

What You Need When the Whole World is Against You

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John: The Jesus I Never Knew Series

John 16:5-33

We have been going through a study from the Gospel of John over the last 5 or 6 months. In the last 2 months we have been looking in particular at John chapters 13 – 16 – what has been titled the “upper room discourse” – Jesus’ words to his disciples on his very last evening with them before he is put to death.

There is an old saying that last words are lasting words. What is it that Jesus concentrates on as he speaks to his disciples? What does he talk with them about? The subjects that Jesus talks about at the end are probably the most important subjects for his followers to hear.

When people are about to die, it’s generally not the time that they tell jokes or engage people with the trivial. They share what they consider most important. Men dying on a battlefield or cradled by one of their comrades might say something like, “Tell my wife, Rachael, that I always loved her.” Or “Try to get word to my kids that their daddy was thinking of them before he died.”

Here’s Jesus about to be crucified. He shares with us about things that are most significant to him. One of the dominant themes that runs through chapters 13 – 16 is the opposition that Jesus predicts for his followers from the world. Jesus reminds me of a dad about to leave on a long business trip, warning his kids about drugs or gangs in the neighborhood: “Now remember what I told you. You stay away from those guys on the corner. They’re up to no good. Did I tell you about the guys on the corner? Let me remind you again. Stay away from the pushers. Stay away from the gangs.”

Jesus’ heart is bursting with concern for his followers as he warns them repeatedly about the effects of the world on their Christian faith. He has a very clear world-view in John 13 – 16 and that is of his followers being under attack from the world. Last week, I described the attack on Christianity in America. Christians are under attack in the United States in at least 5 dimensions of life. In family, in sexuality, in education, in the media and regarding materialism and consumerism. Families are under attack.

Every other family I know that has more than one teenager is struggling with one of their kids. How in the world do you raise healthy, sexually abstinent, truth telling, other centered, fervently oriented, Christ honoring teenagers in a culture that undermines parents at every turn?

Marlene and I were walking around Easton just a couple of nights ago and I said, "You know, there are thousands of teenagers wandering around here on Thursday night. I wonder if parents have any idea of what they are releasing their children to. When kids walk around a place like Easton – just look at the displays in the clothing stores ... walk by the racks of music ... virgin records ... look at the movies or magazines marketed to teenagers. And what are the messages that teenagers are getting, hundreds and hundreds of times just by walking around this place?"

One of the messages they're getting as they walk around Easton is, "Looking good is the most important thing that could be said about you." Character formation is irrelevant. You don't see a clothing store with a big sign saying, "Honesty is the Best Policy" – "Tell the Truth" – "Remember, don't lie to your parents"

There aren't a lot of articles in Teen magazines titled "Be a Decent Human Being" – "How to Have Rock Solid Character". What is the message as you walk around a place like Easton? "What you own and what you can afford to purchase is far more significant than the kind of person you are." The message is that your life does consist of the abundance of your possessions.

What's the message to teenagers as they walk around Easton? Is it not that sexuality must be continually expressed and endlessly discussed? Little else is really important in life. Sex, not God, is the central concern of life. Look at the ads. Look at the movie titles. Listen to the music. Sex, not God, is the central concern of life and teens are told that a thousand times a day.

What's the message? The message that drenches this culture is that your feelings should control all that you do. We live in an entirely feelings-dominated culture. What should control you is not the truth, not what your parents believe, certainly not what the Bible teaches. You must always go with your feelings - a continual, non-stop assault on parents trying to raise teens.

There is a continual non-stop assault on marriages. The culture regularly undermines marriage. In all of its messages there is a rejection of values like patience or perseverance or forgiveness or faithfulness. Isn't the larger culture continually preaching to us immediate gratification? -- Making sure you "get yours" under all circumstances? Escape from pain – have no tolerance for any discomfort. Isn't the larger culture producing a society of utter whiners and complainers and quitters who can not accept responsibility for any action, but always shift the blame to someone else? We have a culture in which everyone is a victim and no one is at fault. Do you discern, are you in touch with a sustained attack of the world on your family, on your value system, on your kids?

Of course 21st Century America is not the only place and time that Jesus was speaking about. This is not the worst period of history. Jesus is also speaking

also to 18th Century England where, before the Revival under John Wesley & George Whitefield, one of the most popular forms of entertainment was to go out and watch public hangings. Every large city had “hanging shows” on Saturday where 10 – 15 people might be hanged at once. In 18th Century England, people could be hanged for any one of 160 different offenses. These included shoplifting, and speaking badly of the King.

