

“Haven’t Got a Prayer? Come Get One”

Psalm 13

Sermon Series: *It’s A Wonderful Life, Week 1. Your Life Needs Prayer*

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The Woodside Church

December 2, 2018

It’s rare to see a movie begin with a prayer. Yet that’s how this one starts. Not just one prayer. There’s a chorus of prayer from a pharmacist, bar tender, policeman, cab driver, a mother, wife and children – all praying for one man. In fact, the whole movie is the answer to that one man’s desperate prayer on Christmas Eve. When it seems he received no answer from heaven he decides to end his life by jumping from a bridge.

Boy – doesn’t that just warm your heart with Christmas cheer! And yet Rotten Tomatoes rates the film, *It’s a Wonderful Life!* as the #1 Christmas film of all time. It’s more than a Christmas classic. The American Film Institute places it at twenty on its list of top 100 films and #1 on its list of 100 inspiring films. Stars Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed each name it the favorite of their many movies and director Frank Capra writes,

I thought it was the greatest film I ever made. Better yet, I thought it was the greatest film anybody ever made.

That’s amazing since this film which begins with a prayer didn’t have a prayer in the beginning. The author who wrote the original story, *The Greatest Gift*, couldn’t get it published so he gave it away as a Christmas Card. When the movie debuted it was a disappointment. Many thought the plot too depressing. It left the theaters quickly and left Frank Capra in debt to the tune of \$525,000. When Frank Capra tried to recruit Jimmy Stewart to play the lead Stewart replied,

You want me to be in a picture about a guy that wants to kill himself and an angel comes down named Clarence who can’t swim and I save him...?

Yet Stewart said, “When do we start?” and the rest is history.

So why has *It’s a Wonderful Life* made history? I believe because George Bailey’s history deeply touches my history and yours. In his story we see some of our story. And though Jesus is rarely mentioned, the film also connects us with God’s story – a God who hears our prayers, sends help, saves us from death and shows us the way – a better way to look at this wonderful life. Each Sunday this Advent/Christmas season we’ll use movie clips as doorways to discover the wonderful life Jesus came to give us.

So let’s begin where the movie begins: with prayer. Why does George Bailey feel he doesn’t have a prayer? Over the course of the film we’ve watched George grow up. As a young man he dreamed of seeing the world and accomplishing great things. Yet every time he tries to follow his dreams they are dashed by some demand at home. Each time he shelves his plans, sacrifices his desires and dutifully keeps his head buried in the Bailey Building and Loan and Bedford Falls. Now, on Christmas Eve, through no fault of his own, eight thousand dollars is missing just at the moment when the bank examiner shows up. Even now, George takes responsibility, swallows his pride and goes to his enemy Mr. Potter to ask for help. Potter cruelly informs George he is worth more dead than alive and calls the police. Feeling he has no other option, George turns to prayer:

Dear Father in Heaven. I'm not a praying man, but if you're up there, and you can hear me, show me the way. I'm at the end of my rope. Show me the way God.

Soon after that prayer a man in the bar slugs him in the jaw. Thinking this is the answer to his prayer, he heads out to a snow-covered bridge so he can end his life.

George troubles may be familiar to you. Perhaps you are haunted by regrets. Maybe your dreams were dashed. You always take the blame, shoulder the burden, clean up someone's mess. You might be facing financial fears, legal problems, family quarrels, worries about school or work. What if, like George Bailey, you pray to God and get a punch in the mouth? What if you cry out, "How long, O Lord?" and receive no answer? What if you call out in the darkness and hear only the echo of your prayers? What do you do when God is silent?

The Scriptures teach us the ultimate goal of prayer is not results but a relationship with God. When we were young we often measured our parents' love by what they gave us for Christmas. As we mature we discover it's far better just to be with those you love. Through prayer God gives more than answers: He gives Himself. George does receive an answer to his prayer. It's not Jesus but Clarence Odbody, a second class angel who keeps failing to win his wings. That's not the kind of help George wants though it turns out to be just what he needs.

