

A Legacy of Prayer

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I tried to pray this morning. I *needed* to pray. But the words just weren't there. I couldn't think. Was it because of the injury? The medications? I don't know. I don't know. I felt like someone in a little canoe out on a lake in a heavy fog. I would paddle first one way and then another, but I could never seem to go in a straight line or get any closer to shore. Everything seemed muffled and strange, and I couldn't see any landmarks to guide me.

And then I just got tired of paddling. Tired of even trying.

So instead of reaching for words that wouldn't come, I just started thinking about Jesus: Walking the earth doing miracles. Touching the man at Bethesda. Holding the little children in his lap. Hanging on the cross. And now, lifted up so high. Beautiful, like the morning star just before sunrise.

That's when it hit me. Jesus was *with* me in that canoe, out in the fog. My landmark wasn't out there somewhere, he was in the boat. And I didn't need to talk just then. I could rest, feeling him close, knowing he was there.

Forty Years Later

That's not all bad.

The fact is, there are still times in my life when words flee from me. I want to pray. I want to be near to God. But because of pain or heaviness of spirit, I can't summon the energy to put a prayer together.

I'm reminded of a little poem from one of my favorite books.

Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
the falling of a tear;
the upward glancing of an eye,
when none but God is near.

My friend Margaret Clarkson, now with the Lord, penned those words. And that bit of verse summarizes so much of what I learned from this godly woman.

Margaret was a missionary in Canada who wrote many wonderful poems—and virtually each one was born out of her life of severe and chronic physical pain. The last time I was with Margaret was at Ontario Bible College. We spent lunchtime together talking, me in my wheelchair, and she lying on her side on a cot.

She was in so much pain she simply could not stand up for any length of time. As a result, Margaret taught me many lessons about praying through pain.

I'm sure you can understand. You've probably experienced aching, sleepless nights when prayer seems impossible, when you simply cannot summon up enough physical or mental energy to put two sentences together in prayer—let alone pray to God “in his own language,” as I've suggested.

Or perhaps you wake up to face another day of watching a suffering loved one—and you are utterly exhausted and completely unable to gather the shreds of your shattered personality and bring your unspeakable need before the throne.

Margaret Clarkson experienced many a painful time like this, and I'll never forget when she said, “Joni, the first thing we must realize is that it is neglect of prayer or refusal to pray that is sin, not the inability to pray. If the earnest desire to pray is present, we must not condemn ourselves because we find prayer hard or even impossible.”

Looking back, I believe my missionary friend was harkening back to Psalm 38 where the psalmist cries, “Lord, all my desire is before You; and my sighing is not hidden from You” (Psalm 38:9 NKJV). And elsewhere it says, “The desire of our soul is for Your name and for the remembrance of You” (Isaiah 26:8 NKJV).

That was true of my friend Margaret. Her struggle to pray was never out of neglect or refusal. It was simply at times her inability to order her prayers before the Lord in a clear and concise way.

But that didn't really matter, because she never really stopped communicating with God. She offered him her groaning.

And because of that, God fulfilled the desire of this extraordinary woman who truly feared the Lord. Yet this dear saint waged never-ceasing warfare against allowing her infirmity to gain the place of power in her life, a warfare against allowing her physical pain to come between her and Jesus.

If you are in pain—or perhaps gripped with grief or anxiety—as you read these words, you may find prayer a difficult proposition. What you do manage to whisper to God seems feeble and faint.

Maybe so. But that fact doesn't change the reality of Psalm 145:18:

The Lord is near to all who call on him,
To all who call on him in truth.

Jesus stands at the right hand of God's throne on your behalf, and he is touched with the feeling of your infirmities. Are your prayers faint and weak? Take heart. Jesus is praying for you.

And never, never underestimate the ability of our God to use the shakiest prayer of the weakest saint to move heaven and earth.

Maybe something like the prayers of Corrie ten Boom, in her final days.

Praying in the Spirit

Corrie ten Boom survived the Nazi concentration camps and went on to travel the world to share Christ with millions. A series of strokes severely incapacitated her, after which she retreated to the sanctuary of her small home in southern California. But Corrie's ministry did not stop. Her house became a sanctuary of prayer.

Shortly before Jesus took her home, I went to visit with her. I wheeled into Tante Corrie's house, and the air was fragrant with the aroma of European coffee. A clock ticked and a kettle whistled. I sat in her parlor, enjoying old photographs of the ten Boom family while I waited for Pam, her helper, to wheel Corrie out of her bedroom. When she arrived, we talked—actually I did most of the talking, since the strokes had severely limited her speech. I also sang to her several favorite hymns. What a grand visit!

Before I left, Corrie grasped her paralyzed hand with her good hand. Then, with great effort, entwined the fingers. Pam, understanding this gesture, knelt by Corrie's wheelchair and looked up into that determined face.

“Tante Corrie, may I pray with you, too?”

We bowed our heads and Corrie began. Her words were indistinct—part Dutch, part English, and part neither one—but her voice was strong as she prayed earnestly in the Spirit. The Spirit was, in fact, the only one who could understand her.

