

**SCRIPTURE READING: Psalm 61**

I stood beside his bedside at the hospital. He couldn't hear me—I was there with his son, one of my dear friends. We talked about his dad's condition, about the timeline for his departure to be with Jesus, about how he himself was doing with his father's imminent death. I opened my Bible to this psalm and read it, both for the father and the son.

Because this psalm calls out to God, asking him to lead us to a higher rock, you might think of an on-rushing flood and a boulder in the midst of the stream that juts out as a safe spot; maybe in your mind's eye you see the high ground on the battlefield—Little Round Top at Gettysburg—that commands everything else. Who is our higher rock in the storms, the battles, of life? God is.

Yet where will we ultimately find that place of safety? When we dwell in his tent forever, when we come to the house made not by hands, when we live forever under the shelter of God's wings. Until then, we ask God to prolong our lives, but also the life of eternal King, the Davidic ruler, Jesus, who ever-lives to make intercession for us and who will bring us home to the higher rock from which we will survey all our sorrows in safety and security.

HYMN: "O SAFE TO THE ROCK THAT IS HIGHER THAN I" *Trinity Hymnal 655*

O safe to the Rock that is higher than I
my soul in its conflicts and sorrows would fly;
so sinful, so weary, thine, thine would I be;
thou blest Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in thee.
Hiding in thee, hiding in thee—
thou blest Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in thee.

In the calm of the noontide, in sorrow's lone hour,
in times when temptation casts o'er me its pow'r,
in the tempests of life, on its wide, heaving sea,
thou blest Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in thee.
Hiding in thee, hiding in thee—
thou blest Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in thee.

How oft in the conflict, when pressed by the foe,
I have fled to my refuge and breathed out my woe!
How often when trials like sea billows roll,
have I hidden in thee, O thou Rock of my soul!
Hiding in thee, hiding in thee—
thou blest Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in thee.

PRAYER: (adapted from *Psalms for All Seasons*)

Loving God, you hear your peoples' cry. We turn to you for understanding, comfort, and help. Lead us to the safety of your presence, both now and in our dying day. Grant us to dwell forever under the shelter of your presence. And show us your glory so that we might be sustained in this earthly life. We praise and thank you for your wisdom, strength, and unfailing love, made ours through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

CATECHISM: Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 117

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SCRIPTURE READING: 1 Kings 18:41-46

It had been over three years since it had rained. Think of that! How dry everything would have been! The economic devastation of four harvest cycles with no food—and yet, what could anyone do? No human being has the power to make it rain, no matter what the hucksters who claim to be “rainmakers” say.

But after the false gods were defeated in the duel on Mount Carmel, those very idols that the hucksters claimed had the power over the rain, Elijah began to pray. Seven times, he bowed down before God; seven times, he sent his servant to scan the skies. The final time, “a little cloud like a man’s hand” rose from the sea. A storm cloud was coming! “In a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain!” (18:45). And Elijah ran in the rain in the power of the Spirit.

Why did it not rain? Because God stopped the heavens. Why did rain come? Because God sent the rain. What made the difference? Elijah prayed. God bowed down his ear to the man bowed before him, heard, and answered. What might make the difference in your world? Maybe your prayers?

“BOW DOWN THINE EAR, O LORD, AND HEAR” *Trinity Hymnal 91* (Tune: Gift of Love)

Bow down thine ear, O Lord, and hear, for I am poor and great my need;
preserve my soul, for thee I fear; O God, thy trusting servant heed.

O Lord, be merciful to me, for all the day to thee I cry;
rejoice thy servant, for to thee I lift my soul, O Lord Most High.

For thou, O Lord, art good and kind, and ready to forgive thou art;
abundant mercy they shall find who call on thee with all their heart.

O Lord, incline thine ear to me, my voice of supplication heed;
in trouble I will cry to thee, for thou wilt answer when I plead.

There is no God but thee alone, nor works like thine, O Lord Most High;
all nations shall surround thy throne and their Creator glorify.