In 1750 one out of four houses in London sold Gin. Signs over Gin houses advertised, “Drunk for one shilling – dead drunk for 2 shillings.” The extent of public drunkenness was so great that 5-year-old children staggered through the streets of London. The 3 sons of the King openly kept mistresses. Seats were bought and sold in Parliament. In fact, a parliamentary seat would be advertised in the paper for sale. Appointments as Bishops in the church were made as the result of bribery.

Jesus warns us about 21st Century America, 18th Century England, 20th Century Nazi Germany, and 1st Century Rome. Whatever time you’re living in – whatever country – you will be under attack from the world.

What do we do? Just throw up our hands in despair? Is the warning that things are really, really bad – really dark – but there’s nothing you can do about it? In chapter 16, Jesus offers us help in our battle with the world.

I’ve called today’s talk “What Jesus Offers when the Whole World is Against You.” Let’s pray

John 16:5-7

“Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”

Jesus says in John 16:7, “But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away.”

If you have a Bible I’d like you to underline the words “it is for your good.” These words contain the most basic statement of faith that a Christian makes about God in this bad world. Christian faith goes like this: Despite the badness of the world, I can still experience the goodness of God. *It is for your good* Jesus says. All that God does, He does for my good.

Is that your faith? Is that foundational in your approach to this world, that God is good and He intends good and actually works for good all the time, in every circumstance of your life? Is that your bottom line as you approach this world and God?

Jesus acknowledges that life can be very painful in this world. He says in verse 6, “because I have said these things, you are filled with grief.” In this world you will be disappointed – maybe you’re hurt now, your heart may be broken – you may feel abandoned, alone, misunderstood. But do you carry with you, all the time, the knowledge that God is good and that He intends good and actually works for good in every circumstance of your life?

There is nothing more basic about God that you can say than that He is good. Back in the Old Testament, in the book of Exodus, when Moses asked to see God in all of His glory, we read:

“And the Lord said, ‘I will cause all of my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence.’” (Exodus 33:19).

Goodness is the essential characteristic of God. The goodness of God is foundational for people’s prayer and worship throughout the Bible. God’s goodness is mentioned dozens of times in the books of Psalms.

Psalms 34:8 says, “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.”

Psalms 86:5 says, “You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.”

Psalms 100:5 says, “For the Lord is good and His love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.”

Psalms 106:1 “Praise the Lord. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.”

I particularly like Psalms 119:68 & 71 – “You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.”

All that God does in your life and my life and the life of every one of His children is designed for your good. Now consider the world’s substitute for God. What does the Bible call the world’s substitute for God. The Bible calls the substitute for God an Idol.

You know the easiest way to distinguish an idol from God? It concerns this issue of goodness. Only with God is everything designed for your good. Nothing else, no one else, no activity, no person, no substance, nothing in this world is completely committed to your good other than God.

In the 21st Century we often call idols “addictions.” Just like God, an addiction asserts a total claim on your life. If you’re addicted to some substance – alcohol

or drugs or food, or you're addicted to pornography or homosexuality or some other sexual activity, or you're addicted to work, or gambling, or a relationship – that addiction, like God, will exercise a total claim over your life.

A true addiction demands your thoughts, your plans, your time, your money, your reputation, your health, your peace, often your job, your marriage. A true addiction, like God, demands that you serve it with everything you have and everything that you are.

As Bob Dylan said 25 years ago, "You've got to serve somebody. You may serve the Devil or you may serve the Lord, but you've got to serve somebody." What happens when you serve an addiction? What is the ultimate end of an addiction? What is the goal of an addiction?

When the world offers you a substitute for God that exercises a total claim on your life, what is the purpose of that substitute? I'll tell you what the purpose is. It is for your ruin, for your destruction. An addiction, which is our 21st century word for an idol, will take from you everything. In fact, some addictions to drugs, to alcohol, to sex may actually take your life.

Only with God is your total devotion rewarded with good. It is for your good, Jesus says – for your blessing, for the purpose of fulfilling your life and freeing you up and satisfying you and making you a healthy, more whole, more integrated person – that God works. Whatever so called good thing you can come up with – your kid, your boyfriend, your girlfriend, your spouse, your job – no one else and nothing else will always, always work for your good.

Everything in this world will disappoint you other than God. In a world that is bad, God is good and He always, always, always works for your good. That's the context, that's the basic foundation from which the Christian approaches the world. And out of God's goodness, He gives us gifts. The most important of which is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

John 16:7 – "But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you".