Yet what do you do when you pray and God does not answer? You ask the Lord to find you a job, to heal your parent, spouse or child, to bring back your wayward teen, to lighten the crushing stress, to restore your marriage, to stop your enemies and His reply is ... silence. It seems small comfort to say prayer is about a relationship with God not results. In times like these you need results. If God truly wants a loving relationship with you, why doesn't He do something?

There are some simple solutions to why God doesn't answer prayer. William Culbertson advised us to "keep praying, but be thankful that God's answers are wiser than your prayers!" Along the same line, Ruth Bell Graham, the wife of Evangelist Billy Graham remarked, "God has not always answered my prayers. If he had, I would have married the wrong man – several times!" Sometimes God answers our prayers with a "No" because what we ask is not what is best for us.

It's also possible that our requests are simply impossible. "A father heard his small daughter saying over and over, 'Tokyo, Tokyo, Tokyo.' He asked her what she was doing and she replied that she was praying. 'What kind of prayer is that?' he asked. 'I had a test in school today,' she replied, 'and I am praying for God to make Tokyo the capital of France.'"¹ Perhaps the Lord says, "No," because our requests might cause other problems we cannot see.

Maybe God's answer is not "No" but "Wait." Our time table is not the same as His. In an age when communication travels at cyber speed, we become impatient waiting for a reply from heaven. In Luke 18, Jesus tells his disciples "they should always pray and not give up" (v. 1). He will answer His people who "cry out to him day and night" (v. 7) but according to His timetable. So how does God answer prayer? One formula says:

¹ Steve Brown, Approaching God: How to Pray, Moorings, Nashville, TN, c. 1996, p. 179.

If the request is wrong, God says, ‘No.’ If the timing is wrong, God says, ‘Slow.’ If you are wrong, God says, ‘Grow.’ But if the request is right, the timing is right and you are right, God says, ‘Go!’²

That’s a nice, neat outline and it’s certainly worth remembering. But outlines and formulas seem empty when you wrestle with the awful silence of God.

David knew the anguish of facing God’s silence. In Psalm 13 he cries out:

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
 How long will you hide your face from me?
 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
 and every day have sorrow in my heart?
 How long will my enemy triumph over me?
 Look on me and answer, O LORD my God.
 Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;
 my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,”
 and my foes will rejoice when I fall (Psalm 13:1-4).

By the end of this prayer, there is still no answer from God. The enemies surround David and the situation remains the same. The Lord has not said “No”, “Slow”, “Grow” or “Go!” The only change occurs in David. He moves from trembling to trust.

But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.
 I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me (Psalm 13:5-6).

When your prayers seem unanswered, when it feels God is giving you the silent treatment, that is the moment you discover just how much you trust in God’s unfailing love and salvation. It’s easy to trust Him when His blessings shower down on you. It’s harder to trust when your soul is as dry as a desert, when the situation is as dark as night. Either that silence will break you or you will make a breakthrough.

The silence almost breaks Jesus. When He was born, legions of angels sang for joy. At His baptism, the Holy Spirit descended and the voice of His Father boomed from heaven. In the quiet of every dawn, Jesus went off by Himself to talk with His Father. Up on the mountain top, flanked by Moses and Elijah, His Father said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Matthew 17:5).

But in the darkness of Gethsemane, Jesus says, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” The word Gethsemane means “olive press.” Olives are crushed under massive stones until all their oil seeps out. There, among the olive trees, Jesus feels the weight of the sin of the world – past, present, and future – bearing down and crushing Him. Falling down with His face on the ground, Jesus cries out, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.” He does not fear the desertion of his friends, the public humiliation, the flogging or the crucifixion. It is the cup that floods Him with sorrow and grief. For in the cup is the righteous punishment of God against all our sin. Jesus, who never sinned, will soon have to drain that bitter cup of God’s wrath to the very last drop. He prays with all His might. But this time, no choir of angels sing, no Voice booms from heaven. At His moment of greatest need, there is only silence.