In all thy deeds how great thou art! Thou one true God, thy way make clear;
teach me with undivided heart to trust thy truth, thy name to fear.

PRAYER:

Almighty God, forgive me for believing that my prayers are inconsequential in your economy. Story after story in the Bible, men and women prayed, you bowed down your ear, and you acted—and yet, I tend to think that was for those times or even worse, I believe that those are make-believe tales that don’t happen in the “real world.” Forgive me and grant me a renewed energy to pray, bowed down before you, time and again until you send the answer: sweet grace pouring down on me like the rain. I pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.

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SCRIPTURE READING: Daniel 6

This passage finds its parallel with Daniel 3. In the earlier scene, Daniel's three friends refuse to pray to their God through the mediation of Nebuchadnezzar's great golden statue—in effect, they refused to act as though Nebuchadnezzar was god-like, a mediator between God and men. The same is going on here. The edict is passed that prayers should only be offered through the mediation of Darius the Mede, which has the net effect of making Darius god-like, a mediator between God and men.

Just as for Daniel's friends, such a requirement was anathema. And so, what does he do? Does he give up praying? Not at all. As Old Testament scholar Ralph Davis observes, we learn a lot about Daniel's prayer life. You see the *defiance* of prayer: "When he knew...he had windows...open." Daniel prayed anyway and didn't hide his praying. Notice also the *focus* of prayer—he prayed "toward Jerusalem" in line with 1 Kings 8:46-51. His *posture* of prayer, "he got down on his knees," and *consistency*, "three times a day," were also significant. Above all, the *content* of his prayer was central: "making petition and plea" about his people, likely the prayer that one finds in Daniel 9.

What stops us from praying? I doubt that any of us will face the threat of death for prayer. How might Daniel's prayer life serve as a prod to our own praying? After all, our great God invites us to come and to make our petitions through Jesus, the one mediator between God and men (1 Tim 2:5). Will we pray?

HYMN: "HOW GREAT IS OUR GOD" Tomlin

The splendor of a King, clothed in majesty— let all the earth rejoice, all the earth rejoice.
He wraps himself in light, and darkness tries to hide and trembles at his voice, trembles at his voice.

How great is our God, sing with me how great is our God, and all will see how great, how great is our God.

Age to age he stands, and time is in his hands, beginning and the end, beginning and the end.
The Godhead, Three in One, Father, Spirit, Son, the Lion and the Lamb, the Lion and the Lamb.

How great is our God, sing with me how great is our God, and all will see how great, how great is our God.

He's the name above all names; he is worthy to be praised. My heart will sing how great is our God.
You're the name above all names; you are worthy of all praise, and my heart will sing how great is our God.

How great is our God, sing with me how great is our God, and all will see how great, how great is our God.

PRAYER: (adapted from Matthew Henry, *A Way to Pray*)

O Lord, we do believe that you are great and that you have made a way into your presence through Jesus Christ. Grant us grace to sustain a lifetime of prayer. To that end, grant us such a sight of you—your glory, your excellency, your power, your holiness, your justice, your love—that we will desire you above all things. And if a day ever comes when we would have to make a choice between you and our own lives, may we have the grace and strength to choose you. You are the one true God, revealed to us in your Word, promising to hear us. We believe you through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.

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SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 6:5-15

The Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield once told a story about D. L. Moody. While Moody was staying in London with a Scottish family, a young man came to speak with Moody about prayer. The young man simply could not understand what prayer was and how it operated in relation to natural laws. "What is prayer?" the young man asked. "I can't tell what you mean by it!"

Before Moody could answer, they heard a child's voice in the hall, a little girl about ten years old; she came running down the stairs and paused when she saw the guests. Her Scots father told her, "Come here, Jenny, and tell this gentleman, what is prayer?"

Jenny didn't understand what was going on, but she understood that her daddy wanted her to say her catechism. She drew herself up, folded her hands, and said in her clear childish voice: "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies."

"Ah! That's the catechism," Moody exclaimed. "Thank God for that catechism!"