That word Counselor, as some of you know, the translation of a Greek word – Paraklatos – its anglicized form is Paraclete. This word Paraclete is a very rich and many-sided word. The King James Version translated this word "comforter". In John 14:16, 18 we read these words in the King James Version,

(16) "And I will pray to the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you forever. (18) I will not leave you comfortless; I will come to you." (Jn. 14:16, 18)

In the New International Version we read, “I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you.” Sometimes we say, if only Jesus was still around like he was in the 1st century. Wouldn’t it be wonderful? We could talk to him. We could ask him questions. He would explain to us. He could help us.

We don’t have to go back to the 1st century to be around Jesus. Jesus promised to be around with his people from the 1st century to today. In fact, he says that he will be around more people and in a more intense way than he was in the 1st century. It is for our good that he goes away because when he goes away he will send the Comforter. Comfort is an unusual thing, isn’t it? When you’re grieving the loss of a loved one, when you’re deeply distressed because your heart is broken, when you’ve suffered a major disappointment in a relationship or in achieving some goal, just having other people near you – having someone hug you, just having another person embrace you and stand along side of you, whispering to you that you are loved – gives us wonderful encouragement and strength to keep going on.

Your circumstance may not have changed at all. You still may have lost a mother or father, your wife or husband, your child or friend. You still may have been denied the pregnancy that you sought, the adoption that you’ve gone after, the job you applied for. The circumstances haven’t changed, but comfort gives you the ability to keep going in the face of tragedy or disappointment. This is part of what the gift of the Spirit means for us. God comes with His presence when we are in pain.

How many of you have experienced the presence of God – the hug, the embrace of God the Holy Spirit when you were grieving? Friend, if you haven’t welcomed Jesus into your life and surrendered to him as your Lord, you are missing something so much more precious than money or success. Comfort in a time of tragedy, and help.

The gift of God’s presence is the most wonderful thing in the world, especially for those of you who find yourself, now, alone. As you go back to school you may find yourself alone at the lunch table. You have no one to eat with because you are a Christian and all the other kids are into something so radically different than you that it’s difficult to connect.

You might find yourself alone in one of your college classes or women’s studies or Law School because it seems like not that many Christians sign up for those programs. You might find yourself alone in your office. Jesus promises you, by His Spirit, he will not leave you alone. Welcome his presence. Before you walk into the lunchroom, welcome the presence of Jesus throughout the day in your office. Welcome his presence in your classroom, in your family.

The word paraclete, which is translated in our New International Version Bibles “Counselor,” also carries with it the connotation of Helper. The Spirit of God is

given to us as a helper. Has anyone ever helped you in a time of need? One of the most wonderful stories I've heard about helping in our church concerns a woman who I will call Diane who's developmentally disabled. She's a 33-year-old living with HIV. Diane regularly attended Project Compassion events. Project Compassion is Vineyard's ministry to those who have HIV or AIDS. She went to Project Compassion's Christmas and Easter banquet and joined a group for Coffee and Conversation. After a few months, Diane asked for a faithful friend. The Faithful Friend program is a program in which a person with HIV in the community is paired with someone from Vineyard.

In November 2002, Diane was paired up with a woman named Lisa. Diane began accompanying Lisa to church and to Lisa's women's group. Lisa's group adopted Diane and helped her through various crises. There were multiple occasions when Diane was forced to leave her house with very little notice. She often called Lisa in tears and in no time Lisa rounded up people from the church to help Diane move.

About 6 months ago, Diane began attending the Vineyard. She came forward one Saturday evening to receive Christ as her Savior. Not only did Diane receive Christ, she was baptized just a few months ago in April. In June, Diane was given 6 months to live by her physicians. Project Compassions Faithful Friends have helped Diane with gifts, food, practical assistance of moving, prayer, and friendship. They are with her in life and they will be with her in death. When you think of the Holy Spirit, you should think in your mind of a Faithful Friend, a helper.

When you think of the gift of the Spirit you should think of an attorney who defends or prosecutes. The Holy Spirit defends us. As we found last week,

John 14:25-26, "All of this I have spoken while I was still with you. But the counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

The Holy Spirit not only defends us, as we talked about last week, but as an advocate or attorney, he prosecutes the world.

