

Christians Transformed by Prayer 2021
 Mark 2:1-12 James 5:13-20

Mark 2:1-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. 3Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. 4And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. 5When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’ 6Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7 ‘Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ 8At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, ‘Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? 9Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven”, or to say, “Stand up and take your mat and walk”? 10But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he said to the paralytic— 11 ‘I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.’ 12And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’

James 5:13-20 (New Revised Standard Version)

13Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 14Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. 16Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. 17Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest. 19My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, 20you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Growing up in a family that was active in the Church,
 I’d heard this story from Mark 2 several times.

But it came alive and more meaningful to me **as a directed meditation**
 when it was the focus and reading during a spiritual exercise.

Our spiritual director read it out loud very clearly and carefully,
 then had us all close our eyes and be still to hear it again,
 and try to imagine that we were there in the story
 as a close observer watching & listening taking it in.

When she read it to us it was very slowly with pauses between verses
 to give us time and space to reflect and think about every detail,
 about how it all fit together and what was being revealed.

Then she read it to us once more, and this time
 we were to visualize it **from the perspective of the lame man**,
 thinking about what would our feelings and sensations be

with everybody watching us being lowered into the crowd.

And when Jesus said, vs. 5 “your sins are forgiven”,
you are still lying there -- not healed though your sin is forgiven,
denying the idea illness & suffering always tied to someone’s sin...
... and so what would you be thinking there on the mat?

Then that powerful moment when Jesus said to you, vs. 11
“stand up, take your mat and go to your home”,
what would that have been like? ---
- perhaps wondering, can I really stand up and walk out?,
then discovering that indeed you can, that you are healed,
and then walking through the amazed and mystified crowd,
still trying to figure out **what just happened to me?**

After a pause, our spiritual director read the story to us again,
and this time we were to see ourselves inside the house
as part of the crowd inside listening to Jesus teach.

Suddenly there is dirt and roof falling and interrupting the Lord.
You see a man on a mat being lowered through the hole
and you wonder, just what exactly is going on here?

You are watching and listening as Jesus speaks to the lame man,
and you can see that the religious leaders are upset with Jesus...
... so then what are you thinking, what comes to mind
as you watch him stand and walk out through the crowd?
How would someone in the crowd react to what they had seen happen?

When the passage was read to us again, this time we were to listen
from the perspective of the scribes, the religious authorities.

The scribes are gathered off to the side listening and deciding
as this man from Nazareth with no credentials or formal training,
has attracted this overwhelming and attentive crowd
and teaches with such wisdom and unheard of authority-
-- who is he and how can this be?

It is offensive to those with rabbinic credentials,
and who does he think he is, to be doing this?
Suddenly that lame man on a mat enters the scene
and you hear Jesus declare, “your sins are forgiven.”

Now that is disturbing and infuriating for only God can forgive sin.
Who does Jesus think he is to be making such a declaration.
Jesus has infringed on the scribes’ turf – and that’s unacceptable.

Then Jesus addresses the religious leaders’ rancor and disdain,
vs. 11 “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.”
but how could he possibly know that you were thinking?
Jesus then tells the man to stand, to walk and to go home,
and somehow he does --- he’s able to stand up and walk out.
Clearly he poses a danger to the scribes’ authority,
and somehow Jesus must be stopped and silenced.

Our spiritual director’s last reading and meditation was
to imagine being **one of the 4 men bringing their friend to Jesus.**

Perhaps having heard rumors about the Lord,
hoping maybe he can do something for their friend.
But when they got to the house where Jesus was teaching,
the crowd was huge ... too tight and unyielding to get inside.

Then in a bold, audacious and even defiant move,
the 4 of you haul your friend up to the roof, dig a hole large enough
to lower your friend down to where Jesus is sitting and teaching.
Imagine your surprise looking down at the words & events that follow.

**It's with great commitment, tenacity and boldness
they brought their friend's need before Jesus.
Isn't that's a great metaphor to represent intercessory prayer?**

We can see their support in overcoming the obstacles that
were keeping their friend from the healing power of Jesus.
**These four friends of the paralytic at the four corners of the mat
exemplify for us, what it means for us to pray for one another...
... prayer was being enacted as they cared for their friend--**

**--- and as the Church, we are to be that to each other,
like those four friends at the corners of the mat,
bringing those in need before Jesus, to heal and to make whole,
humbly before Almighty God, who hears and answers our prayers.**

That Mark 2 story also reminds me of a similar story I once read.

A favorite seminary professor and his wife were very much in love
and would walk together holding hands around campus every evening.
Seeing their deep and genuine love for each other
was a truly a joy and gift to the seminary community.

Quite unexpectedly the professor's wife suddenly, tragically died.

He was shattered, broken and unable to eat or take walks on campus.
In his grief and sorrow he was lonely and depressed,
his soul fell into a very dark night of isolation.

