

Prayer in Eclipse

B Y K E N M A S S E Y

My prayer life, long eclipsed by emotional pain over my daughter's tragedy, changed in the past year. I can only attribute this to the prayers of Jesus. Apparently, when I could not pray, he never stopped. I no longer have much faith in the "power of prayer," but my faith in the power of God is emerging from eclipse.

"Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." And he said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me."

Luke 22:31-34

I was never a big scorer on the basketball court so I worked hard to be a tenacious defensive player. When my team was preparing to face the leading scorer in our area, I begged for the defensive assignment. "Put me on him, coach. I'll shut him down." I still have slow-motion dreams of that guy knocking down nineteen points in the first half. *Confidence is what you have before you understand the situation!*

Simon Peter suffered from the same sort of self-confidence — the untested kind. Jesus had conferred his kingdom upon the disciples (Luke 22:28-30). They would "sit on thrones and judge the tribes of Israel." But the road to glory would test their faith. Jesus prayed for them because he knew that Satan would "sift them like wheat."

Sifting is the necessary and useful process of separating the wheat kernels that become daily bread from the husk or beard which is discarded.

The ancient practice of sifting began by placing the heads of grain in a sieve. The sieve would be shaken violently to accomplish the separation. The Adversary, Jesus warned, would do something like this to the disciples. Their faith would go through a brutal process of separation.

Jesus' warning should have reminded Peter of the way Job's faith was sifted by Satan. Job became the poster child for suffering and spiritual struggle. Simon, however, did not make the connection, so he responded to Jesus like a warrior who has not yet been deployed to the front lines of battle. He bragged with bluster and bravado about his bulletproof faith, but he had never been sifted by Satan. He did not understand the situation.

Like Simon, I claimed the husky exterior necessary for ministry. "Are you sure you want to take the pulpit out of the sanctuary?" the kindly deacon asked me. "Yes, it really creates a barrier between me and the congregation," I said with conviction. "I think you're going to get some pushback from Ms. Snodgrass," he replied. "Sometimes you just have to jump over the side of the boat, like Simon," I assured him. Texans love a good skirmish.

When the Persian Gulf War broke out in 1990, two deacons who were veterans of World War II dropped by my office because they had just noticed there was no American flag in our sanctuary. They wanted a show of patriotism in a time of national conflict. I wanted to stay clear of anything that approximated nationalism or civil religion. "That's a fight you can't win," said a friend. He was right, but I was not going to acquiesce. After all, I thought, Simon was ready to draw his sword to defend Jesus!

I learned early on that you better have thick skin to be a pastor. You cannot let the pressures get to you. All the while, beyond my hearing, Jesus was praying for me, "Father, protect his faith." I did not understand that the real sifting was still to come.

"TO SIFT YOU LIKE WHEAT"

In 1997, my oldest daughter Kristen had a psychotic meltdown at age fourteen. It was the first episode of many on a dark descent into mental illness that shook my life and faith to the core. Before this event Kristen had been a sweet and fun-loving child, full of sunshine. She was an average student with above average musical ability.

Like a powerful magnet erasing a computer hard drive, that initial trauma wiped out much of Kristen's cognitive ability. She worked hard to make her way back but never reached the capacity she had before. Each subsequent occurrence left her more incapacitated. She now lives most of her life in fantasy and delusion between dependence and quasi-independence. She has meltdowns of frustration, anger, and self-mutilation. My wife and I care for her at home, and we never know what each day will bring.

The Synoptic Gospels record the story of a woman who suffered much under the care of many doctors and spent all her money searching for a cure

(Mark 5:25-34; cf. Matthew 9:20-22 and Luke 8:43-48). Instead of getting better, she grew worse. My family has never been able, however, to touch the hem of Jesus' garment; and we have looked and reached everywhere.

As I entered this "valley of the shadow," I learned and practiced every prayer in Richard Foster's lexicon of divine dialogue. Many faithful believers added theirs. I have nothing but praise for the support we have received from our congregation and friends. Yet by every visible measure, our prayers have failed to have a positive impact on Kristen's well-being.

At some unconscious point, I wrote off God's intervention and went into survival mode. I attempted to make Kristen's world what it needed to be "without God's help." I gave her the mercy and love that God was withholding. Like the main character in William P. Young's novel *The Shack*, I was enveloped in a "Great Sadness." The Psalmist's complaint described my prayer life:

But I am like the deaf, I do not hear;
like the mute, who cannot speak.
Truly, I am like one who does not hear,
and in whose mouth is no retort.

Psalm 38: 13-14

I had read about the dark night of the soul. I had some concept of grief and its stages. I was familiar with the concept of projecting, especially in times of emotional flooding. Being sifted, however, was not a neocortical experience. There were days and weeks when I could not utter "Help thou my unbelief!" or "Why have you forsaken me?" I went past *Deus absconditus* (the hidden God) and looked into the abyss of *Deus defunctus* (the dead God).

Job's severest test was likely the death of his children (1:13-20). In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan could not accept the reality of the goodness of God because of the great suffering and death of children.¹ A professor of religion at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill shared with NPR that he had been a confessing Christian but eventually abandoned the faith because of the moral problem of suffering in our world.² I have yet to find a theodicy that really understands the situation.

Jesus prayed that Simon's faith would not "fail" as he was sifted like wheat. The word translated "fail" means to "eclipse" or "pass by." That describes what happened to my prayer life. It was eclipsed by emotional pain and overshadowed by the spiritual struggle.

Something has changed for me in the past year, however, which I can only attribute to the prayers of Jesus. Apparently, when I could not pray, Jesus never stopped. When I was buried in chaff, he was trying to dig me out. My faith found a resting place in Jesus' prayers for me rather than in

my prayers to him. I no longer have much faith in the “power of prayer,” but my faith in the power of God is emerging from eclipse.

“BUT I HAVE PRAYED FOR YOU”

I performed the wedding of a young couple, and six months later the new husband walked into a robbery and was shot dead. The widow sank into dark despair, coming out occasionally for fits of rage. She eventually lost her job but did not care. Her family and friends shared her suffering but not in a way that seemed to lighten the burden. Her faith went into total eclipse.

It had been over three years since the tragic turn in her life when she came by to see me. Her demeanor was different. She was not smiling, but she was erect, alert, and engaging. “I got face to face with my depression,” she began. “Tell me about it,” I replied.

“Last night, the familiar darkness began to wash over me as it has done for so long. Only this time, I didn’t drink more wine, eat more ice cream, or curl up on the couch. I stood up and demanded to know what it wanted from me. I yelled and even commiserated with it for over an hour. In the process, I named it Ms. Fogbottom because of the way it moved in, turned everything gray and shut me down.”

“Something changed after that fight. It wasn’t like happiness washed over me. It was more like some weight fell off my heart or like I had cracked out of an egg shell. For the first time in forever it felt like maybe God didn’t hate me. What do you think that was?”

I smiled and said, “I think the end of your eclipse might be near. Jesus has been praying for that, you know.”

NOTES

1 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book V, Chapter 4 (“Rebellion”).

2 Bart Ehrman, “The Gospel Truth: Sometimes a Little Hazy,” interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, 4 March 2009.



KEN MASSEY

is Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church in Greensboro, North Carolina.