

Prayer

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[0 : 0 0] So we're going to look at Sam 13 tonight together and think about prayer because this is a Sam of prayer.

I want to start by talking about a movie though and if you've not seen Gravity, which is out six years ago so you should have seen it by now, if you've not seen Gravity and you're worried about a spoiler alert, put your earphones in for a minute and don't listen to what I'm going to say because I'm going to read to you from the Gravity script.

Now you have to imagine that I'm George Clooney, which isn't that hard, and I'm playing somebody called Matt and then I'm also playing Sandra Bullock playing somebody called Ryan.

So there's two astronauts. One is George Clooney, his name's Matt, the other is Sandra Bullock and her name is Ryan. They've been on the space shuttle but it's been destroyed and now they're trying to save themselves by finding the International Space Station and Sandra Bullock, Ryan, has tenured herself to International Space Station but Matt, George Clooney, is drifting off into space where he's going to die.

So here's how the script goes. Matt drifts away from the station into the empty space. Ryan bumps up against the station pulled by the parachute.

[1 : 2 7] She twists and turns before finally grabbing hold of a rail. Ryan says over the intercom, Matt, I'm coming to get you.

Matt says to Ryan, Ryan, you're going to have to learn to let go. Ryan stares at Matt's tiny figure in the distance, drifting off into the infinite darkness.

Matt's voice comes back over the intercom. What kind of name is Ryan for a girl? Ryan replies, my dad wanted a boy.

Matt, are you close to the airlock? Ryan says not yet. Matt says we'll just keep going. Ryan arrives at the airlock.

Matt's voice comes back over the intercom. So now that you have some distance between us, you're attracted to me, aren't you? Ryan, what?

[2 : 2 6] Matt says, well, people say I have beautiful blue eyes. Ryan replies, you, you have beautiful, you have beautiful blue eyes.

Matt says, I have brown eyes, that hurts. She looks at Matt's figure receding. Matt, you know Ryan has a nice name for a girl. Wow, you should see the sun in the Ganges.

It's amazing. Ryan starts to respond, then falters, watching Matt's figure grow ever smaller. The sad crueLLing of Hank Williams crackles through the dying radio, and then static hisses.

Static again as Matt falls deeper into the distance, becoming lost in a sea of white specks and transmission ends. So that's the story of gravity. Sorry if I've ruined the movie on you.

Here he is, George Cleary, looking gorgeous in a space suit after a spacecraft has been destroyed. And isn't he witty and wry and gorgeous and lovely and well-meaning as he floats off into the never-ending darkness of death?

- [3 : 33] And sometimes, you know, life feels really awful and terrible. We feel like we're staring into the abyss, and all we can try and do is sort of calm ourselves and tell some good stories that make us feel that life is worth something.
- We're one of the most blessed and privileged of all generations. We have more materially than most people could ever imagine. So we're a blessed generation, but we're also a very hurting generation.
- We've never had it so good at one level, but we've never found it so hard at another level. We're more anxious than any previous generation.
- We feel trapped. We feel inadequate. We bear the curse of constant comparison on social media, and we're always made to feel like we never quite measure up.
- We get down. We get sad. We're lonely. We're afraid. And in the midst of all that, we've got nothing to believe in.
- [4 : 41] So we're offered therapies, medications, and techniques, which might soothe us for a while, but don't promise or offer any lasting answers, because there are no answers, are there?
- Life is where it is. We live in the edge of the abyss, and if Hollywood is to be believed, the best thing that we can do is to tell each other good stories, be witty and kind, be brave and generous, be handsome, because if you don't, the terror that lies within will eat you up.
- So life is hard. We all know that. We all suffer. And often we don't know what to make of that. First bereavement, loneliness, relationship breakdown, ill health, unemployment, trauma.
- The weight of human suffering forces itself on us. And that makes us ask questions about God, doesn't it? If God cared, this wouldn't happen.
- If God cared, He would be answering me right now. If God was really there, I wouldn't be going through this. How can God be silent when I'm going through so many hard and horrible things?
- [6 : 06] Sometimes we just say to ourselves, I can't take it much longer. How does God expect me just to keep going? So I'm going to talk about two or three things to do with truth and hope.
- And the first thing I want to talk about is when the truth doesn't touch you. So we've got a Psalm full of truth. And the key truth of the Psalm is found in verse 5.
- So if you just look at your Bible for a minute, you've got verse 5 there. There's the central truth of the Psalm. And the central truth of the Psalm is a truth about God, as it should be.
- And it's a truth about God's steadfast covenant love. So this Psalm proclaims one very important idea. God's love is unending and unchanging.
- The Psalmist says, I trust your steadfast, your unfailing love. My heart rejoices in your salvation. So the Psalmist's teaching us something very important then, that God is good.
- [7 : 10] He's a God of covenanted promised love that can't be broken. God's more reliable and trustworthy than we've even begun to imagine.
- God will not let us down and God will not let us go. So when our hearts are full of pain and life is worse than we ever thought it might get, we can still have joy in God.
- The Bible promises that God works everything for good. We don't know the reason for many things. We don't know the reason for all the experiences that we go through at any time.
- But at least we know there is a reason that God wants to bring good through the things that hurt, that God wants to bring us closer to Him and use our suffering to help us grow near to Him.