"When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned." (John 16:8-11)

This is what you might call the unpopular work of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Spirit, in pointing out to the world its moral bankruptcy and its spiritual bankruptcy, is the prosecutorial work of the Spirit. This work of holding up a mirror to the world and allowing the world to see itself in all of its ugliness and

depravity and confusion. Jesus says the Spirit will come along, prosecuting the world, declaring it guilty regarding sin because “men do not believe in me.” The essential sin in men and women is the failure to trust in Christ. This is the sin that will keep you from being forgiven. This is the sin that will keep you out of heaven. This is the sin that will cause you to be held accountable for all your other sins. The failure to trust in Christ.

The Spirit comes along and prosecutes the world regarding righteousness because Jesus says, “I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer.” The world condemned Jesus as a criminal who was justly condemned at the cross. But because Jesus was raised by God the Father from the dead and ascended to God the Father, God reversed the judgment of this world and He points out to the world the world can’t recognize righteousness or goodness. The world regularly exchanges goodness for badness and purity for corruption. And so the Spirit of God shows the world that it doesn’t understand righteousness at all. The Father comes along and raises a condemned and rejected criminal from the dead and then names him Lord and Messiah.

The Spirit of God prosecutes the world concerning Judgment. Because, as Jesus says in verse 11, “The Prince of this world now stands condemned.” It is the work of the Holy Spirit to show the true meaning of the cross.

Why in the world would we, in the 21st century, put our trust in a condemned and crucified Jewish criminal who lived back in the 1st century? Why would we put our trust in this crucified Jew to save us today? How could he possibly be relevant? The Holy Spirit shows us the true meaning of the cross, and when Christ died it was not he who was judged; it was Satan who was judged. The power that’s at work behind the world is dealt a death blow. It was sin that was judged at the cross. The whole mindset that opposes God was judged at the cross.

The Holy Spirit comes along and prosecutes the world. You are guilty because you do not believe in Christ. You are guilty because you do not recognize righteousness. You are guilty because you misinterpret the cross. And has the Holy Spirit ever come along to you, friend, and held up the evidence of your sin before the bar of your own conscience?

Has the Holy Spirit ever come along to you, held up a mirror in which you see yourself as guilty – as guilty – as guilty? What hope did 12 uneducated men have, facing the entire Roman Empire, as they went out proclaiming that through an executed Jew, salvation has come to the world. What hope could these 12 uneducated men have of influencing their world unless they were assisted by the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit who prosecutes the world, who convicts the world and shows the world its guilt?

You know, we face a radical choice all the time when the Holy Spirit declares us to be guilty. We can choose to accept the Spirit's verdict and confess our sin and repent. If we do so, we become healthier, more whole, more integrated people. People who respond appropriately to the Spirit's verdict become people in whom Christ's power is revealed. Much of the world, unfortunately, hears the Spirit's guilty verdict rendered in their conscience, but they choose to deny the verdict. This guilty verdict I feel is the result of my low self-esteem. This guilty verdict is just because I'm reflecting my over-strict parents' views. I will redefine sin. What I am doing is really OK. I will continually dull my conscience to the voice of the Holy Spirit so that I can't hear him anymore.

When we deny and redefine and deafen ourselves to the Spirit, we do incredible damage to our souls. We create spiritual wreckage. And what do you choose, friend, to say when you hear the Spirit's verdict, "Guilty, guilty, guilty?"

C.S. Lewis is my favorite Christian author. He wrote a wonderful science fiction trilogy. The space trilogy ... and in this space trilogy we read about three planets – Mars, Venus and Earth. Mars and Venus are ruled by 2 powerful – what we would call "angels" who direct their planets under the guidance of God. But earth is what Lewis calls the "silent" planet. Because on earth, darkness reigns.

One day these powerful angels begin to invade planet earth. They lay siege to planet earth so they can save it. The hero of the story – a man named Ransom – sees these huge angels descending as a pillar of light. Only the angels are coming down at an angle that is about 10 degrees off. As Ransom looks at this pillar of light that's coming down at about 10 degrees off center, he realizes for the first time that the angels are actually coming down at a true vertical angle. It is the whole planet that is off 10 degrees. Ransom is in touch with true vertical. And as he looks around he realizes that everything is off. The floors are off, the walls are off, people are off center.

This is one of the most creative portrayals of the Holy Spirit being found that I have ever read, because it is the work of the Spirit to continually show you how off everything in this world is. That what the world holds up as good and valuable and worthwhile at Easton – the messages the world sends your family or for your marriage or you in your sexuality is all off! The advice you get at the lunch tables, in the magazines, and talk shows, it's all off. And only the Spirit can move you back to true vertical. The Holy Spirit is given to remind and to reveal.

