

How to Pray When Life Falls Apart

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In the midst of broken dreams and riveting pain, how should we pray?

Should we pray for healing and deliverance, believing that we just need to ask, because God can do anything? Or should we relinquish our desires to God, trusting that even in our anguish he has the perfect plan for us?

Yes.

When life falls apart, God invites us to do both.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus faced unimaginable suffering. Sweating drops of blood, he fell to the ground and prayed: “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36).

Jesus, in his agony, is teaching us by example how to pray when we’re desperate.

Abba, Father

Jesus doesn’t begin with, “Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth.” Of course, God is Lord of all and deserves honor and reverence. But Jesus chooses a term of endearment: “Abba.” *Abba* is an intimate, personal term for a father. Jesus is asking his Father to do something for him.

In a similar way, I need to draw near to God in my pain. He’s the Almighty Lord, but he’s also my Abba Father (Rom. 8:15). I need to approach him as such.

Nothing Too Difficult

Jesus knows God can do anything. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills. All things are his servants. Nothing is impossible with him.

While I know those Scripture verses by heart too, I often functionally doubt God’s ability to change my situation. I scan my circumstances and assume things will continue as they are. Even as I’m praying, I don’t look for miraculous answers; my prayers become rote recitations of requests more than earnest petitions of faith.

But in Gethsemane, Jesus knows his Father can grant his request. God gives life to the dead and summons into being things that don’t exist.

And I need to remember his limitless power when my situation looks insurmountable.

Remove This Cup

The cup Jesus asks God to remove isn't mere physical suffering. Disciples and martyrs through the ages have faced physical pain without fear. Jesus is anguished over suffering that's infinitely deeper. He is facing the terrifying fury of God's wrath over our sin. And he's facing that wrath alone, with no comfort from above.

Jesus knows God can change this horrifying situation. So he asks. He wants God to remove the very suffering he was sent to bear, the suffering he willingly came for, the suffering that would secure salvation for his people. Jesus wasn't coerced onto the cross. He lay down his life of his own accord (John 10:18).

But now Jesus is asking if there is another way—any other way—for God to accomplish his purposes.

So many times I filter my requests. Should I ask God to relieve my suffering when I know he can use it? Is it okay to ask for healing, or is that presumptuous? Should I not ask for anything and just accept what I've been given? That posture seems more holy.

Yet, Jesus asks God to remove the cup.

If Jesus can ask, I can too. It's appropriate to ask God to remove my suffering, change my situation, keep me from further pain. He longs to give me good gifts. I've begged God to heal friends, save family members, and give clarity, and he has answered "yes." But I've also pleaded with God to save my dying son, heal my escalating disease, and bring back my husband, and he said "no." So even though I don't know how he will answer, my Father still bids me to earnestly petition him for the things I desire.

Not My Will, But Yours

Jesus finally relinquishes his will to God's. When denied his desire, Jesus accepts the decision completely. He stumbles to his execution without murmur or complaint.

This relinquishment isn't easy for me. When I keep God at a distance, I can stay detached without expectations. But if I draw near to him and truly believe he can change the situation, I can start to clutch the outcome I want. I may verbalize "Your will be done," but I'm whiteknuckling my own will.

God often has to pry my fingers off my desired outcome. Though I've felt devastated by his "no's," as I submit to his will—often with disappointment and tears—he assures me he's working for my good. I see only part of the picture. He has a purpose in his denials.

The Father said "no" to the Son. And that "no" brought about the greatest good in all of history.

God is not capricious. If he says "no" to our requests he has a reason, perhaps 10,000. We may never know the reasons in this life, but one day we'll see them all. For now, we must trust that his refusals are always his mercies to us.

Run to Your Father

And now as we wait, still struggling to make sense of the storms in our lives, let us pray as our Savior did. Let us draw near to God, believe he can change our situation, boldly ask him for what we need, and submit our will to his.

Our Father's plans are always perfect. They will always be for our good and his glory.

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