

LIFE IS FRAGILE; HANDLE WITH PRAYER

By Rev. Will Nelken

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I came down with a head cold last week. Not severe, but runny nose, bleary eyes, low energy. All I could think of was overcoming it before the weekend arrived. But Wednesday began early and ended late, and Thursday even earlier. By the time Friday arrived, I saw Martha off to work, and determined to get a couple of hours more sleep to ward off my heavy head. And then the phone rang. It was the police department, seeking the help of a chaplain. I hesitated just a moment—a wishful moment—and then asked for the address.

Sometimes life hits you smack in the face! A curve ball you didn't foresee. A sickness or a loss you didn't see coming. It's too sudden for you to avoid it. So what do you do next? How do you manage it?

Is there really any way to prepare for the unexpected?

Jesus reminds us, *"Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart (courage), because I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33; NLT)

Kyle and I were both called to the same scene—an auto accident that claimed the life of an unsuspecting pedestrian, a family man, being a good neighbor just a few doors from his home. How many people's lives were suddenly and severely altered in a matter of minutes! His wife, his brother (who was in business with him), his pre-teen sons, their church, his neighbors, the driver (who was blinded by the morning sun), the paramedics, the police.

After our work at the hospital was done, Kyle and I went to get a cup of coffee and decompress, and he said to me, "Life is so fragile!" How true.

Our original remodel project, begun in 2002, seemed to be on track for a successful completion, when the housing market went south and our spec home project lost millions. We were helpless to control it and it capsized our project. And even though it rattled our cages and some lost their spiritual footing, in the end we were better off. Leaner in several ways, but also cleaner and united—actually healthier.

Paul taught this: *"We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them."* (Romans 8:28; NLT)

This was no guess on his part; he said, "we know..." After many difficult experiences, in fact, as a *result* of those difficult experiences and the way God rescued and recovered his life and the church, he concluded, "we know."

A few weeks ago we heard the video testimony of Stan and Ann Steward, who suffered a terminal illness that should have scuttled their mission in Turkey. Instead, his story is having a growing, positive impact upon his wife, his children, his neighbors, those who read his book or see his video. God took what the enemy intended for evil and turned it to amazing good. The cost was great, but the result will be infinitely greater. Because of God.

Let me tell you the story of an older man (we'll call him Levi), who was "lame from birth." His friends arrived at his home just after lunch. They exchanged hurried greetings with his quite elderly parents, with whom, due to his condition, he still lived.

They lifted him to their shoulders and carried him out into the bright light of midday, through the narrow streets and out through the city gate, then along the high wall to the great double gate. The hills around the city gleamed with golden light.

Once inside the only gate that led directly into the Temple grounds they positioned their friend with a clear view of the court area where people gathered three times each day to pray.

The city had filled up with pilgrims from faraway places because it was still the season of Pentecost. The 6:00am crowd for prayer was usually just businessmen and might have been lucrative, except they seemed to hold more tightly to their money at the start of the day, so the men's strategy had been to bring their lame friend for the afternoon prayer meeting, when both businessmen and shoppers filled the court to capacity.

His stomach already felt sunken, for lunch had been nothing more than a cup of lukewarm soup and a crust of bread. It was early for prayer, so there was little to do but watch the buzz of daily activity until the afternoon crowd began to arrive.

While the sun was at its zenith, the shadow of the great wall spread to cover him, like a merciful cooling blanket and he would have dozed, except the crowd was beginning to swell again for prayer. His shift had begun.

MEANWHILE, after sharing lunch with his parents for the first time that week, John hurried back across the marketplace to find Peter. Together, they moved toward the Temple for the afternoon prayers. They so looked forward to these occasions—with new friends and old—to call on the name of the Lord together.

After Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon them so mightily and the Church in Jerusalem was born, their work of ministry had been a blur—so many people were inquiring about Jesus and seeking to understand how the ancient prophecies tied in with His life and ministry, His death and resurrection, and their work until His return.

They arrived in plenty of time, but as they stepped inside the Eastern Gate, they could see many other Christians were already there. They spoke enthusiastically with each other about the fellowship and prayer soon to begin, when Peter was suddenly distracted—something to his left caught his eye.

The scene was not unusual—a lame beggar, whom he had often seen in about this same spot, was getting settled in his place—but this day, Peter could not look away. John noticed Peter, and they both stopped as he turned to look in the same direction. This caught the attention of the beggar—like a coin sparkling in the sun—and he looked earnestly in their direction, expecting some help.