God will work through hard things to give us a bolder, brighter, better grasp on His beauty and kindness. So that's the central truth of this Psalm.

[8 : 15] So is that it then? Problem solved? Everything's good again? Well, the unfortunate reality of life from our perspective, of course, is it's never quite that simple, is it?

Even when we believe that these things are true, it can be really hard to hold on to them when we're going through sorrow and fear and loneliness and anxiety.

Sometimes it feels like our faith isn't enough. Sometimes it feels like God's not enough. And sometimes even for the Christian it feels, well, God's not even there.

Whatever this Psalm says is true just doesn't feel real to me. Maybe God isn't listening to me.

Maybe God's not going to be there when I really need Him. So sometimes our problem is not just that we don't know the truth, but sometimes the problem is that the truth doesn't seem to touch us.

[9 : 23] And that's a dilemma then, because what do we do when the truth doesn't seem to help? And so I want to say secondly, keep moving towards God.

His truth doesn't seem to help, it doesn't touch us, but nevertheless I want to say to you keep moving towards God. Because when the Bible starts speaking to you or when you feel that God's let you down or He's not interested or He's forgotten about you or cast you off, then the temptation for us is to move away from God, to turn our back, to curve in on ourselves, to curl up in a ball, to try and fix our own problems or find another solution or simply to go to things that comfort us and give us pleasure and drown our sorrows in some kind of way.

So that's one thing that we sometimes are tempted to do. God isn't listening, God isn't helping, so I'm just going to find another way of coping.

The psalmist recommends not to take that path but to find prayer. Okay, that seems a bit obvious, doesn't it? But that's what the psalm says.

But what the psalm says is this, it says, pray like you've never really prayed before. When life feels rough, when things are terrible, and when God seems absent, the answer isn't to stop talking to God but the answer is actually to really begin talking to God in the most real and incredible way that you've ever spoken to God.

[11 : 08] In other words, when things are at their worst, don't go silent but instead pray some really wild, big, bold prayers, maybe you've never prayed or maybe you only pray the shallow kind of prayer, maybe your prayers are trite, banal or meaningless.

Many of us think that prayer is like having a cup of tea with great anti-Beti. She only sees her every few years, she lives in a very quiet house, it's a bit like a dusty museum, and conversations with anti-Beti are done in whispers and platitudes with bone china tea cup, shortbread, lace doilies and polite chit chat.

I bet you that's a fairly good description of your prayer life. Not chit chat with a God of heaven and earth, platitudes uttered to the Almighty because your prayer life doesn't really go to the things that are really happening.

Bland conversations that avoid anything remotely personal or difficult or controversial. Can you talk to God about controversial things?

Of course. Can you talk to God about personal stuff? Yes. Can you talk to God about difficult stuff? Yes. Because when we look at prayer in the Bible, prayer in the Bible is wild.

[12 : 44] It really is. It is fierce. And prayer often explodes out of the pages of the Bible in anguished cries between broken people who have given up on platitudes, crying out to the God who said he cared but seems to have disappeared off for a cup of tea with anti-Beti as ignoring all your phone calls.

So this is one of those Psalms that teaches us to forget the platitudes of prayer and learn to really pray big, bold, wild prayer.