Several professor-friends came by to comfort and pray with him,
and he told them that he wasn't able to pray to God right now.
He said, "I'm too hurt, angry, upset and disappointed,
in fact, I'm not certain I even believe in God anymore."

After some moments of silence one of his friends said,
"Then we will **believe for you**, and we will pray **for you**."

And every few days they would come by his house,
and they would pray together **for their friend**,
asking God to restore the gift of faith **to their friend**.

After several months,
as they gathered to pray for their friend, he smiled and spoke.
"It's no longer necessary for you to pray **for me**.
Today, I would like you to pray **with me**...
... for my dark night of the soul has passed."

All through Scripture we are instructed to pray,
but as Christians, how do we understand this process of prayer?,
and what is it that actually happens when we do pray to God?

The answer is, it's a mystery that we don't fully understand,
as we read in the Call to Worship today from Isaiah 55:8-9

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

The surest way to get it wrong,
is to try and explain exactly what happens when we pray,
or to establish rules & formula for praying a perfect prayer.

The book of James provides a very pragmatic look at our faith,
how our behavior as Christians is defined by God's grace,
and how to live well within the life that God desires for us.

The passage today is about our need for Christian prayer,
a fervent call for Christians to be faithful in prayer. vs. 13~16

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ... The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

If you are struggling or dealing with troubles or difficulties,
bring it to the Lord in prayer, put on the armor of grace,
and let the Spirit's embrace guide and comfort you.

If things are going incredibly well and wonderful,
bring it to the Lord in prayer, put on the armor of grace,
and thank your God with praise, joy and gratitude.

Whatever is going on in life, through prayer we commune with God,
which helps us interpret life in terms of God's presence,
as in prayer we ask, what is God showing us, teaching us
so that our faith can develop, mature and grow deeper,
which is to put on the armor of grace.

**The Lord is always up to something, pouring grace into our lives
and in prayer God guides us to see it, recognize it and receive it.**

So rather than prayer as a to do list or instructions for God,
our prayers become requests that he open our eyes & hearts
to better perceive how he has chosen to work and heal...
... though of course we're to ask God for what we desire and want,
knowing that most often God has something much better for us.

In prayer we focus, speak with and listen for the Spirit to reveal,
placing our emotions, desires, needs and burdens before God,
expecting that the Lord will do something about it,
and help us live more fully & faithfully as God intends.

**And rather than a one-way-street of sending our messages to God,
let us in prayer ask how God wants to transform each of our lives.**

Prayer is traveling along a path where we can be transformed by God,
and if there is a change in circumstances or situation,
it is only by the sovereign grace and kindness of God,
and **not that our prayer has coerced or forced God's hand.**

Prayer is also about far more than just our individual spirituality.
It is also the
critical work and mission of the whole community of faith.

**Prayer is an integral part of the life we share as a faith community
as we are all to be involved and supporting one another in prayer.
Praying for others, we recognize that all are important & connected
as we become conduits of God's gracious love, mercy and healing.**

Prayer helps us be open to change and growth as we connect with God,
as we can see this world and our circumstances in new ways,
finding peace and hope as God realigns our understanding
with a renewed Christian perspective and perception.
Prayer moves us toward healing, even if our situation doesn't change.

Christian prayer is coming before our Heavenly Father in humility,
so that by sharing our concerns, petitions and requests,
our relationship with God grows deeper as we draw nearer,
so that our lives and our thinking
are brought more and more into line with our loving God.

Does God want us to pray when we want something?
Yes, absolutely, the command to pray is throughout Scripture.

Does God do miracles, impossible and totally unexpected things?
Certainly that's true, and there's no doubt about that.

**Does prayer cause or make the Lord do something
that otherwise God would not have done had we not prayed?**

I don't know, how could anyone other than God possibly know,
for prayer and the decisions of God are definitely not
something to be tested by experiment in a laboratory.

The God of Scripture is infinite and unlimited, entirely free,
a mysterious and uncontrollable God who loves and rules in wisdom,
and if we lose sight of that truth and understanding,
then we're no longer talking about the true God,
the God of Israel as described in Scripture.

Prayer is **far too precious a gift**,
a wonderful connection & blessing, & critical to our walk of faith,
for it to ever be reduced to something rote or mechanical.
**Prayer is really not about getting what I want, or think I want,
but more critically getting on track the God's purpose & plan.**

There is a painting in the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC
painted by Peter Paul Rubens in 1615,
a favorite of mine called, "Daniel in the Lions' Den".

It always struck me that Daniel isn't even look at the fierce lions,
but his focus is looking upward expectant & confident in the Lord.
Prayer is simply keeping our focus set upon the Lord our God.

In Ephesians it's described this way: Eph 3:17, 5:10-11, 18

... may Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ...Finally, be strong in the Lord and **in the strength of his power**. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand ... pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.