

Wisdom of Suffering and Prayer

Psalm 19: 7-14 James 5: 13-20 Pastor Lentz

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This week when Pope Francis has been in the news so much and people are shown to be taking their faith seriously by going to services where he is speaking it can be a moving experience. We all have a greater sense of how powerful our faith is and how seeing someone else's faith impacts us. I have never heard so many positive comments about faith as during the last week. People have been clearly identifying with and appreciative of Francis for demonstrating his faith in so many positive ways. Not just in what he says but riding in a Fiat instead of a limousine, eating with the poor, and hugging people who need a hug. You know he hugged John Boehner, and it appeared to mean a lot to Boehner. The looks on people's faces when they were greeted by the Pope said it all. They were allowing themselves to feel encouraged. They were feeling their faith vindicated by the righteous acts of a man representing the faith.

That is in part what happens for me when I study the Bible. It is what the Bible says will happen to us. I feel encouraged. Revitalized and even spoken to personally by God through the act of reading the Bible. The more closely I study the Bible the more I see it to be incredibly amazing and the more that I feel that encouragement. These two passages are both good examples where it is easy to see the beauty and wisdom in the Scriptures. We will only have time to briefly examine the beginnings of them. However, hopefully learning about these verses will add to any positive feelings that you have been having watching faith be respected and acted upon in a positive way.

The passage in James tells us to pray if we are suffering. Before when I read this passage it never hit me how brilliant it is beyond the obvious.

Obviously to pray when suffering and asking for God to help us is a good idea. However, it never occurred to me that even the act of prayer would help us. It is more than God doing it because we ask it is because God built into the act of prayer a blessing for us all along. The act itself will help calm us and that alone lowers pain, and gives us a sense of comfort. But more than that it also uses the act of suffering to be a catalyst for our getting closer to God. When suffering we tell God what it is that has been bothering us, and that leads to us feeling better. It helps us to identify what it is that has been bothering us. It brings to mind God's law and all of the scriptures. It also is going to get our unconscious mind to be seeking solutions. It is ingenious. It might even lead us to feeling cheerful.

In the next verse we are told that if we are cheerful we are to sing Psalms. If you sing Psalms when you are cheerful you will also have a very positive feeling that you are attaching to the Psalms. So the next time that you go to the Psalms and need comfort some of the good feeling that you attached by having sung them will also be there to soften whatever it is that you were needing comfort from. It is as if this passage in James is giving us a formula to take better care of ourselves when suffering and when not. It is even encouraging an act that is like a squirrel burring nuts for the winter. Singing the Psalms when cheerful is certainly putting back for yourself in the future some positive feelings.

The third line in the passage is even better and I never saw it before. Sure I have read this passage hundreds of times, but I never saw the connection of deep wisdom and health that it is offering. It says if anyone is sick, let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil, in the name of the Lord. Before I would have looked at it from the eyes of a modern person and either believed that it didn't happen or it only happened then, or on special occasions that no one could count on. It would have been something that I would have had difficulty with. I wouldn't have had an answer for it. In fact, I

would have struggled with it because I wouldn't want to be required or encouraging others to do this because I would know that would lead to disappointment. It would when done with a modern mindset.

While studying this passage this week and reading a psychology book about nonverbal communication something happened and I realized more of the brilliance of this verse. By calling on the elders of the church to pray over you, there are several things that are going to happen, even without God's intervention. First, asking for others to pray over you is going to change how you feel toward whatever it has been that was bothering you. Your action of asking changes things. It is one thing to ask one person, or someone who is related to you to pray for you. It is even another thing to ask the minister to pray for you, but it is really another to ask people in the Church to pray, over you, not just in a service but come to you and pray over you. Doing that would connect you to the elders of the Church. It would be demonstrating your willingness to be close to them. If they were truly people who took their faith seriously as most Elders would they would probably even pray that their prayers would be helpful. Their very mindset and desire for you to recover would be an instrument that God could use to impact you toward health. It has only taken us a little over 2,000 years to figure that out in Psychology. But imagine how impressed I was with the passage when I realized that it contained something so powerfully positive intentionally.

