

God Wants You to Be Helpless

When I lived in the nation's capital, I used to notice how often the Washington papers reported suicide leaps from the Calvert Street Bridge. This happens so repeatedly that the site is often called "Suicide Bridge."

Sensing the human drama behind these brief notices, I often thought there was probably a common denominator in all these tragedies. Each person must have felt helpless.

And I have thought, If I could speak with such persons at the zero hour, I would try to stop them with the thought that helplessness is one of the greatest assets a human being can have.

For I believe that the old cliché "God helps those who help themselves" is not only misleading but often dead wrong. My most spectacular answers to prayers have come when I was helpless.

The psalmist says: "When I was hemmed in, Thou hast freed me often" (Ps. 4:1, Moffatt). Gradually I have learned to recognize this hemming-in as one of God's most loving devices for teaching us that He is real and gloriously adequate for our problems.

One such experience occurred during the writing of my first book under my own name. As the young widow of Peter Marshall, I was attempting what many felt was the rather audacious project of writing his biography. About midway through the manuscript, I received devastating criticism from one whose judgment I trusted. He told me bluntly, "You haven't even begun to get inside the man Peter Marshall."

And he was right—that was the sting of it. The realization of my inadequacy as a writer was not only an intellectual one. It was also emotional; there were plenty of tears. But out of the

crisis came a major realization: In my helplessness, there was no alternative but to put the project into God's hands. I prayed that A Man Called Peter be His book and that the results be all His, too.

And they were. I still regard as incredible the several million copies of A Man Called Peter circulating around the world. But numbers are of little importance compared to what I hear from time to time of individual lives changed through this book.

Why would God insist on helplessness as a prerequisite to answered prayer? One obvious reason is that our human helplessness is bedrock fact. God is a realist and insists that we be realists, too. So long as we are deluding ourselves that human resources can supply our heart's desires, we are believing a lie. And it is impossible for prayers to be answered out of a foundation of self-deception and untruth.

Then what is the truth about our human condition? None of us had anything to do with our being born, no control over whether we were male or female, Japanese or Russian or American, white or yellow or black. Nor can we influence our ancestry, nor our basic mental or physical equipment.

After we are born, an autonomic nervous system controls every vital function that sustains life. A power that no one really understands keeps our hearts beating, our lungs breathing, our blood circulating, our body temperature at 98.6 degrees. A surgeon can cut tissue, but he is helpless to force the body to bind that severed tissue together again. We grow old relentlessly and automatically.

Self-sufficient? Scarcely!

Did Jesus have any comment about all this? Yes, as always He put His finger on the very heart of the matter: "'Without Me you can do nothing'" (John 15:5, NKJV).

Nothing? That seems a trifle sweeping! After all, human beings have made great progress. We have almost eliminated diseases such as smallpox, bubonic plague, tuberculosis, polio and most of the communicable diseases of childhood. We have learned to control our environment to quite an extent. We have put men on the moon. How can all that be helplessness?

Most of us do not enjoy that idea. The cult of humanism since the Renaissance has trained us to believe that we are quite adequate to be masters of our own destiny.

Yet not only did Jesus insist on the truth of our helplessness; He underscored it by telling us that this same helplessness applied equally to Him while He wore human flesh: “‘The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do’” (John 5:19). In this as in everything else, He was setting the pattern for imperfect humanity.

The Scriptures spell out for us point by point how helpless we are in relation to our spiritual lives as well as our physical ones.

We feel an impulse toward God. We think we are reaching out for Him. Not so, Jesus told us. “‘No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him’” (John 6:44).

We want eternal life and release from our sins. We think we can earn this salvation. No. The truth is, “It is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

So far as the virtues and graces we long for in our lives—faith, joy, patience, peace of mind—there is no way we can work up such qualities. Paul tells us in Galatians 5:22-23 that these are gifts of the Holy Spirit; they can be had in no other way. “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven” (John 3:27).

This emphasis on our helplessness is found over and over in

the writings of Christians in other eras. For instance, in that little jewel of a 17th-century book, Brother Lawrence's Practice of the Presence of God, helplessness was the hinge on which turned the Carmelite lay brother's relationship with God:

"That when an occasion of practicing some virtue offered, he addressed himself to God, saying, 'Lord, I cannot do this unless Thou enablest me'; and that then he received strength more than sufficient.

"That when he had failed in his duty, he only confessed his fault, saying to God, 'I shall never do otherwise if You leave me to myself; it is You who must hinder my falling, and mend what is amiss.' That after this he gave himself no further uneasiness about it."

