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ANOTHER LESSON ON PRAYER

Psalm 143

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When I was in high school, I had a couple of English teachers who drilled into us the basics of English grammar. We learned about verb tenses, participles, infinitives, gerunds, and other parts of speech. I assure you that when the teacher announced another lesson on these subjects, we students did not cheer. We groaned and thought, "Why do we have to study this stuff?"

But when I got to seminary and studied Greek, many of my classmates didn't have a clue what a participle or infinitive are. The seminary had to put together a remedial English class for these students just so the Greek instructor didn't have to get bogged down with teaching basic English. And now that I write sermons each week, I am very thankful for those high school English teachers who forced us to learn the basics of English grammar.

We come today, class, to another lesson on prayer. It is similar, although not identical, to the lesson we had last time in Psalm 142. You may groan and think, "Why do we have to have *another* lesson on prayer?" Why did God put all of these psalms in the Bible when so many of them are similar? The psalmist is in a difficult trial; he cries out to God; God answers him; he praises God. Maybe a few of these are needed, but why do we need so many repeated lessons on prayer?

The answer is that not many of us handle trials rightly. I have seen many that profess to be Christians, when they encounter various trials, get angry with God and fall away from the faith. Some turn to worldly solutions or false teaching. I've told you before about a couple in my church in California where the wife suffered from chronic back pain. I was chatting with the husband about it when he told me that they had been going to a Science of Mind type of group, and that it was providing his wife with some relief. When I told the husband that these groups held to heretical beliefs, he indignantly replied, "My wife was in pain. This group gives her relief from pain. We're going there!" I never saw them again.

In the parable of the sower (Mark 4:3-20), Jesus warned that two out of the four types of soils would fall away because of trials. The seed sown on the rocky soil at first received the word with joy, but when affliction or persecution arose because of the word, they fell away. The seed sown among the thorns took longer to fail. But eventually the thorns, which represent “the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful” (4:19).

As I understand it, the only type of soil representing true believers is that which endures and brings forth fruit. False believers reveal their true colors by falling away or returning to the world under trials. So we need to know how to take our trials to the Lord in prayer so that we endure and grow, rather than fall away. That’s why Psalm 143 is in the Bible, because we need this additional lesson on how to pray correctly when we face severe trials.

I emphasize that this is a lesson for those who, like David, can say, “You are my God” (v. 10) and “I am your servant” (v. 12; cf. v. 2). Prayer is not a method or technique that just anybody can use to manipulate God to get what he wants. Rather, prayer is for those who have repented of their sins, trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior from God’s wrath, and who are seeking to follow Him as Lord. To apply this vital lesson on prayer, you must know God as *your* God and you must be obedient to Him as His servant.

We can’t identify for sure the situation behind this psalm. The LXX (Greek O.T.) and some ancient versions add to the inscription that it was when David was fleeing from his son Absalom. If that is the situation, it may explain his painful request (v. 2) that God not enter into judgment with him, adding, “for in Your sight no man living is righteous.” Absalom’s rebellion was a direct consequence of David’s sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:11). So David may be connecting his present trial with his own previous failure. But the reference (v. 3) to dwelling “in dark places, like those who have long been dead,” sounds more like the situation in Psalm 142, where David was hiding from Saul in the cave.

But whatever the exact situation, the language is general enough that we all can identify with David. He was in a severe trial, where he desperately needed God to answer. Whether your trial is a life-threatening disease, the need for a job, a difficult person, a

powerful sin that keeps defeating you, or whatever, David's lesson on prayer will be helpful to you. To sum it up,

We are to face overwhelming trials with heartfelt, humble, believing, obedient prayer that seeks not only relief from the trial, but also to know God better.