Unfortunately, we often don't do things like that until the situation is dire. I suspect it would be much more effective to treat prayer more like people of that day were. It was so commonplace that it would be a compliment to the Elders that you wanted them to pray over you. It would be a compliment to you that they would want to, and it would be a compliment to the Church that both you and the Elders would be so willing to be that intimate. That type of intimacy enlivens the church, the individuals doing it and enlivens faith. Of course we could pray

more often and with more emotion. I hope to. I haven't been as willing to pray in ways that everyone would see. I took way too seriously Jesus saying to not even let the left hand see what the right hand was doing. I believed it was better to not let others know very much about the prayers I have said for them.

I suspect that we as a society don't take prayer, as a means to become closer with the people that we pray for. Our culture looks at results, and not at the journey. It isn't and doesn't appreciate the subtle changes that happen when we feel close to someone who wants us to get well. It is actually, a powerful device that helps us to live and bounce back when all else looks bleak. It is so much more powerful than our just looking at the end result.

The truth is that emotionally the boost that we get from others openly praying for us to benefit is powerful. A woman prayed for me recently just about something that she knew I wanted to happen. I wasn't suffering in the usual way, it was just that it would mean a lot to me because I would interpret it as God wanting me to keep going in the direction that I have been and she knew it. It wasn't for health, but because she knows it means a lot to me. Her prayer was very moving, because it was her wanting something good for me. When she told me it was an intimate moment that felt wonderful, because I could tell she really wanted good for me. That feeling was with me powerfully just because she told me about it. It made me feel cared about and somehow blessed by God because she was willing to involve God in something for me. I hope that when people pray for your benefit that you let yourself feel very cared about and blessed.

The Psalm says that the law of the Lord is perfect reviving the soul. In Hebrew it is saying that the law of the Lord returns you to your origin, or makes you again like you were. Yes, it means reviving but it is more than that. For instance, in Hebrew you do not have a soul, you ARE a

soul. It is who you are. It isn't just the essence of you it is the real you. So the law of the Lord returns you to yourself. It returns you to life, yes, but more than that. It returns you to who you really are. When I read the Bible and see the wisdom of the Law and of the instruction I feel revived, and more of who I believe myself to really be.

The rest of the sentence is "the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;" The English is actually a bad translation. The word simple doesn't do justice to what is expressed. In Hebrew the idea is making someone able to be open minded enough to hear. Our word simple doesn't convey the powerful change from closed mindedness to a willingness to receive instruction that accompanies open mindedness.

Our word simple implies limited ability, either willful, or handicapped, but the Hebrew is more acknowledging the brokenness that we get to as being human. Our pride, or fear of being hurt or humiliated can get activated and we simply can't hear. Neuroscience says that the part of our brain called our Amygdala gets inflamed because of fear, and we simply can't hear. That is its job to be on high alert and to shut down when danger is present and prepare for running or fighting. It literally shuts off connections to the main part of the brain. So your body may hear what someone else is saying at that point but your brain is not processing it.

When a person is in an argument and their heart rate reaches 100. They are not hearing what the other person is saying. It literally, takes according to some researchers 7 to 20 min to be able to be rational again. That isn't taking into consideration that in the presence of the Lord we can make the transition much more quickly. It is because we can feel safe. The law of the Lord helps us to feel safe. It was designed to do that. The law was created for us so that we would be safe from our own bad thinking as well as from others foolishness as well. That is how come the decree of the Lord is praised.

The entire rest of the Psalm is like that. “The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;” in other words combining with the words earlier it means our hearts can be calm as well as our minds. It makes us able to be open enough to hear.

The decrees of the Lord then can calm someone enough to allow them to actually hear what would be beneficial to them to hear. That is if they are willing to listen to the Lord.

If when you saw the Pope’s messages or the crowds’ reactions and felt good in your heart then you were getting some of the calm that comes from the Lord’s law. You were appreciating faith, and a willingness to follow God’s word. It doesn’t matter what our faith is when we see others being genuine and wanting to follow God’s word by being kind to others, we can sense God’s involvement in that. If you allowed yourself to be moved by any part of the kindness or good deeds that the Pope did while here then you are sensitive to God. Of course as Protestants we don’t agree with everything the Pope does or that the Catholic Church stands for or does. But being people of faith we can appreciate acts of goodness and kindness or even expressions of faith that are moving to us. That is because of who we are as believers.

Because of my faith, I can tell you that whenever I look up the words in Hebrew it astounds me with the beauty of the wisdom, and the deep respect it offers us. If you have appreciated the joy and excitement I have from these passages then you are resonating with God’s word and you can rejoice even more. Amen.