

*“Even If Prayers Feel Unanswered, God is with You”*

Based on Matthew 26:36-44 and Philippians 2:5-11

Delivered on April 5, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

Three times Jesus prayed for the cup to be passed from Him. Three times He asked that He did not have to go upon that cross. In this passage, we see a very human side of Jesus, one that may not know sin – He still submits to the will of God – but a human side that knows fear and anxiety, worry and that deep-seated pain of uncertainty.

We are all getting in touch with our human side, or at least these human sides, of late. You see, there is a great deal of fear and anxiety, worry and uncertainty. These Holy Week texts are easy this year to illustrate with real life, because these texts speak to what we feel in this pandemic, as we navigate a new normal in light of the COVID-19 threat. How many countless Christians are praying right now? Praying for an end to this virus, for it to disappear, and yet the numbers keep rising.

In the face of all that seems to not be working as more people get sick, more people die, know that some things are working – because mortality rates stable, as social distancing continues to keep the virus from the most vulnerable. Washing hands is still working, as this is the best defense we have. Masks help some. And I believe prayer is working, because it is in prayer, that we submit to God’s will and find ways to help, even if it is just by washing our hands and by staying home as much as possible.

Prayer is a 2-way form of communication, not in that we expect to hear an audible voice, but God uses our awareness of what we are praying for, to shape us to His will. I think sometimes it is easy to dismiss Jesus’ walk to the cross because of His divinity. We think that, well, since He is God, He knows it’s all going to work out. But in a text we did not read today, Philippians 2, verses 5 to 11. The Apostle Paul answers this to say that yes, Jesus is God, but unlike the stories of false gods, He did not exploit it, but emptied Himself to be a slave, a human being, humbled, but connected to both His divinity and His humanity by obedience, literally listening, it seems to the Spirit, even to the point of death, death on a cross.

The Jesus in Gethsemane is divine, but has submitted to our human limits, and so, He cannot escape the fear and trembling of facing His own mortality, so He prays for that to be taken away, yet humbles Himself to accept it, to trust that the One with whom He is united – God the Father – is still in control, and will never forsake Him.

When you think your prayers are not being heard, remember these prayers of Jesus. He prayed three times that the cup be taken from Him and it was not answered, at least it was not answered in the way he wanted it to be in that moment. Instead, the complete plan of God was something far greater, that even though there would be pain and suffering, that there would be a shameful death hanged on a tree, a resurrection was coming – new life.

We are in a Good Friday moment around the world right now, and we are praying for each other, finding out loved ones have this disease, and we are feeling like what we are praying goes unanswered. But let me assure you, as author Tony Campolo who visited us last October said, “It’s Friday now, but Sunday is coming.”

When we pray, we connect ourselves to the God of Resurrection, the One who renews us in this life, and who will raise the faithful on the last day. When we feel that our prayers are not being heard, we are building our communion both with God, and those who we are praying for each day. Prayers are answered, but Prayer's first responsibility, is to change us.

So, as you look around and struggle with change, pain and suffering all around us, hold fast to the truth that God is listening, Jesus shares in what we go through, and the Holy Spirit is at work, renewing us, guiding us, even praying for us, even when we struggle with our faith, yet still do our best to pray. Do not be discouraged, but trust in God's will to keep praying, because even if your prayer feels unanswered, God is with you, strengthening you, and helping you to endure. Amen.

*"You're Not Abandoned, You're Called to Witness"*

Based on Matthew 27:45-56, Psalm 22 and Philippians 2:5-11

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Earlier I said to you that God is with you, even when you feel your prayers are unanswered, and I pointed to one of the most human moments in the story of Jesus. And Jesus, despite His pleas to have the cup taken from Him, goes willingly to fulfill the will of God on the cross. But at the apex, as death is drawing near, He says, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" "*Eli, Eli, lema sabbachtani!*" in Aramaic.

These words are gut wrenching for us, because how could even Jesus say this? Critics of Christianity have pointed to this as Jesus revealing He was not divine, because they question how God could feel abandoned by God. But there are two things at play here for us to remember. First is that the words of Paul matter here again. Unlike the Roman gods when they took human form, Jesus was emptied of power to exploit, finding His power in obedience to God and submission to being human.

What's more, that cry of dereliction as it is known, "Why have you forsaken me?" Was not original to Jesus – He is quoting Psalm 22. It was common for Jewish believers in Jesus's time to memorize Psalms. They memorized the Psalms of Praise for the Passover dinner. They didn't have books they could read from to recite them. They memorized psalms of confession for the temple. The Psalms were their prayer book, and it was a memorized book, passed on in families and synagogues.

Often, a leader would recite the first line of a Psalm for followers to finish it. Imagine then, that this is what Jesus has done here, crying out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" After we are done, read the whole Psalm 22 for yourself, imagine you are at the foot of the cross, hearing Jesus start it. And look at those final lines in the Psalm.

Verses 29-31 say, "to him indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down. Before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him. Posterity – those who come after him – will serve him, future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it."

God has not abandoned the one who cries out, but carried them through to redeem all, even the dead, even those alive now, and even those yet unborn are delivered, and they will say that this one who seemed forsaken, delivered them. Looking at the fullness of this text and we see Jesus in the text, we see his life, death and resurrection as a deliverance, a sign to all that God wants us to see.

The Philippians text closes with Jesus receiving the name above every name, meaning that He resumed having the name of God, so every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess, that Jesus is Lord – One with the God of Israel – and that saying so, is to the glory of, not to take away from, God the Father.

At the end of what we read from Matthew, we find that only the women were there, only the women actually saw Jesus die, and next week, they saw the empty tomb. They were the final witnesses, but they stayed faithful, going to His tomb, and so they were the 1st witnesses too, to the glory of God in Jesus. Let us be like these women, as we pray in our sorrow, and stay faithful to witness the glory that is coming. Amen.