It's a prayer that assumes restoration while never shying away from the destruction they have felt. More than that, think about the end of the parable Jesus offers. When the friend finally gets out of bed because of your knocking, the friend doesn't start with, "Why did you plan so poorly?" "What type of friend shows up at midnight?" He doesn't ask about your guests. Exasperated as he may be, he simply offers the bread.

I don't know what your midnight prayer is. What would take you out of the safety and security that you know to demand something of God? I know that sometimes you can feel tired and feel as though prayer is too much of a risk, but that's part of the challenge of prayer. Philip Yancey argues in his classic work on prayer that "prayer is not a means of removing the unknown and unpredictable elements in our life but rather it is a way of including the unknown and unpredictable elements and the outworking of the grace of God in our lives."⁵ It's moving God back into the center. It's saying, "God, I need to know that you are with me in this place. That no matter what, you are going to show up and work through this mess." And God does more than just show up. Jesus's final section reminds us that we are also free from a fear.

Let me repeat that. Jesus doesn't just tell us that prayer is a magical action that will result in a winning lottery ticket or a parking spot. It won't give us a cure or even an answer to the suffering. No, it is a deeper promise that

⁵ Phillip Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* pg. 82.

the one to whom we pray will be with us in that midnight hour and only seeks our good.

When I think about the ancient stories of the gods and how often prayer, an answered prayer became a curse. How one god's response would trigger the anger of another. That's not what Jesus teaches. Jesus teaches and reminds the disciples that even if we can't understand, even if we are so overwhelmed, we can be assured that ours is a God who will hand good things to God's children.

If we can remember the difference between a fish and a snake, God definitely can. God will do better. God will never withhold God's spirit from us.

I sometimes wonder what would happen if Jake were here right now in his 10-year-old form. I think he would have left about 20 minutes ago or he would be rolling around somewhere over here. If we were to ask him what he had to say about prayer, I'm not sure what he would have said, but he would have had a lot to say about scorpions. I could share some of the facts he passed along, but those have all been filed carefully away under "the stuff of nightmares." That day, watching him, he was my teacher. He reminded me of the gift that prayer is. It is an exercise in relationship, an act of connecting with a God who knows us and whose steadfast love surrounds us. A God who is big enough to hold fish and snakes, wars and warts, grief and the granular with compassion and grace. A God who listens at midnight and noon and every hour in between. The one who listens when our prayers are old and worn. A God who will not withhold the spirit but pours it out again and again and again with every knock, with every whisper, with every amen.