

Help!

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 80; 2 Peter 3:8-15; Luke 1:1-25

Prayer for Illumination

Grant us, O Lord God, the knowledge of your divine words, and fill us with the understanding of your holy Gospel and the riches of your divine gifts and the indwelling of your Holy Spirit. Enable us with joy to keep your holy commandments and accomplish them and fulfill your will, and to be accounted worthy of the blessings and the mercies that are from you now and at all times. *Syrian Jacobite Liturgy*

Everyone Needs Help

I woke up with a start, suddenly unable to talk or walk. I made enough noise to alert Ruth, who immediately called an ambulance. Soon I found myself confined to a hospital bed, wrapped in tubes and electronic sensors. I had double vision and could not read. I lost my sense of balance and could not walk. I could not swallow, not even my own saliva. I needed help, just to stay alive! An MRI confirmed that I had experienced a stroke, and for four days I was completely helpless. My vision returned first, balance and swallowing took several months of therapy. The neurologist predicted a full recovery, and praise God here I am today.

Today I can read and walk and eat, so I am no longer helpless. But my brush with a stroke highlights a truth we often forget – we all need help. Some of us have health struggles and need medical help. Others are unemployed and need a job. Some have a job, but it is unbearably stressful and taxing. Some people have terrible family situations and need help getting through the holidays. Children have enough trouble getting through school without the pressure of social media. When you go to Wal-Mart to do your Christmas shopping, you are surrounded by healthy, happy people. Yet behind the laughter and under the smiles are cancer, drug additions, divorce, bankruptcy, unemployment, and sorrows too numerous to count. Now there is much happiness out there, too, and it would be perverse to say that everyone is miserable all the time. But at root, all human beings face situations they cannot control and problems they cannot fix. We all need help. I am sure that many of you here today are dealing with profound struggles that wear you down day after day. You need help.

Zechariah and Elizabeth Needed Help

Our gospel lesson is about a couple who needed help. Zechariah and Elizabeth were godly servants of the Lord. Zechariah was a priest, and he served God in the temple. Our text tells us that they were both righteous and blamelessly obeyed all of God's commandments. I sure would not say that about myself. Would you? Yet failure clung like a wet coat to Zechariah and Elizabeth. In a culture that placed a high value on children and honored women for their child-bearing ability, Zechariah and Elizabeth were childless. Furthermore, God declared at the very beginning that his purpose in creating men and women was for them to multiply and fill the earth. Now they were old. Elizabeth was likely past menopause, and all hope of children was gone. This godly couple had served God all their lives, but in this regard they were miserable failures. And not only religious failures, but also social failures. Imagine the disapproval and scorn of neighbors who for years and decades had looked upon this couple as failing to fulfill God's purpose and failing to produce offspring for their community. No doubt thousands of nights they cried themselves to sleep in their misery.

And where was God in all of this? People today do not value a woman for her reproductive capacity, and some couples deliberately choose not to have children. But righteous people such as these would have prayed for a child. They blamelessly followed God's commands, so they offered all the prescribed sacrifices and served God in everything. And prayed for a child. But nothing. Year after year, decade after decade nothing happened – yet they still believed, they still obeyed, they still served. If ever there were people who deserved a child it was them, but not only did God not answer their prayers – God was silent. Zechariah needed help – a lot of help.

To compound the sorrow, their nation was occupied by a foreign power. Once, Israel was a golden nation. Under Kings David and Solomon Israel was safe, strong, prosperous, and victorious. King David defeated all of Israel's enemies and enlarged the Kingdom. Solomon solidified those gains and formed alliances with the nations surrounding Israel. The temple was the most beautiful building in the world, where Levitical choirs sang praise to God and offerings were made every day to the Lord of the universe. God's law was observed and people lived in relative harmony. But Israel turned against God. She was destroyed by invading powers, and Jerusalem and the glorious temple were burned to the ground. Years later the temple was rebuilt, but it was a poor substitute for the original. First the Babylonians ruled, then the Persians, the Greeks, and now the hated, brutal Romans ruled the land. No one in Israel enjoyed being occupied by the Romans, but godly people especially longed for the day in which pagan powers would be expelled and Israel would be a righteous nation once again.

This was not a foolish dream. The prophets predicted that righteousness would return to Israel. They would no longer be ruled by a pagan power, but pagans would come to Jerusalem and worship God. There was even the promise that wars would cease and the whole human race would prosper and be at peace. Swords and spears would be turned into agricultural tools. What a vision! How exciting to dream of such a world! But all they had to do was look down the street to see the occupying Roman soldiers with their swords and spears, all too ready to seize anyone they suspected of disturbing the peace. There was peace, all right – the peace that was purchased by Jewish blood. Any hope of resistance was futile. Roman armies were invincible, and if an opponent happened to win a battle, the Romans flooded back with overwhelming force and annihilated their enemies. From a human perspective, the prophecies looked like hallucinations of the insane. Yet there were faithful people who clung to these promises. They believed that God was faithful and would somehow, someday fulfill these promises. The Jews needed help. Zechariah, Elizabeth, and the whole nation needed a lot of help. They needed a miracle.

