

John Eldredge: Don't Give UP

Then Jesus told His disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. — Luke 18:1

I find that line immensely encouraging. I'm grateful Scripture precedes the famous story of the "persistent widow" with that little comment. It's encouraging because Jesus obviously understands that we all have reasons to give up. It's encouraging because in the story He tells, it looks like nothing is working, not for a long time.

One of the reasons I love the Bible is because it is such an honest book.

How many Psalms are basically built around the question, "Where are you God? Why aren't you doing something?"

My wife just called me into the living room. "I have disappointing news," she said. Her eyes were moist. My stomach had that queasy oh no — *what next?* feeling. I braced myself. We've had several rounds of bad news this spring and I just don't know how much more I can take right now. "The radiologist called and gave me the report." I sat down and listened. It wasn't what we were hoping for. It certainly wasn't the report of healing we had been praying for over the course of the past seven months. My heart sank.

"But we prayed."

I know we all have stories like this — stories of disappointment in prayer. We tried, we put our faith in God, but nothing seemed to change. It can be brutal on the heart and on our relationship with God. Prayer creates a terrible bind for us. We long to pray; it's part of our nature. We long to see things change in our world. But then, when prayer doesn't seem to work, it can really knock the wind out of you.

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? — Psalm 13:1-2

Which brings us back to not giving up. Jesus urged us not to give up. But how? I'd like to try and offer a few words of encouragement.

First off, don't go "global." It's an expression I use as a counselor to describe what happens when somebody is upset, and they go from the event that made them upset to everything makes them upset. You know how this works — you forget to feed the cat, and your wife or housemate is mad and they say, "You always forget to feed the cat. You forget to lock the door and you forget to mail the taxes and you...." They go global; they let one disappointment trigger them into "everything is disappointing" when in fact it's just not true.

When Stasi gave me the bad news this morning I wanted to go global; in my disappointment I wanted to say, "Prayer doesn't work. I'm done praying about everything." When the truth is, we have seen stunning answers to prayer over the years, many answers to prayer. No — not all the time. But many times. Yet when my current prayers don't seem to be working, I suddenly I forget all the answers I have seen over the years. I have to catch myself and remember what is true. This is in fact exactly what the Psalmist does, just a few lines later:

But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me. — Psalm 13:5-6

He reminds himself, “God does love me; He has been good to me.” This is heartbreaking, but this is not my total experience of God, not even close. Which brings me to my second lesson: I have to anchor myself in what is true: God is good. He cares immensely. He is involved. When disappointment strikes and my prayers seem to be bouncing off the ceiling, I simply must anchor my heart in these truths or will go down like a sinking ship.

Third, I want to stop and ask why — “why aren’t my prayers working, Lord? What is it I need to know?” Prayer is, after all, a conversation with God. It isn’t supposed to be speech-making, where we come in and have our say and leave before He can say anything in return. The one thing that has changed my prayer life more than any other is asking Jesus, “Lord, what do I pray here?” He can then re-direct my prayers in a far more helpful and effective direction.

Back to the story of the persistent widow — you’ll notice that it is a story about persevering in prayer. Most of the great biblical prayer stories are. How many times did it take Elijah to call down the promised rain? Not once; not twice; eight rounds of all-of-your-heart-soul-mind-and-strength prayer. In Acts chapter 12 James had been seized by Herod and executed. He then arrested Peter and put him in jail and the outcome looked the same. But the story shifts with the phrase,

But the church was praying very earnestly for him. — Acts 12:5

The Greek for “very earnestly” is the same description of the prayers of Jesus in Gethsemane. This is serious prayer. The text also indicates that the church is praying for Peter all night long.

And Peter is rescued.

In humility I don’t think we can begin to discuss the dilemma of “unanswered prayer” until we have learned to pray like the persistent widow, or Elijah, like the church in Acts 12.

One last thought for now: did you notice that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray:

Lord, teach us to pray. — Luke 11:1

It had never crossed my mind that prayer is something to be learned. I assumed it was more like sneezing — you just sort of did it, and God took care of the rest. A very naive view of prayer. You couldn’t get away with that attitude in your marriage, or career, not as a parent, or in anything you enjoy doing. Everything you value in your life you had to learn. And so it is with prayer, especially with prayer. This is our great secret weapon, friends. James says,

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. — James 5:16

If it is, I humbly accept that it is something I want to be trained in.

I understand disappointment in prayer, I really do. I also understand there is nothing my enemy would love more than for me to give up praying. And so I return to the Psalms, and I let them express my heart: both “how long, O Lord?” and “But I trust in Your unfailing love” for You have been good to me. And back to my knees I go.

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