Though few of us have Brother Lawrence's maturity, nevertheless sometime in life every one of us finds himself out of control, caught in circumstances he is helpless to change. When this happens, welcome such times! Often it is only then that we lesser spirits enter into the truth of Jesus' statement, "'Without Me you can do nothing'" (John 15:5).

With helplessness alone, one would be like a bird trying to fly with one wing. But when the other wing of God's adequacy is added to our helplessness, then the bird can soar triumphantly above and through problems that hitherto have defeated us.

I have always been impressed by the story of Dr. A.B. Simpson, the famous New York preacher. Poor health had haunted this man. Two nervous breakdowns plus a heart condition led a well-known New York physician to tell him when he was only 38 that he would never live to be 40.

The physician's diagnosis underscored the physical helplessness that the minister knew only too well. Preaching

was an agonizing effort. Climbing even a slight elevation brought on a suffocating agony of breathlessness.

In desperation, sick in body and despairing in spirit, Dr. Simpson went at last to his Bible to find out exactly what Jesus had to say about disease. He became convinced that Jesus had always meant healing to be part of His gospel for the redemption of man's total being.

One Friday afternoon soon after this revelation, Dr. Simpson took a walk in the country. He was forced to walk painfully, slowly, for he was always out of breath. Coming to a pine woods, he sat down on a log to rest. Soon he found himself praying, telling God of his complete helplessness with regard to his physical condition.

But to this helplessness he added his belief that God was "for health" all the way. It was that majestically powerful combination again, "My total inadequacy, Your perfect adequacy." He then asked Christ to enter him and become his physical life, for all the needs of his body, until his life's work was done.

"There in the woods," he said later, "I made a connection with God. Every fiber in me was tingling with the sense of God's presence."

A few days after that, Simpson climbed a mountain 3,000 feet high. "When I reached the top," he related joyfully, "the world of weakness and fear was lying at my feet. From that time on I had literally a new heart in my breast."

And so he did. During the first three years after this healing he preached more than a thousand sermons, conducting sometimes as many as 20 meetings in one week. His testimony was that never once did he feel exhausted. For the rest of his life he was noted for the amazing volume of his sermonic, pastoral and literary work. He lived to be 76.

Simpson's work, moreover, has lived after him. The Christian and Missionary Alliance, which he founded, is still a potent spiritual force today; his books are still being published and are blessing millions.

Why is prayer so startlingly effective when we admit our helplessness? First, as we have seen, because God insists upon our facing up to the facts of our human situation. In addition, this recognition and acknowledgment of our helplessness is the quickest way to that right attitude so essential to prayer. It deals a mortal blow to the most serious sin of all—man's independence that ignores God.

Another reason is that we cannot learn firsthand about God—what He is like, His love for us as individuals, His real power—as long as we are relying on ourselves and other people. And fellowship with Jesus is the true purpose of our lives, the only foundation for eternity.

So if your every human plan and calculation has miscarried, if, one by one, human props have been knocked out and doors have shut in your face, take heart. God is trying to get a message through to you, and the message is: "Stop depending on inadequate human resources. Let Me handle the matter."

Here are three suggestions for presenting to Him what I call "the prayer of helplessness."

First, be honest with God. Tell Him you are aware of the fact that in His eyes you are helpless. Give God permission to make you feel your helplessness at the emotional level, if that is what is needed. Recognize that this may be painful! There is a good psychological reason, however, why it may be necessary. Unless the power of our emotions is touched, it is as if a fuse remains unlit.

Second, take your heart's desire to God. You have accepted your helplessness. Now grip with equal strength of will your belief that God can do through you what you cannot. It may

seem to you for a time that you are relying on emptiness, dangling over a chasm. Disregard these feelings and thank God quietly that He is working things out.

Third, watch for opening doors. When the right door opens, you will have a quiet, inner assurance that God's hand is on the knob. That is the time of action for you, an opportunity for your creativity to join hands with His.

One sunny day in the future, you will look back and your heart will overflow with praise to God that He cared about you enough to shut you up to Him alone. Without that stringently kind providence, you could never have learned firsthand the amazing benefit of helplessness.

Catherine Marshall (1914-1983) was one of America's most beloved authors. She wrote two novels—Christy and Julie—and numerous inspirational works. She and her second husband, Leonard E. LeSourd, along with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, founded Chosen Books in 1972. Adapted from The Best of Catherine Marshall, edited by Leonard E. LeSourd, copyright 1993. Published by Chosen Books. Used by permission.