

Prayer in Times of Cholera

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Preacher: Bishop Steve Breedlove

[0 : 00] I just wanted to take a moment and introduce our preacher this morning, Bishop Steve Breedlove. Some of you have had the opportunity to meet Bishop Steve and his wife Sally when they visit at least once a year to be with us in our parish. But for those of you who don't know him, Bishop Steve leads our diocese, which is the Diocese of Christ Our Hope. He's also a dear friend of mine and really my pastor. And so I'm very excited to have him with us this morning. I reached out to him several weeks ago and felt like this would be a really good time in the life of our church and the life of our society to hear from our bishop. So we're so thankful to have him with us.

Good morning, Church of the Advent. Tommy, I particularly want to thank you for welcoming me to preach today's message to your church, to this precious church. And I hope and trust that you and Laura and the kids are having a great vacation. And I'm thankful to be among all of you. Dan and Jen and Kevin and Susan, the newest deacon in our diocese, Lisa Schultz, along with her husband, Tim. That's great. Deborah, the rest of the team, the whole church. Though I can't see any of you, it is my joy to be with you. This is surely one of the strangest Fourth of July weekends in my life. In North Carolina, pretty much every public event is canceled. There's no firework celebrations. We're advised not to gather in groups, but stick together only with the people that you live with, that you're accustomed to being around. Don't introduce any new risk factors.

I'm not pretending that that was a hardship for us in any sense. It really wasn't. It's just strange. It's just different. But the bigger issue, of course, is that we're living in a season of renewed and growing COVID-19 pandemic that's overlaid with the most serious season of strife and social pain in recent U.S. history. We're like medics in a field hospital on the battlefield trying to care for the wounded and seriously ill soldiers while in the distance we hear the approaching rumble of artillery and machine gun fire. And we're listening to the drone of bombers overhead. So how do we focus? How do we focus our care for the sick and the wounded while preparing for the probability of violence and mayhem? And all the while, by the way, we're trying our very, very best for ourselves and for our family and particularly for the children to have some sort of a holiday. Some have some fun together.

You know, Christians in America do not face crisis and dark times well. We are part of a culture that is built on the premise that we all have the right, and I underscore the word right, to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

[2 : 34] But over the generations, we have morphed that into simply we have the right to life, to liberty, and to happiness for those who can make the system work for them. And we have the illusion that we finally found a political system that guarantees freedom from wickedness and oppression from the top and guarantees equality and justice for all. And we couple that with the advances of technology and science and particularly medicine. And we're confident that we can look pretty much any problem that comes our way.

Now, the last four months has disabused us of these fictions and forced us to face our own, ongoing, broken, and flawed humanity and the limitations that are built into every human government system. The systems that we presume will work. It will produce life and liberty and pursuit of happiness and justice and equality for all are simply not working. Our laws are not enough to govern human behavior and to force us to do what's right. Technology and science are not adequate. We're not prepared for the crisis. We're not handling the crisis. We're losing the game. And we're face to face with the deeper facts of our human existence that has been true for every society and continues to be true for us. That we are just simply not adequate for life.

Now, in that context, as Americans, it's hard and disorienting. And it's hard not to fall into discouragement or fear or despair or anger. Pride and being American and confidence in our countries at the lowest level since we began measuring such things 50 or 60 years ago.

Now, in that regard, I'm not suggesting to us as followers of Jesus that there's no basis for hope or happiness, but it will have to come from another view of the world. And in fact, that's one of the greatest gifts we receive from Jesus Christ. The message of the gospel is that the core flaws and existential sorrows of human existence have been overcome by Jesus, God the Son incarnate in human flesh. And through Jesus, we are forgiven and reconciled and redeemed and given a new life, eternal life, and a promise and a hope of a new creation. And the deepest problems of our identity and existence have been resolved in Jesus and by Jesus and through Jesus.

And therefore, we can talk about faith and hope and love with a straight face. We have ground to stand on. In my mind, the last few days, the song, the old gospel hymn, On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand, has been just filtering again and again, kind of rolling through my mind.

[5 : 07] And that also means that we can face head on into a world that is not yet redeemed, not yet remade, and we can live a meaningful life, a life of hope, yet without denying the pain and not being overwhelmed. And in that, the Psalm of Moses, Psalm 90, can help us and guide us.

Moses was a leader well acquainted with sustained crisis. Yes, he did some wonderful things to lead the nation out of Israel, out of a terrible political and economic situation. They were slaves.

They were an entire race that was simply a cog in the machine of Egyptian materialism.

The nation of Egypt stood on the backs of the people of Israel. And God delivered them mightily through Moses and all those beginning stories and the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea.

But over the next 40 years, it turned out that Moses was leading a nation of faithless, sinful people.

No matter how high they might rise to their calling as the people of God, they always fell back into their core nature as sinners and rebels, as people who are discontent and unbelieving. And the result is that Moses did not have a life that materialized into anything that we might call happiness.

He just wasn't there. In fact, I've often read the life of Moses and thought, what a terrible task and calling to have. But Moses did find deep peace and joy, a way of resolving this and a way of moving forward.

And Psalm 90 is written late in his life. And it's my personal go-to psalm on virtually a daily basis for how do I live with realistic hope and action in a pain-filled, sin-filled world.

[6 : 58] And I want to share it with you today because I think it will help us in this time. We've already read it, but if you have your Bibles or you want to look on the liturgy, please turn to Psalm 90. It begins, And the ground of Moses' faith is that God exists. He is more solid than the mountains. He is more solid than creation itself. He is more founded than earth itself. And in fact, for the people of God, we can say we are at home in the Lord and in nothing else. That's where our true home is.