And thank God for the Lord's Prayer. Because this prayer is a kind of catechism for how to order our desires before God. Three petitions for the advance of God's Kingdom in his world: vindicate your name, advance your kingdom, grant your will on earth. Three petitions for the move of God's rule in our lives: provide what we need, grant us forgiveness, keep us safe from evil. And three truths about God in relation to everything: his kingdom, his power, his glory. Is there anything else we desire? Is there anything else for which we pray?

HYMN: "COME, MY SOUL, THY SUIT PREPARE" *Trinity Hymnal* 628

Come, my soul, thy suit prepare: Jesus loves to answer prayer;
he himself has bid thee pray, therefore will not say thee nay; therefore will not say thee nay.

Thou art coming to a King, large petitions with thee bring;
for his grace and pow'r are such, none can ever ask too much; none can ever ask too much.

With my burden I begin: "Lord, remove this load of sin;
let thy blood, for sinners spilt, set my conscience free from guilt; set my conscience free from guilt."

"Lord, I come to thee for rest, take possession of my breast;
there thy blood-bought right maintain, and without a rival reign; and without a rival reign."

"While I am a pilgrim here, let thy love my spirit cheer;
as my Guide, my Guard, my Friend, lead me to my journey's end; lead me to my journey's end."

"Show me what I have to do, ev'ry hour my strength renew:
let me live a life of faith, let me die thy people's death; let me die thy people's death."

PRAYER: (pray in unison if doing this with others)

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For yours is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory, Amen.

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SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 18:1-8

The Bible tells us clearly that this parable is about praying and not losing heart. But how does it do this? It tells us about a judge and a widow. This widow is the least of society—she has no protection, no power, no pull. She demands justice, but the judge refuses to even hear the case. Yet, she keeps demanding, keeps asking, keeps pestering, so much so that the judge gives in “so that she won’t eventually come and attack me” (18:5 NIV). Imagine that! A weak widow frightening a powerful judge simply because she kept on asking.

Look, though: Jesus argues from the far lesser to the greater. The parable’s judge is a harsh, uncaring soul; but our God is our Father, one who loves us and promises to hear us. And the parable’s widow is a weak, powerless individual; but we are beloved children of the King. And if the harsh, uncaring judge gives justice when he was asked repeatedly by one who is powerless, *how much more* will our God and Father hear us, his children, when we ask him to set the world to rights again? Shouldn’t that give new energy and fuel to our prayers? Will we believe what Jesus says?

HYMN: “MY FAITH LOOKS UP TO THEE” *Trinity Hymnal 528*

My faith looks up to thee, thou Lamb of Calvary, Savior divine:
now hear me while I pray, take all my guilt away, O let me from this day be wholly thine.

May thy rich grace impart strength to my fainting heart, my zeal inspire;
as thou hast died for me, O may my love to thee pure, warm, and changeless be, a living fire.

While life’s dark maze I tread, and griefs around me spread, be thou my guide;
bid darkness turn to day, wipe sorrow’s tears away, nor let me ever stray from thee aside.

When ends life’s transient dream, when death’s cold, sullen stream shall o’er me roll,
blest Savior, then, in love, fear and distrust remove; O bear me safe above, a ransomed soul.

PRAYER:

Lord, all too often, when we pray once or twice and we don’t see you work, we give up. Forgive us for failing to believe the truth about you. We conclude wrongly that you don’t hear us or don’t care; actually, you love us passionately and are eager to hear us. We think wrongly that you are a harsh judge; actually, you are a loving Father who gave your Son for our salvation. We see ourselves as weak and powerless outcasts; actually, you tell us that we are your beloved children. Give us fresh fuel to ask and ask again for justice in our world—to set the world to rights, starting with us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 18:9-14

While the purpose of this parable is not prayer—it tells us that Jesus told this parable “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt” (18:9)—yet it does teach us something about prayer. For the tax collector’s prayer demonstrates the three things that are true of every good prayer. First, it recognizes God as God. The Pharisee used God’s name, but the prayer was utterly self-referential. Meanwhile, the tax collector recognized that God is the holy judge of the world. The prayer was God-focused, not self-focused.