There's a message Bible that's called the Message Bible. It was translated in the 1970s by a hippie and it reads like it was translated in the 1970s by a hippie but it's quite useful sometimes.

And the Message Bible in Psalm 13 reads like this, long enough, oh God, you have ignored me long enough.

I'm looking at the back of your head long enough, long enough. I've carried this ton of trouble. I've lived with a belly full of pain long enough.

[14 : 12] All my arrogant enemies are looking down their noses at me hoping I die long enough. You see when they read this Psalm written by King David of Israel, it is a howl of pain.

He is howling to the heavens to God. Verses 1 and 2 tell us that he's been suffering for a long time, don't they? Can you hear him crying?

How long, oh Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face?

How long must I take counsel and have sorrow in my heart? How long, how long will my enemy be exalted over me?

God seems unavailable, not for a minute or an hour or a day or a week but for months, even years. God is unavailable. Uninterested it seems, out of contact.

[15 : 17] And so he starts to think that he'll never see God's face or know God's presence again, that the things that he thought he knew about God aren't actually true. Verse 2 is about his mental and emotional struggles and scars.

How long do I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long? Can you hear him? Can you understand him?

How long are my enemies exalted over me? God's ignoring his parents' sorrow and so what does he do? He doesn't turn away from God, but he doesn't just repeat platitudes either.

He howls, howls to heaven in response. God wants to hear your real prayers, not your fake prayers. He wants to hear genuine prayers, not platitudes.

He doesn't want the sugar-coated version of your life because, guess what? He doesn't see the sugar-coated version of your life. He sees the real you and the real cries of your heart and the real struggles and the real sorrows and fears.

[16 : 31] In verse 3, the psalmist is screaming out for answers, crying out, bellowing to heaven for light because he says, I can't keep going.

I can't do this any longer, Lord. Give me light or I will sleep this sleep of day.

That is a soul in trouble, weeping, crying for help from heaven. And that's how God teaches us to pray.

So you don't need to feel ashamed when you're anxious, where you're despairing or where you're angry. But what you do need to ask is, how do I keep my despair and my anger from destroying me?

Cry to the Lord. Emotions are the language of the soul. They are the cry that gives the heart a voice. They help us to tell God what's going on and to tell others as well, to say that we are hurting people.

[17 : 46] So when we feel in this way, we need to do two things. We need to move towards God and cry out to Him. But we also need to move towards others and tell a friend. So when you feel like this, I would say, do two things.

Pray to God and then ask a friend to pray for you as well. Tell God I'm depressed. Tell God I'm lonely.

Tell God I've been hurt by someone. Tell God I feel terrible and I don't know why I feel so terrible. Tell God and tell a friend. Tell your friend I'm depressed.

Tell your friend I'm lonely. Tell your friend I've been hurt by someone. Tell your friend I feel terrible and I don't know why. Please, please pray for me.

Pray big, bold, wild prayers. Even Jesus were told. In the book of Hebrews were told this, chapter 5 verse 7, Jesus called to the Father with loud cries and tears.

[18 : 50] During the days of Jesus' life on earth, He offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save Him from death. And He was heard because of His reverence and submission.

If Jesus had to pray like this, you will end up praying like this as well. Last year I read a book by Joni Erikson Tadder called When God Weeps.

And she's older than me, but when she was a teenager, she had a diving accident. She became quadriplegic. And talks about her days in hospital recovering from her accident or didn't learn how to live after her accident really.

And the anger, the despair she felt at the loss of the use of all her limbs. She just says, all I wanted was to die.

And I was furious with God that He wouldn't let me die. But she then says, the Psalms have been a huge place of learning for me.

[19 : 53] Because there I learnt to pray. The Psalms are a gyroscope, she says. They keep moving things level. They are the voice of God that steals the wave. They're an anchor holding steady and turbulent waves.

They stabilize, reminding us and teaching us solid rock-like truth. So move towards God, cry out.

When truth doesn't touch you, don't turn away. Move towards God. And then last thing, just this, move towards hope. The Psalms give us a language to speak to God and vent our anger and our fear and our distress.

In the kind of way that we begin to move up from the bottom of the pit and out of the darkest place towards hope. We're moving towards God, even though it's messy, tear-filled and hard.

And as we do so, God's at work in us. And He's moving us to a place that's more hopeful. But that's not a quick process.