The psalm falls into two halves, divided by the musical notation, "Selah" (v. 6). In the first half (1-6), David lays out his problem to the Lord, crying out to Him to hear and answer. In the second half (7-12), he presents his prayer, repeatedly crying out to God to answer him and to teach him to do His will before it is too late. Since a number of the themes are repeated because of the intensity of David's feelings, I thought it best not to work through the psalm verse by verse from first to last, but rather somewhat thematically, under three main headings.

1. Being godly, or even being one of God's chosen leaders, does not exempt us from severe trials.

Although David was God's servant (2, 12) and was a man after God's heart (1 Sam. 13:14), God allowed David to be pushed to the brink, where he despaired of life itself. Many times he thought that Saul would succeed in killing him. As he told Jonathan (1 Sam. 20:3), "... there is hardly a step between me and death." During Absalom's rebellion, David's army would not let him go into battle, because they knew that he was the main target (2 Sam. 18:2-4).

Note how he describes his situation in Psalm 143. He says (vv. 3-4), "For the enemy has persecuted my soul; he has crushed my life to the ground; he has made me dwell in dark places, like those who have long been dead. Therefore my spirit is overwhelmed within me; my heart is appalled within me." Derek Kidner (*Psalms 73-150* [IVP], p. 475) observes, "Every phrase here is so heavy with distress, that no sufferer need feel unique in what he experiences. And the similarity of these terms to those that describe our Lord's emotions (*cf.* Mt. 26:37 ff.; Heb. 4:15 ff.) remind us that none need feel himself alone, or less than fully understood."

This lesson, that God does not exempt any of us from trials, is especially needed now because of the popular, but false "health and wealth" teaching. Some of the pastors of the largest churches in America promote this error, and it is spreading rapidly in Africa

and other places. The claim is, God wants you healthy and wealthy. You don't have to suffer illness or poverty. Just claim your healing or that new car by faith. And, if you'll send your generous gift to us, we'll pray for your miracle! Suckers are born every minute!

But Scripture clearly exposes the falsehood of this error, which appeals to the flesh. God uses trials so that we may share His holiness (Heb. 12:5-11). The apostle Paul shares (2 Cor. 1:8-9),

For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.

He goes on (2 Cor. 4:7-10) to explain that we have the treasure of the gospel...

... in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

Several more times in this letter he tells of the difficult trials that had come upon him as an apostle (2 Cor. 6:4-10; 11:23-33; 12:7-10). The Savior, who suffered horribly at the hands of sinners, warned us (John 15:20), "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (also see John 16:2). The apostle Peter warned (1 Pet. 4:12), "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you." So don't fall for the health and wealth lie. Being godly does not exempt anyone from trials. But, you need to know how to respond when you encounter such trials.

2. Heartfelt, humble, believing, obedient prayer is how to respond when you face severe trials.

In this life threatening crisis, David turned to God. Again, this is *not* an automatic response. As we saw from the parable of the sower, rather than turning to God in trials, many turn away from Him. But the more intense the trial, the more diligently you need to

seek the Lord. But, you need to seek Him in the right way. David here teaches us four vital lessons about prayer:

A. Prayer should be heartfelt.

David's heartfelt cry bleeds through the entire psalm. It begins (v. 1), "Hear my prayer, O Lord, give ear to my supplications! Answer me in Your faithfulness, in Your righteousness!" In verse 6 he cries, "I stretch out my hands to You; my soul longs for You, as a parched land." He continues, "answer me" (v. 7), "let me hear Your lovingkindness in the morning" (v. 8), "deliver me" (v. 9), and, "cut off my enemies and destroy all those who afflict my soul" (v. 12). He's a desperate man, crying out for deliverance before his enemies kill him.

While we may rarely be in such life-threatening situations, David's prayer teaches us that we will not pray as we ought unless we recognize our weakness and need and, therefore, our total dependence on God. Many unbelievers go to their graves without the Lord because they are oblivious to the peril of judgment by a holy, all-knowing God, who will judge them by His perfect standard. In fact, the greatest dangers are often those that we do not perceive. As you know, people die of carbon monoxide poisoning because they cannot smell or see that deadly gas. Satan lulls many into breathing the deadly gas of good works. They think, "I'm a pretty good person. I've never deliberately hurt or killed anyone. I'm not a child molester. So I should be good enough for heaven."