God could understand Corrie’s seemingly jumbled intercession as clearly as he read Margaret Clarkson’s heaven-directed sighs and groans. Romans 8:26–27 says,

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.

Don’t try to diagram the path of these prayers in the Spirit or wrap a precise theological definition around them. Just know that God knows our every thought, and he has no difficulty sorting out English from Dutch, or prayers from some deep well of spiritual language that could never be translated this side of heaven.

Margaret’s quick thought in his direction through a searing wall of pain spoke volumes in heaven. And Corrie’s apparent gibberish—Spirit-aided as it was—may have stopped angels in their tracks as it came before the Father.

But there is so much more to this mystery of prayer beyond even these wonders. And it shouldn’t surprise us that rubies of surpassing value may be hard-won through suffering.

The Math of Heaven

Sometimes when my wheelchair gets me down or I feel like giving up because of the encroaching pain of paralysis, I think of a young woman named Kim, and I am encouraged to persevere.

Perhaps more than any other person, Kim showed me that my life—and your life—counts. And it counts more than we can possibly imagine.

I first learned about Kim when an elder from her church in Pennsylvania called to ask if I could contact her with a few words of encouragement. “Kim is a brilliant 26-year-old Christian woman who has always been active in our church,” he explained. “But last year she contracted motor-neuron disease and now must stay in bed. She can hardly move and must be fed with a feeding tube.” The elder paused a moment, then added, “Kim is very depressed. She’s wondering if her life is worth living anymore.”

I telephoned Kim right away. Her mother tucked the receiver against her ear and against the pillow. I could hardly hear Kim’s voice, her breathing was so faint. We discussed many things, including our favorite parts of the Bible, the subject of heaven, and prayer. Finally, Kim said faintly and with great labor, “Joni, they want to give me a ventilator to help me breathe, but I don’t know whether I want one. I’m so tired. Do you think I should go on a ventilator?”

For a moment I was speechless. Finally I took a deep breath, whispered a quick prayer, and replied, “Kim, there are a lot of things to consider—not the least of which is that your decision will affect many people around you. But of the two choices facing you, I think there’s a better one.” I then proceeded to tell her about a simple but powerful Bible verse that has encouraged and guided me through the toughest times of my forty-plus years of quadriplegia.

Do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. (2 Peter 3:8)

We all know the old adage that God looks at the last two thousand years as only a couple of days gone by. But what about the other half of that verse? The part about seeing each day as a thousand years?

What kind of math is that?

It's the math of One who lives outside of time, is not bound by time, and can step in and out of time whenever he pleases to accomplish his purposes. If we really come to grips with the fact that God can pick up any 24-hour day he chooses and give it an eternal impact of a thousand years, then each day of our lives becomes immeasurably important—and brimming with opportunity. Each day God gives us precious hours to invest in the lives of others—investments which will have eternal repercussions in our lives *and* theirs.

But let's carry the math out just a bit further. If 24 hours can have the impact of a thousand years, then what kind of impact could a single hour have?

I figure about 41 and a half years.

And then what about a single minute?

Maybe something like eight and a half months.

Kim perked up as I began to speak with her about these thoughts. "But I'm in bed," she reminded me. "I can't go anywhere or do anything. How can my life count in this condition?"

"First, Kim," I replied, "you can pray. No matter how feeble or fainthearted your prayers may seem to you, they have a very special power with God. It says in Psalm 10:17, 'You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry.'

"Do you realize what this means, Kim? It means that the Lord cups his ear to listen when someone like you prays out of great affliction. He bends over backward when people offer him a sacrifice of praise. Please hear me, Kim. I mean this with all my heart. God will use your intercessions to shake the lives of those around you . . . as well as the destiny of nations."

It was a big, big thought for Kim, but it intrigued her.

"Your obedience, Kim, counts for eternity. Now is your chance to stretch your soul's capacity for God! Your patience and longsuffering and endurance will resound with more glory to God than you can possibly appreciate right now. As it says in Romans 8:18, 'I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.' If you can hang in there and keep a godly response, then who can measure the impact? Who can put a value on how God will work through your prayers?" Kim's body was feeble. Dying. But there was nothing weak or faint about her opportunities to do battle in the spiritual realm. I couldn't help but think of those beaten-up, battered believers described in the book of Hebrews "who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice . . . shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and . . . whose weakness was turned to strength" (Hebrews 11:33, 34).

Kim laughed as I went on and on. It was sweet to hear.

But that's the way this young woman chose to live out her days. Can any of us calculate the impact of her prayers? If she were to live only two more weeks with a perspective like this, that figures out to be 14,000 years' worth of eternal reward and glory. As she became progressively weaker and weaker, who is to say that her ministry in time and eternity didn't become stronger and stronger?

Unseen Realities

The lesson of 2 Peter 3:8 isn't only for Kim, it's for all of us who believe in the might of God and the power of prayer.

Archimedes of Syracuse was a Greek mathematician, physicist, astronomer, and engineer in the second century before Christ. Speaking of the lifting power of a lever, it was he who said, "Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world."