In John 14:26 we read these words:

"But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

The Spirit assists us in the world by reminding us of the words of Jesus and the words of scripture that have been written down under the Spirit's inspiration. It is the common experience of followers of Christ when they are being pressured by

the world to have words of Jesus or words from a particular Bible text pop into their mind suddenly. Words that offer an answer for their particular need.

Our church has long supported an Indian church planter named A. Stephen, a convert from Hinduism. He became a Christian at age 16; his family beat him. The leaders of the village threatened to kill him and his father disowned him. His father literally threw A. Stephen out of the house as a teenager. His father said to him, "You are not my son and I am not your father. I never want to see you again." A. Stephen was put out in the street with just the clothes on his body and no food; no money. In this comfortless state, the Lord has regularly reminded him of the promise from the book of Psalms, Psalm 27:10, "Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me."

When you have been under pressure from the world, has the Holy Spirit ever reminded you of something that God has said in His written word?

But the Spirit's role goes beyond reminding you of things that Jesus said. The Spirit also reveals what Jesus is saying.

"I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you." (John 16:12-15)

Throughout Christian history it has been the frequent experience of followers of Christ who are being persecuted by the world to have the Lord reveal the way of escape or what's going to happen or a word of wisdom that silences opponents. It's prophetic work that complements the Spirit's reminding work. There are marvelous stories both from the early church as well as the persecuted church today of the prophetic work of the Spirit continuing to reveal the mind of Jesus in our day – people being comforted in jail with visions or dreams or being spoken to by the Holy Spirit that God is with them.

The reminding work of the Spirit is what evangelicals typically camp on. The revealing work of the Spirit is what charismatic typically camp on. We at Vineyard, we want to hold onto both – reminding and revealing work of the Spirit. We need both, what God said and what God is saying, if we're going to be equipped in the fight with the world.

Jesus not only gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, but He gives us the gift of a new world.

"In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me." Some of his disciples said to one another, "What does He mean by saying,

'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father'?" They kept asking, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We don't understand what he is saying." Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, "Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me'? I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy." (John 16:16-22)

Jesus is using an Old Testament image of a woman giving birth to describe what is happening in this world right now. This is a wonderful picture of the nature of what Jesus is doing in this world, because we see around the world tremendous amount of pain. We see the world going through all of these convulsions. We see agony. We see people experiencing great difficulty. Everywhere men and women are in distress. Giving birth is more than pain and convulsions and agony and difficulty and distress. Giving birth also is expectation and hope and joy. Jesus says to his disciples you are being plunged into a period of deep, sharp, convulsive pain. But something dramatic is happening in the midst of that pain. Something wonderful. God is breaking in and giving birth to a whole new world. The Kingdom of God is coming.

Do you perceive enough in the bad world what God is doing? In the midst of all the violence, disappointment and sickness – that there signs of the invasion of God everywhere? Do you have eyes to see not only the shape of the world, but also the shape of the Kingdom of God? The Kingdom of God is breaking into your family. The Kingdom of God is breaking into your teenager's life. The Kingdom of God is breaking into your school. The Kingdom of God is breaking into your office. Do you have eyes to see God invading, like a baby being born? Yes the world is bad, but everywhere God is invading! God is breaking in.

And finally, Jesus offers us the gift of answered prayer.

"In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete. Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father. In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father." (John 16:23-28)

In this text, Jesus promises us, unlike the ancient Kings' Courts in which an individual had to first get through the sentry at the gate and then turned over to some minor official, then to a gentleman or lady in waiting, then to a senior official ... and so on through 6 or 7 intermediaries before you finally got an audience with the King. Jesus is saying, because of his work of mediation, because of what he has accomplishing – the cross and resurrection, you and I can go to the Father and receive from the Father what we ask of Him.

You shouldn't picture, in your mind's eye, God wanting to condemn us, but being persuaded by Jesus on his knees before the Father pleading for us, "Father, don't strike them, strike me instead."

It is the Father himself who loves us. It is the Father who sent the Son to die for us. It is the Father who wills salvation – not just the Son. Jesus does not wrench out of the hands of an unwilling Father, as though the Father must be persuaded to give to us. It is the Father's desire to bless us.

As Jesus says, "The Father himself loves you because you have loved me and believed that I came from God."