Now let's read the official record of what happened next (Acts 3:1-16):

Peter and John went to the Temple one afternoon to take part in the three o'clock prayer service. ² As they approached the Temple, a man lame from birth was being carried in. Each day he was put beside the Temple gate, the one called the Beautiful Gate, so he could beg from the people going into the Temple. ³ When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for some money.

⁴ Peter and John looked at him intently, and Peter said, "Look at us!" ⁵ The lame man looked at them eagerly, expecting some money. ⁶ But Peter said, "I don't have any silver or gold for you. But I'll give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, get up and walk!"

⁷ Then Peter took the lame man by the right hand and helped him up. And as he did, the man's feet and ankles were instantly healed and strengthened. ⁸ He jumped up, stood on his feet, and began to walk! Then, walking, leaping, and praising God, he went into the Temple with them.

⁹ All the people saw him walking and heard him praising God. ¹⁰ When they realized he was the lame beggar they had seen so often at the Beautiful Gate, they were absolutely astounded!

¹¹ They all rushed out in amazement to Solomon's Colonnade, where the man was holding tightly to Peter and John.

¹² Peter saw his opportunity and addressed the crowd. "People of Israel," he said, "what is so surprising about this? And why stare at us as though we had made this man walk by our own power or godliness? ¹³ For it is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God of all our ancestors—who has brought glory to his servant Jesus by doing this. This is the same Jesus whom you handed over and rejected before Pilate, despite Pilate's decision to release him. ¹⁴ You rejected this holy, righteous one and instead demanded the release of a murderer. ¹⁵ You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. And we are witnesses of this fact!

¹⁶ "Through faith in the name of Jesus, this man was healed—and you know how crippled he was before. Faith in Jesus' name has healed him before your very eyes.

Notice, it was not the act of prayer, or the manner of prayer, but the HEARER OF PRAYER that made the difference.

(Verse 16:) *“Faith in Jesus’ name has healed him before your very eyes.”*

When you ask for man’s help, you get what man can give; when you ask for God’s help, you get what God can give.

How differently could we navigate the unexpected difficulties of life if we were better prepared?

What would it take to become better prepared? I suggest these two things: prayer and fellowship.

Catastrophic experiences often generate a psychological (non-medical) reaction that we call “shock.” It is a reflexive response—a vain attempt to process the event by mental fixation, social withdrawal, and acting out (fight or flight)—that usually appears as dazed, disoriented, or agitated behavior. Untreated, psychological shock can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder—a lingering and debilitating condition.

The best treatment for such shock is simple social interaction—not the kind where you try to pretend nothing happened, but the kind where you intentionally share about the experience. This is a case where “two are (really) better than one” (Ecclesiastes 4:9).

Talking it through with others who have experienced the same event, as well as others who have not, provides needed perspectives, including *identification* (recognizing you are not alone in your feelings), *expansion* (realizing there are other valid viewpoints than your own), and *collaboration* (working together to arrive at acceptable conclusions and forward movement).

The Biblical word for this interplay is “fellowship”—sharing life together, with the Holy Spirit.

It is natural to pull away at such times, to isolate—and it is deadly, mentally and spiritually. You MUST break through the inner inertia, stop making excuses, and rejoin the church family—sooner rather than later.

Now, here are three practical ways to pray: Ask in advance. Ask on the spot. Thank Him on reflection.

Ask in advance: let past experiences, premonitions, and others’ experiences or needs guide your anticipatory prayers, in advance of an immediate need.

Ask on the spot: don't hesitate or be embarrassed—it's time for priority, not propriety—to pray in the moment you become aware of a need.

Thank God on reflection: heartily, repeatedly, as often as the matter returns to your thoughts.

Take a few minutes right now to think about this afternoon, this evening, tomorrow. What will you need? What might you need? What do you hope never to need?

Now voice your faith in God: What has He done to meet your needs in the past? What has He done to meet your needs in the future, to protect and secure His purpose for your life? Thank Him for it!

Do you remember the words of this old song?

*I don't worry o'er the future
For I know what Jesus said
And today I'll walk beside Him
For He knows what is ahead.*

*Many things about tomorrow
I don't seem to understand,
But I know Who holds tomorrow
And I know He holds my hand.*

