

RANSOMED HEART

LOVE GOD. LIVE FREE.

May 2016

Dear Friends,

“Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1). I find that line immensely encouraging; I’m grateful Scripture precedes the story of the “persistent widow” with that little comment. It’s encouraging because Jesus obviously understands that we all have reasons to give up.

Stasi just called me into the living room. “I have disappointing news,” she said. My stomach had that queasy *oh no—what next?* feeling. I braced myself. We’ve had several rounds of bad news this spring and I just don’t know how much more I can take right now. “The radiologist called and gave me the report.” I sat down and listened. It wasn’t what we were hoping for. It certainly wasn’t the report of healing we had been praying for over the course of the past seven months. My heart sank.

“But we prayed.”

I know we all have stories like this—stories of disappointment in prayer. We tried, we put our faith in God, but nothing seemed to change. It can be brutal on the heart and on our relationship with God. When prayer doesn’t seem to work, it can really knock the wind out of you.

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me? (Psalm 13:1-2)

Which brings us back to not giving up. Jesus urged us not to give up.

When Stasi gave me the bad news this morning I wanted to go “global”; in my disappointment I wanted to say, “Prayer doesn’t work. I’m done praying about everything.” When the truth is, we have seen stunning answers to prayer over the years, *many* answers to prayer. No—not all the time. But many times. Yet when my current prayers don’t seem to be working, I forget all the answers I *have* seen over the years. I have to catch myself and remember what is true. This is exactly what the Psalmist does, just a few lines later:

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

He reminds himself, “God does love me; he *has* been good to me.” This moment may be heartbreaking, but this is not my total experience of God, not even close. I have to anchor myself

in what is true: God is good. He cares immensely. He *is* involved. When disappointment strikes and my prayers seem to be bouncing off the ceiling, I simply *must* anchor my heart in these truths or I will go down like a sinking ship.

The story of the persistent widow is a story about *persevering* in prayer. Most of the great biblical prayer stories are. How many times did it take Elijah to call down the promised rain? Not once; not twice; *eight* rounds of all-of-your-heart-soul-mind-and-strength prayer. In Acts 12 James had been seized by Herod and executed. He then arrested Peter and put him in jail and the outcome looked the same. But the story shifts with the phrase, “But the church was praying very earnestly for him” (v. 5). The Greek for “very earnestly” is the same description of the prayers of Jesus in Gethsemane. This is serious prayer. The text also indicates that the church is praying for Peter all night long.

And Peter is rescued.

In humility I don’t think we can begin to discuss the dilemma of “unanswered prayer” until we have learned to pray like the persistent widow, Elijah, or like the church in Acts 12.

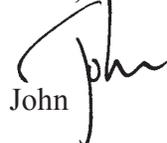
“Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). The disciples asked Jesus to *teach them* how to pray; prayer is something to be learned. I assumed it was more like sneezing—you just sort of did it, and God took care of the rest. A very naive view of prayer. You couldn’t get away with that attitude in your marriage, or career, not as a parent, or in anything you enjoy doing. Everything you value in your life you had to learn. And so it is with prayer; *especially* with prayer.

Prayer is our great secret weapon, friends. It is powerful and effective. James says, “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” (5:16). If it is, I humbly accept that it is something I want to be trained in.

I understand disappointment in prayer, I really do. I also understand there is nothing my enemy would love more than for me to give up praying. So I return to the Psalms, and let them express my heart: both “How long, O Lord?” and “But I trust in your unfailing love” for you *have* been good to me. And back to my knees I go.

If you haven’t yet picked up your copy of *Moving Mountains* – my new book on prayer – it might be the most important thing you do this year. Because everything else will be changed by your powerful prayers! In fact, Stasi and I are reading it aloud to each other in the evenings; it is really strengthening us!

Love,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'John' with a stylized flourish.

PS Don’t miss the one-night-only nationwide premier of our first film – *A Story Worth Living* – May 19th! Catch the trailer and find your local theater at: astoryfilm.com