

Bible Study: Praise God in the Storm

It was the dead of winter in Yarmouth, Maine. Discouragement was trying to wrap itself around my neck like ivy twining around a house. My husband was out of work and depressed. Day after day he interviewed for jobs and didn't get them.

Normally optimistic and able to encourage him, I was struggling now. I felt tired, anxious, burdened by stress. I didn't see how we could pay our bills. Joy seemed gone from our lives, and hope seemed far away.

I continued reading my Bible and talking to God in this wilderness season, but my eyes kept landing on my circumstances. I poured out my heart to Him but heard no answers.

Finally I shared with our Monday night Bible study group how trying a time it was for us. They prayed for us, but things only got worse financially, and my anxiety grew.

A few weeks later at the Monday group, one of the women, Linda, took me aside and said: "Cheri, no matter how hard things are, you must praise and thank God in the midst of your circumstances. And that's not a message from me but from my missionary friend Anne. She wants you to know she's praying for you."

I had heard Linda talk about this elderly missionary who'd served in China before World War II and survived prison camp, but I had never met her. The message was a hard one to hear that night.

"I always thought You wanted genuine—not fake—praise, Lord, and I want to be real with You," I prayed. "How can I thank you and praise You when I feel so sad inside, so discouraged?"

I know it's the right thing to do, so what's wrong with me?"

A Lesson in Trust

I pondered that question all week, trying to force myself to praise and thank God. I wanted with all my heart to be faithful but felt overwhelmed by my feelings and drained from trying to bolster my depressed husband. I knew I was failing.

Falling deeper into discouragement, the next week I told Linda, "When you go to see your missionary friend this week, I want to go with you. I have a few questions to ask her." I thought if anyone could shed some light on my problem, this wise missionary could.

Linda agreed, and on a bitter cold December day, we drove to Anne's apartment. We walked in and saw a white-haired woman in a burgundy sweater laying in a recliner. Her legs were propped up and covered with a small green blanket. Print house shoes peeked out from the blanket.

Anne was almost totally blind, but her spiritual eyes were sharp as she looked over in my direction. She spoke with effort but a quiet authority, asking me all about our situation. She seemed to have a knowledge and understanding about my life far beyond what I shared, and after listening, she offered insights.

"For your children's and husband's sakes, you must praise and thank God and show in your countenance your faith in Him. For he who trusts Him wholly find Him wholly true," she said. "Thank Him in all things. Praise Him even if tears are running down your cheeks."

"But how? I asked. "I want to praise and thank God, and I've tried, but it's so hard when I'm depressed."

"By trusting Him implicitly," she continued. "You can't depend

on your feelings; they are Satan's playground. Ask for God's grace to praise Him, and He'll give it to you."

Later, over our salads and bowls of soup, I asked about Anne's experiences as a missionary in China. She shared about the day she was to leave Shanghai for furlough in Scotland.

After nine years of service with the China Inland Mission, Anne couldn't wait to see her mother, family and friends back in Scotland. She was overdue for a respite. She and the other missionaries had packed all their belongings and were about to leave for the boat when Anne heard a clamor outside their dormitory.

As she watched out the mission-house window, she saw Japanese soldiers goose-stepping in unison down the street, knees almost up to their noses. The Lord spoke to her heart, "Come aside for a minute. I want to talk to you, Anne."

Reminding her of His care and provision in many adventures and close calls in the nine years she had ministered in China, He told her she was not going home but would be a prisoner of the Japanese. He didn't tell her how long, but said He would be with her.

A precious but very real sense of God's nearness and peace filled her. "I've never forgotten this overwhelming peace and the Lord's closeness to me in that moment," Anne told us.

Then He asked her, "Do you have any prayer requests to make?"

Although Anne had never given her teeth a thought, the Holy Spirit nudged her to pray that her teeth would be preserved—that not one of them would fall out. In fact, the health and diet of prisoners is often so bad that they lose their teeth. So out of obedience rather than vanity, she asked God to protect her teeth.