² Bill Hybels, Too Busy Not To Pray, InterVarsity Press, p. 74.

Now there is a choice before Him. Fight: call down legions of angels to drive off his approaching enemies. Or Flight: run off and hide in the dark. Ages ago, in another garden, there were other human beings who faced such a choice. While God was absent and everything was silent, Adam and Eve decided first to take matters into their own hands and eat the fruit and then to run away when the Lord returned. First it was fight against God's will and then take flight from God's wrath. That was the first of many falls into temptation down through the ages.

But now Jesus, all alone in the silence of Gethsemane, does not fight, take flight or fall into temptation. Instead, He falls on His knees and surrenders to His Father. "Yet not as I will," He prays, "But as you will." The silence of that moment does not break Him. Instead, Jesus breaks the power of sin and saves us.

When you face the silence of God, when your prayers seem to go unanswered, that is the moment when you must trust in His unfailing love and salvation. Don't let it break you. Make a breakthrough.

Like George Bailey, Jennifer had dreams. As a little girl, her big box of crayons seemed like a treasure chest, a rainbow locked under a cardboard lid. Jennifer studied each shade and hue and then painted them across her page. Her dream was to be an artist.

As a pre-teen she noticed subtle changes. Opening her combination lock, reading the chalkboard, catching a softball became difficult. Every ring of the bell to change classes filled her with fear. Navigating through the crowded hallways was a nightmare. Jennifer could not avoid running into the other students. Why was she suddenly so clumsy? Then one evening the reason was revealed. She writes,

I'll never forget the night my mom and I were visiting a friend who lived in an upstairs apartment. I was probably 13 or 14, and as we were walking up in the dark, I was stumbling. My mom asked, "Jennifer, can't you see the stairs?" I asked her with just as much curiosity, "What do you mean? Can *you* see the stairs?"

The diagnosis: retinitis pigmentosa. Her retinas were deteriorating and there was only one outcome. The doctor said a lot of words but the only one Jennifer recalls is "blindness." It broke like a shockwave over her and her parents. Their reaction? Silence.

It was silent in the car all the way home from the hospital. But it was not silent inside Jennifer's soul. "*I'm not going to be able to drive a car. I'm not going to be able to be an artist. Are boys going to want to date me? How am I going to finish high school? Will I be able to go off to college?*"

When they arrived home, Jennifer did something unusual. She went straight to the old upright piano in the living and broke the silence that hung over them since the hospital. She'd taken a few years of piano lessons and was just learning to sight-read. But that day, with no sheet music she played by ear for the very first time. "The song that filled my living room that day," she recalls, "the song that fills my heart to this day – was that beloved hymn "It is Well with My Soul."

It was a miracle that on that very dark day, God gave me hope and light through the gift of playing by ear. But the greatest miracle wasn't that I played "It Is Well with My Soul;" the greatest miracle was that, because I was a Christian, it really was well with my soul. With such a concise statement, God gave new color to my life. Blindness has remained with me; it's still not well with my circumstance, but God has made it well with my soul.

Today, Jennifer Rothschild is a musician, author and speaker at Christian conferences. She brings hope to many who are suffering through the silence of God.

The only way I don't shrink back from life's challenges is through God's grace. I'm continually amazed at the fact that when we trust God enough to take a step toward him in hope, faith or courage, he meets us right there – then equips us to take the next step. I know that's what he's done for me. It may never be well with our circumstances, but through God's grace, it can always be well with our souls.³

Trust God, pray and you will find it is well with your soul.

³ Quotations from Decision magazine, May 2007; ©2007 Billy Graham Evangelistic Association; and “Walking by Faith, by Camerin Courtney, Today's Christian Woman, May/June 2007, p. 22-25.