God's Promise of Help

God did send a miracle. As with Sarah and Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah, God revived Elizabeth's body and opened her womb. Sorrow and despair turned to joy and laughter. In their old age, they would have a baby boy! Can you imagine the thrilling astonishment of welcoming a baby into their cold, silent home? But that is not all. This baby would be a very unusually special baby. He would be great before the Lord. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit. He would bring about a huge revival among the people. And then the angel said, "He will go before [the Lord] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." Do you recognize that promise? I am sure Zechariah and Elizabeth did. It is a direct quote from the prophet Malachi, where Malachi describes what will happen when God comes to save His people. Folks, this is unbelievable! Not only will Zechariah and Elizabeth have a baby boy, not only will he lead a great revival in Israel – this boy will prepare for God Himself to come! This means that the long wait is over. The hope, the longing, the struggle of faithful followers of God from Adam through Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, and all the millions of worshipers through the centuries – the millennial desire for salvation promised long ago and reiterated time and again is finally coming to pass! Israel will be restored to her former glory – no, to much greater glory!

Does this sound too good to be true? Zechariah thought so. So he asked the angel of God for proof. On its surface this is stupid and insulting. Here is an angel from God announcing a blessing, and Zechariah asked for proof! Yes, that was a dumb move. But didn't we say this news was unbelievable? Wasn't it too good to be true? Zechariah gave the wrong answer, but God was not angry with him. God understands our weakness and is patient with our frailty. Zechariah said the wrong thing, and as a result was struck with the inability to speak anything else for a time. But when he regained his speech, for the rest of his life he would remember – and his neighbors would remind him – that this boy was a miracle baby. Knowing how John the Baptist turned out, Zechariah likely needed that reassurance from time to time.

God Also Sends Us Help

Friends, the God who helped Zechariah and Elizabeth in their sorrow and need is with us today. Their God is the God of Adam and Noah, Abraham and David, the God who revealed Himself to Moses and the prophets – and He is our God. Our God is the Creator-Lord who loves His people, who shares our sorrows, and who helps us in our weakness. And just as the hope of Zechariah and Elizabeth was not in vain, so God will fulfill your longings. God declares Himself to be a Father to the fatherless, a Husband to widows, a Physician to the sick and injured, a Protector to the powerless. You struggle in a variety of ways, and God is here to help you. Now sometimes we want things, we think we want things, which will hurt us – and God will not give us those things. But what we truly need to flourish and what is good for us God will provide.

So why hasn't He done so? If you have prayed for weeks or months or years or decades for healing of your body or of relationships, for a husband or wife, for success in school or at work – why hasn't God answered? If God is so loving and powerful, why does he torment us so? Aren't you sometimes tempted to think that God must delight in our suffering, or He would do something about it? Maybe you are so holy that you never do this, but most normal people are tempted this way. I imagine that Zechariah and Elizabeth experienced a vast array of emotions through the decades of barrenness. I'm sure their faith was sorely tried during those long years. But you know, what is important is not whether your faith falters, but whether you return to God.

The apostle Peter knew what it meant for his faith to falter. Falter! Peter openly denied his Lord! Friends, that is as bad as it gets. Not only did Peter deny Jesus, he did it with an oath. On a faith scale of 1 to 10, Peter was a 0. Peter knew instantly what he had done. But unlike Judas who tried to bribe Jewish leaders into undoing the damage, Peter ran out and wept, prayed, repented. When all was hopeless, Peter turned to his only source of hope – God Himself. And Peter did not find anger or disappointment or skepticism or a program for rehabilitation. Peter found acceptance, hope, love. The next time Peter saw Jesus, Jesus embraced him without a word of disapproval. That is because, as the writer to the Hebrews says, Jesus experienced all the temptations we experience – and although Jesus did not sin, He knows how hard it is for us never to fall – and Jesus welcomes us.

In the decades after the trauma of that horrible crucifixion week, Peter reflected on the confusion of those events. Why did God do things the way He did? Why the pain? Why the long waiting? Peter tells us that when you measure time by eternity, a thousand years is like a day. Our problem is that we measure time by our own lifespans. This creates in us a distorted understanding of time, and it tempts us to impatience, frustration, and anger at God and His timing. Peter adds that one reason God appears to delay is to give sinners time to repent. If you have a mean boss, a cold husband, a surly child and you long for God to do something – one reason He delays is so that He can woo these troublesome people and bring them to repentance. If God quickly fixed everything that needs fixing, none of us would be here. God's patience brought us to trust in Him and enjoy the blessings of salvation. Shouldn't we be glad that God is patient toward other sinners?