Even as believers, we often do not realize our own inadequacy, and so we do not depend on the Lord in prayer. We assume that we can handle things on our own, unless we get into a huge problem. So the Lord sends overwhelming trials so that we will not trust in ourselves, but in God, through heartfelt prayer.

B. Prayer should be humble.

David asks God to answer in His faithfulness and righteousness. I understand him to mean, "Answer me according to Your faithful promises to your people and in accordance with Your way of exonerating the righteous and punishing the wicked." But no sooner are the words out of his mouth than he is caught up short. He realizes, "But I'm not completely innocent, either." His prayer would have brought judgment on himself! So he quickly adds (v. 2),

“And do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no man living is righteous.”

As you know, there are several psalms where David pleads with God on the basis of his own innocence (Ps. 7:3-5, 8; 18:20). Willem VanGemeren (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 5:852) explains, “Both expressions are valid, depending on the context in which one finds himself. The confession of innocence is appropriate when one is insulted and persecuted for righteousness’s sake, and the confession of guilt is proper when confronted with one’s own frailties.”

Here, David is painfully aware of his own sins. So he asks God not to bring him to the bar of His absolute righteousness. Rather, he appeals to God’s lovingkindness (v. 8), which is His loyal covenant love. He asks the Lord in His lovingkindness to cut off and destroy his enemies (v. 12). As I pointed out in our study of Psalm 136, there is obviously a special love that God has for His chosen people. David asks God (v. 11), “For the sake of Your name, revive me.” In other words, he appeals to the attributes of God (His name) and to His covenant love for His people. That’s why we pray “in Jesus’ name,” which means, “on the basis of all that He is and His covenant promises to us.” We don’t pray on the basis of our merits or good deeds.

C. Prayer should be believing.

David affirms his trust in the Lord (v. 8). He bases his prayer, as we have seen, on God’s faithfulness and righteousness. He can always be trusted to be faithful and righteous. There is faith behind David’s confession, “You are my God” (v. 10). David strengthened his faith by meditating on all of God’s doings and work from days of old (v. 5). If we come to God in prayer, we must come in faith that He is able to answer us (Mark 11:22-24; Heb. 11:6; James 1:5-6). Prayer must be heartfelt, humble, and believing.

D. Prayer should be obedient to God’s will.

That is, it must flow from a heart that is ready to do God’s will. We cannot pray and expect God to answer if we are unwilling to follow Him completely. If we’re just using prayer to get out of our crisis, and then we put God back on the shelf and go back to acting as lord of our own lives, we are really practicing idolatry.

Idolaters try to use their god to get what they want. Followers of the living and true God submit to Him even through trials.

Also, whenever you're in a trial caused by a sinful person who is trying to get you, it is easy to react against their sin by sinning yourself. He angrily threatens you, so you yell back threats at him. He cheated you, so you connive to cheat him. He lied about you, so you lie about him. So it is especially important that you be on guard against this. With a teachable heart, pray that you will know and be obedient to God's will in the trial.

Thus David here prays that he might know and do God's will. He asks (v. 8), "Teach me the way in which I should walk." Then he goes a step further and asks (v. 10a), "Teach me to do Your will." He's asking not just that he will *know* God's way or will, but also that he will know how to *do* it." He doesn't want to be just a hearer of the word, but also a doer (James 1:22). He adds (v. 10b), "Let Your good Spirit lead me on level ground." This is similar to the request in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:13a), "do not lead us into temptation."