Moments later she and the other English and American

missionaries were taken prisoner and marched off to a Japanese prison camp. There she spent three-and-a-half years in near starvation, dreadful cold in winter and scorching heat in summer. Cruelty, rats, disease and death were all around her. There were no Bibles, so she had to rely on all the verses she had committed to memory.

Anne related story after story about God's provision in the prison camp. She shared about His constant presence, of the people who came to know Christ.

She seemed to possess a quiet assurance that she could absolutely trust God. She knew He would never fail her. I sat there spell-bound, marveling at the mercy and faithfulness of the God she and I serve.

Anne was released after World War II ended. And although she was in poor health at the close of her internment, every single tooth was preserved.

Now she was dealing with the present, day-to-day trials of aging—failing eyes and numerous surgeries—but she encouraged us: “Trust. Cast all your cares on Him. No matter what’s on your mind, roll it onto His shoulders and rest under His wing.”

One the drive home, my thoughts were filled with Anne's stories and the Scriptures she had shared. Her words came back to me: “Don't lean on your own understanding. Don't trust what you see or feel or think; trust God and His Word. He's faithful even when we're not.”

I prayed silently, “Lord, I want to praise and thank You right in the middle of our situation, and I ask for Your grace to do that.”

The Turnaround

That night my husband was just as withdrawn and depressed as

usual, but something new was engaging my thoughts. The next few days in my quiet time I searched the Scriptures, especially the Psalms, for words to praise God. All the feelings of discouragement and worry were still lurking around, trying to drag me down, but I knelt and used these verses to adore Him.

As I did, that deep heaviness began to lift, and the anxiety about our empty checking account lifted with it. It was as if dark glasses were removed and I saw what I'd never seen before: that no matter how difficult or trying our situation was, and even if nothing external changed, I could praise and thank God because the trial would draw me into a closer relationship with Him.

Like a trickle from a frozen creek in the spring, something deep inside me began to thaw, and thanksgiving bubbled up and flowed. Slowly, my perspective began to change. I enjoyed loving God for the first time in a long time—no requests or complaints.

I could thank God for the season and for the inner work He was doing in us. I thanked Him for our health; for our children; for our marriage that was still together (the fact that it had been strained caused me to depend more on God); for the plan He had for my husband, though we hadn't see it; even for the financial losses, because they reminded me of the temporariness of material things and our eternal treasures in Christ.

One April morning I walked our sheltie down the road. It had snowed for days, and everything was frozen. A somber gray sky above offered little promise of a break in the wintry weather. I was longing for spring—and also for things to turn around in our lives.

Just then I noticed a rose bush that had been severely cut back before the snow covered it. Now it was stark, with ice

solidly frozen around it. Our lives, too, had been pruned, and the struggles weren't going away.

Three months had gone by after my visit to Anne. My husband was still having a tough time. Our savings were gone. I thought, "That's what we're like. We've been prune too—a not altogether-painless process."

"But just like this rose bush, you will bloom again and be fruitful," God seemed to say. "Let your roots go down deep in Me. Praise Me in the winters too!"

I slowly began to realize that praising and thanking God—no matter how difficult things get—will help us bloom again. There's no hole we can get ourselves into that's too deep for His love to fill. And the tough times, whether financial or physical, press us into a deeper, more intimate relationship with Him. Just as the roots of a plant grow deeper in the winter to anchor it, our faith and dependence on God are strengthened in our "winters."

Are you struggling through a difficult time? Take heart; you will bloom again, with greater fruit than before! Just keep anchoring yourself in Christ and trust Him to bring a springtime of resurrection. He does it for the roses. He will do it in my life—and He will do it in yours.

Cheri Fuller is an inspiring speaker and award-winning author of more than 45 books, including "Dangerous Prayer: Discovering Your Amazing Story Inside the Eternal Story of God" and "What a Girl Needs From Her Mom." Visit her at .



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