



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Going Through Hardship - Growing Through Prayer

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James 5:13-18

Several years ago, Steve Hayner, the late President of Columbia Seminary, told a story to us doctoral students in a class he was teaching: He was attending a national conference on theology and the environment, and this was many years before that class.

They were put in small groups. He told us he wasn't a name-dropper, BUT his small group consisted of Vice President Al Gore, a lady who was the President of the National Council of Churches, Jim Wallis (editor of Sojourners magazine, an evangelical social ministry magazine), and Carl Sagan, the astronomer.

They had a worship service and then went back to their small groups. Carl Sagan made the comment that he didn't really understand the worship service and all that was going on with it.

Steve says that at that, Vice-President Gore and the President of the National Council of Churches began to witness to him. After a few moments Carl Sagan said, "It's been a long time since I've been around people like you."

Al Gore said, "You mean religious people?"

"No," said the secular scientist, "people who care for my soul."

But that's not the end of the story. Dr. Hayner went on to say that soon after that, Carl Sagan was diagnosed with cancer.

He was at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center in Seattle. Near the end of his life, he made the comment, “The believers were the only ones who walked with me all the way.”

The point is not whether Carl Sagan was converted, but it’s about those people, the believers who carried the light of the world into his darkness.

It’s about those believers who could enter Carl Sagan’s cancerous world and stay with him, all the way.

It’s about those believers who see the suffering of the body, but see deeper into the soul to be cared for.

It’s about how we believers know that prayer is more than folded hands and closed eyes and mumbling words.

It’s about those believers being us believers who know what it is to go through hardship and grow through prayer.

“Are any among you suffering?” It’s a question that jumps from the pages of Scripture right into our lives.

Are any among you suffering? James is very aware of the many difficulties faced by his readers. He begins his letter, in fact, writing about it. He says, *“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy...”*

What a bold demand this is that James makes – while suffering, create joy. Is that even possible?

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Alla Campbell, in her book Life Is Goodbye, Life Is Hello, writes, “Suffering itself has no value; it is the use that one makes of suffering, through attitude and action, that can have value.”

That attitude and action, according to James, is prayer. Suffering has value as it leads us to prayer.

Sometimes people say they feel guilty because they either begin to pray or ask for prayer with greater intensity when they hurt.

The fact is we are drawn to prayer by many different paths. In the presence of suffering, which seems to smother us, necessity pushes us where virtue never leads us.

This tends to happen especially when we experience the kind of powerlessness, helplessness, related to a loss over which we had no control – need I say more?

Going through hardship, we grow through prayer.

In this transformation of hardship to prayer we discover what it is to lose our life in order to gain our life. We need to lose life’s answers before we are able to ask life's real questions.

We found ourselves in what someone recently described as becoming members in a “communion of the helpless.”

The author was talking about intercessory prayer, praying for someone else and praying for ourselves going through hardship.

She raised the questions: *Why do we think it matters, and what do we believe it accomplishes?*

She went on to say, “Tragedies like coronavirus or terminal cancer can bring questions like these into sharp relief. We are asked to pray for a person or a community in crisis. A desperate plea for someone we love escapes our lips, half-formed and barely breathed, as the heart races or we feel ourselves go numb.”

So the psalmist knew, as Jesus prayed that psalm from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Our pain can become a powerful force that leads us past the religious clichés and into the heart of prayer. And in the prayerful exploration of our own inner geography, we can discover the goodness and strength hidden there.

James would lead us to turn our hardship into prayer and this happens in four ways: Presence, Mystery, Revelation, and Strength.

Presence – not so much God’s presence, as it is a time for us to be present to God. Not so much speaking so that God can listen, as it is listening so God can speak.

Mystery – not so much using our words to persuade God, as it is realizing that only when words finally fail us can we find a vocabulary to talk with God.

Not so much talking God into doing what we have already decided is best, as it is opening ourselves to the fact that there is no place from which the love of God is absent.

Revelation – not so much focusing on a formula for how prayer works, as it is allowing our experiences, our sufferings to reveal God to us.

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Not so much doing something so that God will understand us better, as it is being open to a better understanding of ourselves.

And Strength – not so much expecting to have it all together standing strong, as it is finding that in our weakness we are able to walk and not faint.

Not so much having certainty, as it is having the courage to live with the unknown.

Presence...Mystery...Revelation...Strength.

We are called to prayer. Even though, at times, our faith is unsure, our trust is tentative, our love is cautious.

But God surrounds us with evidence of amazing grace and we find joy once again.

We can make it, going through hardship, not in our power but in the power of God's abundant love, growing through prayer.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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