Derek Kidner (p. 476) points out that David's three requests for guidance (vv. 8-10) each has its own nuance. The first ("Teach me the way in which I should walk," 8b) has an individual flavor, showing that each of us is uniquely placed and called. The second ("Teach me to do Your will," 10a), "settles the priorities, making the goal not self-fulfillment but pleasing God and finishing His work." The third ("Let Your good Spirit lead me on level ground," 10b), "speaks with the humility of one who knows his need of shepherding, not merely of having the right way pointed out to him." The request for level ground "implies the admission that one is prone to stumble, not only to stray."

Thus David teaches us that our prayers in times of crisis must be heartfelt, humble, believing, and obedient. But, we also need the right aim in prayer.

3. Our aim in prayer should not only be to gain relief from our trials, but also to know God better.

All too often, our prayer in a time of crisis is, "Lord, get me out of this and make it snappy!" David does pray like that here: "Answer me quickly, O Lord, my spirit fails" (v. 7). He is on the

brink of becoming like those who go down to the pit (v. 7), that is, who die. So he needs help fast. But he also realizes that this is a time to go deeper with the Lord.

- A. There is nothing wrong with pleading with God for quick relief from our trials.

David prayed that the child which he conceived with Bathsheba not die, but God did not grant his request (2 Sam. 12:15-20). King Hezekiah prayed that God would heal him of what Isaiah had said would be a fatal illness, and God granted him 15 more years of life (2 Kings 20:1-7). The apostle Paul asked God three times to take away the thorn in his flesh, whatever it was (2 Cor. 12:8). But when God told Paul (12:9), "My grace is sufficient for you," Paul submitted to God's purpose in the trial. Even Jesus prayed in the Garden (Matt. 26:39), "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will." So it is not wrong to pray that God would remove the trial, as long as we submit to His sovereign will. But, also ...

- B. In our desperate cries for relief, we must not lose focus of the greater purpose, to come to know God better.

David does not just cry out for God to save him from his enemies. He also cries out *for God Himself*. He meditated on God's doings and on the work of His hands (v. 5). In other words, he went back and rehearsed how God has acted on behalf of His people in the past. He thought about how God has delivered His people. He meditated on God's work in creation, which displays His power and His infinite understanding. He wanted to know God and His ways more deeply.

Also, David stretched out his hands to God (v. 6), as a little child reaches up for his parent to pick him up. He wants that intimate contact. He adds (v. 6), "My soul longs for You, as a parched land" (see Ps. 63:1). He asks God not to hide His face from him (v. 7). He wants to hear God's lovingkindness in the morning (v. 8). He lifts up his soul to God (v. 8). He takes refuge in God Himself (v. 9). He prays for God to revive him (v. 11). In all of this, his repeated prayer is "to You." He was seeking God Himself, not just relief from his enemy.

It is very easy in a time of intense trial just to focus on the need for relief, rather than to use the trial to get to know God better. Often, we ask, "Lord, why is this happening to me?" But the better question is, "Lord, how can I get to know You better through this trial? Lord, give me a teachable heart, so that I come to know You better. Lord, don't let me miss the lessons that You want me to learn!" As John Piper prayed when he was diagnosed with cancer, "Lord, don't waste this cancer on me!" He wanted to learn what God was trying to teach him.

Conclusion

Let's review: Why do we need this repeated lesson on prayer? We need it because we all face trials, some of which are overwhelming. We need it because false teachers appeal to our flesh, promising us instant health and wealth if we will only believe. We need it so that we can learn how to pray in a time of trials: with heartfelt, humble, believing, and obedient prayer. We need it so that we aim in our prayers not only to get relief from our trials, but also to grow to know God better. Don't waste your trial! Let it drive you to God in prayer.

Application Questions

1. How can a teaching as patently false as the "health and wealth" error entice so many? How can we help a person caught up with it?
2. If a person turns away from the Lord because of a trial, should we encourage him (her) to examine whether he is in the faith?
3. Does praying in faith mean that we believe that God *will* deliver us from this trial, or that He *is able* to deliver us? See Daniel 3:17-18.
4. What are some ways that you have come to know God more deeply through trials? How can you help others do the same?

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