But you say, "Rich, Jesus makes us all of these promises of answered prayer in John 14-16, but yet often in my battle with the world, I don't seem to get my prayers answered." Jesus says in verse 24, "Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will complete."

Rich, I've asked. I've asked on behalf of my child. I've asked on behalf of my spouse. I've asked on behalf of my roommate or for my parents, my coworkers, my classmates, my grandmother, my boyfriend, or my girlfriend, but I don't seem to have received. How do I understand why the promise of answered prayer seems to have failed in my case?

You know, over the years I've read several dozen books on prayer. Everyone wrestles with the issue of unanswered prayer. Certainly sometimes God is not saying "no". Sometimes He's just saying "not yet, but it's coming." Sometimes God wants to purify us through waiting. Sometimes he is at work and we don't see it. We have all of these audacious promises. If you ask anything in my name I will do it.

Again, I think I found the most help by reading CS Lewis in his book "Letters to Malcolm Chiefly on Prayer." Lewis says, "Every war, every famine or plague, almost every death bed, is a monument to a petition that was not granted. At this very moment thousands of people in this one island, England, are facing as an accomplished fact the very thing that they have prayed night and day, pouring out their whole soul in prayer, and, as they thought with faith. They have sought and not found ... they have knocked and it has not been opened – "But that which they greatly feared has come upon them."

Lewis asks the question, “How is it possible that, at one and the same moment, to have a perfect faith - an untroubled, unhesitating faith – you believe you will get what you ask, and yet also prepare yourself submissively in advance for a possible refusal?”

If you envision a refusal as being possible, how can you simultaneously have a perfect confidence that what you ask will not be refused? Here’s Lewis’ answers:

He says, “These lavish promises of Jesus regarding answered prayer are the worst possible place to begin Christian instruction in dealing with a child or pagan. You remember what happened when the widow started Huck Finn off with the idea that he could get whatever he wanted by praying for it. He tried the experiment and when it failed he, not unnaturally, never gave Christianity a 2nd thought. We must never speak of these promises that we read, in places like John 16:24, as being elementary or easy. If a passage contains a truth, it is a truth for very advanced pupils indeed.”

I don’t think these promises are for juveniles. He goes on to say “We must not encourage in ourselves or others the tendency to work up a subjective state which, if we succeeded, we should describe as “faith,” with the idea that this will somehow insure the granting of our prayer. [We’ve probably all done this as children] A state of mind which desperate desire working on a strong imagination can manufacture is not faith in the Christian sense.

It is a feat of psychological gymnastics. What was Jesus talking about in these texts? Lewis says, “My own idea (and I would agree with him) is that it occurs only when the one who prays does so as God’s fellow worker, demanding what is needed for the joint work.”

It is the prophet, the apostle, the missionary who would add the ordinary Christian’s prayer that is made with this confidence and finds the confidence justified by the event. The fellow worker, the companion, the colleague of God is so united with Him in certain moments that something of God’s mind enters our minds.

We don’t always feel or know the mind of God. It is no sin to come to God and say I need this miracle work for me, Lord. Help me in my unbelief. It is no sin to acknowledge to God, I am struggling. I don’t know how or whether you’re going to do this, but you’ve commanded me to ask and so I ask. To believe that God will listen to our prayers, and take them into account; to believe there is someone listening. This is where we start in prayer. And if, in the grace of God, the Lord should take you a bit higher and every so often reveal His mind to you so that you know you are a co-worker, a colleague, then you are blessed indeed.

But if in the ordinary course of events you don’t yet have that level of confidence, the Lord does not push you away. He knows the state of your heart and you do

not have to try to manipulate your heart to make it acceptable to God. You just need to ask and keep asking. Because the context in which we work is always the goodness of God. Jesus offers us gift after gift when we feel the whole world against us.

Let's Pray

What You Need When the Whole World is Against You

Rich Nathan

August 30-31, 2003

John: The Jesus I Never Knew Series

John 16:5-33

I. The Context of our Help

A. The Attack of the World

B. The Goodness of God (Jn 16:5-7; Exod. 33:19)

II. The Content of our Help

A. The Gift of the Holy Spirit

1. He Comforts and He Helps (Jn 14:18; 16:7)

2. He Defends and He Prosecutes (Jn 15:26, 17; 16:8-11)

3. He Reminds and He Reveals (Jn 14:26; 16:12-15)

B. The Gift of a New World (Jn 16:16-22)

C. The Gift of Answered Prayer (Jn 16:23-28)

D. The Gift of Assured Victory (Jn 16:33)