Presumably, even one tiny tap on that cosmic-sized device would move the whole planet. Prayer is like that giant lever. Our smallest efforts, in faith, can have results that stagger the imagination. Your

prayers—even the smallest, weakest little gasps—can move nations and shape the destinies of multiplied thousands.

Little wonder that Psalm 90:12 has us praying to God, “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” So value your days and make the most of every opportunity for doing good because *this* is the kind of wisdom God wants you to apply to your 24-hour slices of time.

Life is so short, whether we’re hale and hearty or severely disabled.

James 4:14 warns us, “What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” No wonder the Bible describes each day as being like a thousand years—that’s how priceless and precious they are! Life is fleeting, and of all the things we waste, let’s not waste our sufferings.

I should tell you that Kim ended up living another month and a half after our conversation on the phone. But as her mother told me later on, those 45 days—she looked at them as 45,000 years—were some of the most meaningful and important weeks she had ever lived. Her life demonstrates that we can all get a head start on eternity by understanding—and investing in—the real connection between this world and the next. Our prayers—as well as our obedience, sacrifices, and Christian encouragements toward others—have a direct and positive bearing on our capacity for joy, worship, and service to God in heaven.

Here is a statement that probably goes directly against the grain of anything you’ve ever heard from our contemporary culture: Life worth living is not found in a set of circumstances—whether pleasant or painful. Life worth living is found in a Person, the Prince of Life. The Resurrection and the Life. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He has the words of life. And the moments we invest in praying for his will to be done in lives, communities, and even nations will extend beyond this life—and beyond time itself.

Does this mean that every one of our prayers will be answered with a yes? No, but the prayers will be answered in a way that brings God the most glory—and ultimate good to our lives.

Mary and Martha must have felt perplexed—and personally devastated—when Jesus deliberately delayed coming to Bethany after he received news of Lazarus’ illness: *Why is the Master ignoring our request? Doesn’t he care about our brother? Surely he’s forgotten about us.*

The Bible tells us that Jesus heard the request and chose not to respond—at first. That divine decision made life hard for Mary and Martha in that brief season of time. Yet it is usually strange answers to prayer that hide the deepest, best, and most beautiful purposes.

Mary and Martha did not receive a brother healed from the infirmary; they received their brother raised from the cemetery. More than that, they received the gift of greater, sturdier, more robust faith. God is interested in the same for you.

Here is a ruby, hard-won through 40 years in a wheelchair: God hasn’t promised me happy endings to every life situation, but he has assured me of greater faith. And that’s the best ending, anyway.

The Legacy of Mary Rose

Just minutes before I was called up to the platform to address an overflowing convention several years ago, I met Mary Rose. She shuffled toward me, leaning on the arm of her escort, her gait stiff and her arm curled against her chest. I guessed she had cerebral palsy. She wore a tan cardigan over a yellow cotton dress. Nothing fancy. Her glasses sat askew on her nose.

“Joni,” her escort said, “this is my friend Mary Rose, and she’s been waiting so long to meet you.”

Mary Rose stretched out her rigid arm to greet me. Her body may have been stiff, but her smile was warm. She was excited to meet me, the person who had written the book that had meant so much to her decades earlier. “And Joni,” her escort said, “Mary Rose has something to tell you.”

“I-have-been-pray-ing-for-you-ev-ery-day,” she said with great effort, “ev-er-since-I-read-you-book.” Praying for me? *Every day?* I did some quick math in my head. Seven thousand times this woman has lifted me up to the Savior! I watched her shuffle away, back into the shadows, as I wheeled out into the light

and the applause. But I didn't feel important at that moment. God isn't impressed by my books, paintings, speeches, and world travel. When it comes to "entering the Master's happiness," the highest accolades will go to people who have labored secretly and loyally in a daily—sometimes hourly—ministry of prayer.

Someday on the Other Side, when Mary Rose steps into the radiant light to receive her magnificent reward, I'll stand happily on the sidelines, cheering and applauding.

Those who have fought battles and conquered kingdoms in the secret places of prayer may never be recognized or affirmed in this life. But Someone has noticed every moment of that investment. And their reward will have nothing to do with being bigger or better, well-known or watched, attractive or charming.

But it will have everything to do with faithfulness.

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About the Author

Joni Eareckson Tada is a global Christian stateswoman and an internationally renowned advocate for people with disabilities. She is the Founder and CEO of Joni and Friends International Disability Center, a nonprofit organization with a worldwide outreach to people with disabilities and their families. A diving accident in 1967 left Joni, then 17, a quadriplegic in a wheelchair. Since then, Joni's wisdom and influence have been shared with the world through Christian books, the media, speaking, and her service in disability advocacy. She served on the National Council on Disability under two U.S. Presidents; during her tenure, the Americans with Disabilities Act was drafted and passed into law. Joni has also served on the Disability Advisory Committee to the U.S. State Department. Her driving desire is to see every person with a disability find hope, dignity, and their place in the body of Christ. Joni and Ken Tada have been married since 1982.