Second, the prayer recognized the truth about the one praying: a sinner he is. The Pharisee was telling God about how good he was, but the tax collector recognized what was true: he was a sinner standing in the presence of a holy God. Every good prayer works from this basic stance. But third, and finally, the prayer recognized what was needed: mercy. And that’s what we all need, every day, in every situation; we need God’s own mercy.

This is the good prayer God always answers: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

HYMN: “GOD, BE MERCIFUL TO ME” Miner (also *Trinity Hymnal* 486)

God, be merciful to me, on thy grace I rest my plea; plenteous in compassion thou, blot out my transgressions now; wash me, make me pure within, cleanse, O cleanse me from my sin.

My transgressions I confess, grief and guilt my soul oppress; I have sinned against thy grace and provoked thee to thy face; I confess thy judgment just, speechless, I thy mercy trust.

I am evil, born in sin; thou desirest truth within. Thou alone my Savior art, teach thy wisdom to my heart; make me pure, thy grace bestow, wash me whiter than the snow.

Broken, humbled to the dust by thy wrath and judgment just, let my contrite heart rejoice and in gladness hear thy voice; from my sins O hide thy face, blot them out in boundless grace.

Gracious God, my heart renew, make my spirit right and true; cast me not away from thee, let thy Spirit dwell in me; thy salvation’s joy impart, steadfast make my willing heart.

Sinners then shall learn from me and return, O God, to thee; Savior, all my guilt remove, and my tongue shall sing thy love; touch my silent lips, O Lord, and my mouth shall praise accord.

PRAYER: (from *Piercing Heaven: Prayers of the Puritans*)

Create in me, O Christ, a new heart, and renew in me a right spirit. Then you will see how I will serve you as your new creature, in a new life, after a new way, with a new tongue and new manners, with new words and new works to the glory of your name, and the winning of other sinful souls to your faith. Keep me forever, O my Savior, from the torments of hell and the tyranny of the devil. And when I am to depart this life, send your angels to carry me, as they did the soul of Lazarus, into your kingdom. Receive me into that joyful paradise you promised to the penitent thief, who at his last gasp upon the cross begged for your mercy and admission into your kingdom. Grant this, O Christ, for your own name’s sake, Amen.

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SCRIPTURE READING: James 5:13-20

The way we work out a life of patience is that we keep on praying. When we are suffering, what should we do? When we are cheerful, what should we do? When we are sick, what should we do? When we sin, what should we do? Pray, pray, pray. Sometimes prayers of praise, sometimes the prayers of others, sometimes prayers of confession—but pray all the same.

Why? Because God uses our prayers in ways that are beyond our understanding in order to demonstrate his power: “the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (5:16). As with Elijah, whom God used as part of his judgment and salvation toward Israel, so with us—God uses those who live patiently, who pray for his purposes of judgment and salvation in our lives and the lives of others. That’s why we should keep on praying.

HYMN: “WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS” *Trinity Hymnal* 629

What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!
 What a privilege to carry ev’rything to God in prayer!
 O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
 all because we do not carry ev’rything to God in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?
 We should never be discouraged: take it to the Lord in prayer!
 Can we find a friend so faithful, who will all our sorrows share?
 Jesus knows our ev’ry weakness—take it to the Lord in prayer!

Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?
 Precious Savior, still our refuge—take it to the Lord in prayer!
 Do thy friends despise, forsake thee? Take it to the Lord in prayer!
 In his arms he’ll take and shield thee; thou wilt find a solace there.

PRAYER: (adapted from F. B. Meyer’s *Daily Prayers*)

Lord, I confess that far too often I am prayerless, not because I don’t know how to pray, but because I don’t want to pray. I want to fix things: to stop being sick, to stop sinning, to stop being sad. Yet, you tell me that the way forward is not to fix it, but to pray about it. Forgive me for my stubborn belief in my own sovereignty; turn my heart gently to trust in you as the great King of my life and my world. I ask this in Jesus’ name, Amen.

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