[20 : 59] It can last a very, very long time. In this Psalm there are four verses of complaint, but only two verses of assurance.

There's a huge step change in this Psalm between verse four and verse five. In verse four, He's crying out about His enemies prevailing over Him.

In verse five, He's found a place of rest. But who knows how many days, months or years it took the psalmist to make that journey from verse four to verse five.

We don't know. Hope. Where is our hope? I remember when I was a student training for ministry, I went to another free church in Edinburgh called the Clue Free Church, and there was an old minister, an old geezer preaching called Clement Graham.

And Clement Graham was a very eloquent man who taught for many years and was principal of the Free Church College, now Edinburgh Theological Center. And he was talking about his own struggles with depression and doubt and fear.

- [22 : 23] And he sort of spoke of it just going down and down and down into this pit of darkness. And he said, you know, when I get to the rock bottom, he says, when I get to the very darkest place, the only thing I can do is hold on to the cross of Jesus Christ.
- I've never forgotten him saying that. I was so surprised to hear him talking about his doubt and struggle and so impressed with where he found his hope.
- For David, hope was found in the promises of God. I trust your covenant love expressed in the Torah, the tabernacle.
- But where's the covenant love of God promised and shown to us? It is shown and seen in the cross. The cross is a great sign that God keeps his promise of love.
- The cross is a great sign that God will not back down and that God will never give up in you. Why? Because he's already sent his son to suffer for you and to bear your sorrow in your wounds.
- [23 : 35] In Romans chapter 8 verse 32, the apostle Paul says this, he who did not bear his own son but gave him up for us all. How will he not also freely give us all things?
- I've already crucified Jesus for you, he says. You know then I'll do everything else you need to get you safely home.
- So we go to the fact, to the truth of the cross and we entrust ourselves to that pledge of God's love. The cross is a place of both suffering and joy.
- It is crucifixion and resurrection. Crucifixion power is found at the foot of the cross. New beginnings, new light, new hope.
- The cross is a place where the storm has come because the love of God is poured out at the cross.
- [24 : 38] The cross is a place where God says you may not get answers but you can have me.
- You may have so much unanswered pain but you have the embrace of the Father in heaven. So you can howl but you have hope.
- At the end of this, the Samhitan says he will look back and worship one day. Verse 6, I will sing to the Lord, why? Because he has dealt bountifully with me.
- One day he's going to look back, singing with praise to God and look back and say, yeah God, you were good to me, you dealt bountifully with me.
- In the movie Gravity, Matt tells Ryan to think about only one thing, getting home. Because how gorgeous the sunrise looks over the Ganges.
- [25 : 40] So we are looking forward to the day when we are home in the new creation with Jesus. Because one day you will, no matter how hard life is for you, one day you will look back with worship.
- You will look back with praise and you will say the Lord has dealt bountifully with me. Because then the whole story will make sense. Every bump, every turn will fall into its place.
- By then every sorrow will have become a joy. And by then every wound will have been healed. Because we know that sorrow lasts for a night and sometimes it's a very long night.
- But God promises joy comes in the morning. And a morning will come that is the last morning.
- The morning that never ends with a joy that never ends. And whether there is no night to fear, that's the promise of the Gospel.
- [26 : 51] And in that promise we look to Jesus who bears our wounds and shares our suffering. Who cry from the cross, God, God, why have you forsaken me?

When we get to the new creation there's only one person who is still wounded. That's Jesus.

He will carry the scars of his suffering forever so that you don't have to. Because his hands are wounded, you know that one day he will finally heal all your wounds too, you will be made whole.

And so today God invites you to real, honest, heart-crrying prayer.

Who you are, what you struggle with, all the heart and the anxiety, the sin and the suffering. God says take it to me and into that through the cross of Jesus I will bring you hope.

[28 : 10] I'm going to say a quick prayer, we're going to sing the Psalm and then we're going to be finished. Lord, we thank You that Your Word promises hope to those in darkness.

It promises comfort to those who suffer. We thank You that Jesus is our comfort. He is our joy and He is our strength and so we pray that by faith we might have Christ tonight.

And we pray for those of us who struggle to get hold of spiritual reality. We pray for those of us who struggle to be real with You about what's happening in our lives that You will teach us to pray and that we will learn to pray the way the Psalms pray.

In Jesus' name we ask.