We Wait For God To Help

Advent is the season in which we remember the long wait for the promised Savior to appear, and to remember the promise of his return. You are not alone in your struggle to flourish, your struggle to believe. For four thousand years faithful believers clung to the hope that God would come to save them. Four thousand years went by and no savior appeared. But in all of life's difficulties and disappointments, God met His people and helped them. At last Jesus appeared and bought salvation to the human race, but still we struggle. God is not finished. God has promised that He will come again to finish what He started. God's promise is that there will come a day in which He shows up again – not in the words of a prophet or the

signs of an apostle, the sermon of your pastor or the sacraments He gave us – but in person. God will come again to restore us to full, vigorous, eternal strength; to mend our broken relationships; to engage us in fulfilling, pleasant work; to establish the peace and harmony we long for. Furthermore, God will come to end all wars, to destroy all weapons, to rule the whole world in such a way that both justice and mercy are satisfied. We will never again be stuck with self-serving politicians, with mean bosses, with unloving spouses, with surly children, with rogue nations, terrorist gangs, or drug cartels. No one will be impoverished, no one will be trafficked or enslaved, no one will be abused. This is our hope. This is our promise. This is the future.

Does this sound too good to be true? Are these the hallucinations of the insane? Haven't preachers been saying this for thousands of years? How gullible are we? When will we face the fact that these pleasant dreams are just that – dreams and nothing more. That only idiots and children refuse to grasp the reigns of power and force others to do what we need. Isn't it childish to believe that God will do these amazing things when He seems content to let the world pursue its own course?

Yes this is too good to be true. No, these are not foolish dreams. Because God consistently does what is too good to be true. He did it for Zechariah and Elizabeth, He did it for millions of believers before and after them, and He will do the impossible for you. Not on your timetable, not according to your plan, not in your way, but God will come to you. He may give you healing, or He may give you the strength to endure your infirmity. He may give you a spouse, or He may give you the special ability to flourish as a single person. God may improve your family relations, or He may give you the resilience to endure disharmony as you love your hateful relatives. We never know how God will help us, and He helps people in different ways. But one thing we know without reservation is that God will help us. Many people never recover fully from a stroke. Ruth's father died from a stroke. As I lay helpless on my hospital bed, I had no idea what God might do. In my case he restored me relatively quickly to full health. In the case of Ruth's father, God called him up for his reward and for the eternal rest he needed. In every case, God helps His children now, and will come in the future to fulfill all of our deepest longings.

How Shall We Wait?

So what does this mean for us? Peter put words to our question in saying, "What sort of people ought you to be?" And he immediately answered by saying, "Lives of holiness and godliness." As his fellow apostle John said, God's commands are not burdensome. Sure they often *seem* burdensome. That is the effect of sin which still lingers in us. Sin makes us hate God's word and tries to convince us that God's commands make us miserable. But God's commands are for our benefit and the good of those around us. As much as we understand and as much as we are able, we should seek to live holy and godly lives. And while we may falter from time to time, this is not an impossible goal. God has given us His Holy Spirit to motivate, equip, and enable us to obey His commands. Don't, like Judas, allow failures to drive you to despair. Like Peter, turn to God when you fail. He will love you, accept you, encourage you, and help you to persevere. God will enable you to keep seeking Him through the trials of this life until He returns to finish His work of salvation.

God extends His promise of salvation to all people, but you must believe in His Son. If you are here today and do not believe in Jesus, God will still help you in this life, but afterward comes the judgment. In due time God did come to save men, women, and children – but many do not accept Him or trust Him. This is shameful and despicable. God is patient in all manner of human weakness, but you must trust Him. If you reject God, He will reject you. You have a choice between eternal life and eternal death. Seek life that you may live and be blessed! Trust Jesus! Believe in Him!

As we struggle to believe in God's love, to persevere in hardship, to live holy lives – God promises to help us, and He provides tangible proofs of His presence. God comes to us, He comes near us, He comes in us as His word pierces our eardrums and enters our hearts and minds. God comes to us as we take the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Just as this bread and wine enter us and spread to every tissue of our bodies, so Jesus enters us and strengthens every part of our being. Just as bread gives us physical strength, so Jesus strengthens us spiritually. Just as wine gladdens our hearts, so Jesus makes us to rejoice in our salvation. Friends, we lay before you ordinary bread and wine, but as you take them in faith, they become the extraordinary vehicle of Jesus's presence. Come, take, eat and be fed with spiritual food that you may wait in faith for God's return to save us.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we need your help! We are beset by many troubles. Our faith wavers. You call us to holy living, but too often we find ourselves giving in to the temptations that pursue us. We long for peace and wholeness and we cry out to You, but we grow impatient when You do not answer us in the manner we expect. But in all this we hope in You. Our hope is weak, our faith is slender, but we have nowhere to turn aside from You. Remember Your promise to be with us. Come to us, strengthen us, help us! Grant us the gift of holiness. Enable us to wait for You. May we in all our trials increasingly trust in Your salvation. This we beg through Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lived among us and died to save us. Amen.

C. David Green
Redeemer Kenai
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