There's nothing else that grounds our lives and our hearts and our souls like the Lord himself. And it is actually that relationship with him that is the ground of our being. This is an intensely personal statement. We remember Moses' passion to see the Lord face to face and his practice personally to meet with the Lord on a regular basis in the tent of the meeting. And the glory of the God would appear and Moses would talk to God face to face so much that it transformed him.

So verses 1 and 2 are not merely a statement of doctrine. It's a statement of experience. That Moses is at home with the Lord and he's with the Lord and wherever he is, God is. And he can never escape. Would never want to escape. And that's where truly every person who owns Jesus Christ can be because Jesus has come to us through the Holy Spirit. He invites us to abide with him daily, constantly, actively to draw our life from him, to be at home with him. One of my very, very favorite hymns is, My Shepherd Will Supply My Need. And the last verse speaks about being at home with God. It ends the song this way here in the references to my father's house, but here would I find a settled rest. While others go and come, no more a stranger nor a guest, but like a child at home.

We are at home with God. And that is the ground of our whole conversation. Anything else we might say that precedes it, undergirds it, surrounds it. We are standing on the rock of Jesus.

Nevertheless, the reality of life in this world is dark. Verse 3, you return man to dust and say, return, O children of man, for a thousand years in your sight are as but yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. You sweep them away, that's people, as with a flood. They are like a dream, like grass that's renewed in the morning. In the morning it flourishes and is renewed. In the evening it fades and withers. Life is futile. It's frail. We are just simply weak, transitory people.

Failure and sin are constantly present in our lives and in the world. Verse 7, we are brought to an end by your anger. By your wrath we are dismayed. You've set our iniquities before you, our secret

sins, in the light of your presence. David in the psalm says, if we consider our sins, who can stand before God? And fear attends it all. Verse 9, for all our days pass away under your wrath. We bring our years to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are 70 or even by reason of strength 80, yet their span is but toil and trouble. They are soon gone and we fly away. Who considers the power of your anger and your wrath according to the fear of you. Now this is a complicated part of the conversation which we're not going to dig into much. But the concept of being under the wrath of God is simply the statement that the anger of God is just because we are sinners. And this is the natural conclusion, the natural clash of a absolute white holy God in his relationship to humanity. [11:03] I'll speak about that a little bit more in a moment. And that's just the reality. So this is a very sobering reality of life in this world and a diagnosis of life in this world that it is not about having better government or a better technology that will solve the problems. But because our core problem is that we're sinners, we're weak, we're limited, and we live under the justifiable wrath of God apart from a mediated, changed existence with God. So what do we do? To quote Francis Schaeffer from an old book in the 70s, how do we now then live? And what Moses proceeds to give us in verse 12 to the end of the psalm is seven prayers, very practical prayers, daily prayers for life in a difficult, fallen world.

And I want to encourage you. I pray this prayer many times. I pray it sometimes every day in the week. And we'll come back and talk about how to do that at the end of our conversation. But I want you to listen to these seven statements of prayer because I think that they will help us understand how to live with realism and hope in this world. Verse 12, so teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. I translate that and say this, may we receive each day as an undeserved gift, which we offer back to you in worship and service and in gratitude. We don't deserve it. Our family prayer has been for about 18 years, Lord, thank you for this day we do not deserve. The person who introduced that first into our family was our youngest son. And as he was expressing that, what overwhelmed us, he was coming out of this, a core of gratitude and awe that we do get to have a day of life as a gift from God. And it's, we already know it's with God. We're standing on him.

We're not on our own. So even though this is a difficult world and there's things we've got to work through, we've got to reflect that this is a day in which we have been given by God to serve him, love him, know him, walk with him. So we can offer this day every day, all day back to God as a gift of gratitude and worship. Like Romans 12, 1 and 2 says, we can offer ourselves everything who we are as an act of worship, as a living sacrifice to God. Acceptable, it says, acceptable to God. It's amazing. Thank you for this day, Lord. Thank you for the gift of this day. We don't deserve it. May we offer it back to you. Second prayer, verse 13, return, O Lord, how long? Have pity on your servants. Have pity on us. Have mercy, Lord. I've been spending more consistent time in systematic reading of the Old Testament this last year. The Old Testament is raw and unfiltered many places. It's the holiness of God and the unholiness of humanity. And that often results in a clash. It's like fire and gasoline. It's what Moses was referring to as being under the wrath of God back in verses 9 through 11. And it's not because there's an active anger necessarily. There are moments when that seems to be true. But because of the necessity that spills out of unmediated holiness when it meets sin.

And so by nature, this is who God is. This is by nature who we are. And by nature, it is conflict. Yet within that, as we read the Old Testament, what has happened to me as I've just continued to think about that and wrestle with it, it seems very clear to me. In fact, it is very clear that God simply keeps at it. Even though we constantly turn away, even though we prove utterly unreliable, God keeps at it. So how does that work? Well, it suddenly hit me one day that no matter how crazy the specific interaction between God and people are in the Old Testament, in every moment, and in that moment, the vanguard, the advanced team, the first move from God towards humanity is mercy, is mercy. It's like that's the presenting characteristic of God throughout the entire story of redemption. It's always first and fundamentally mercy. And it finds its fullest, most complete expression in the coming of Jesus in the flesh. The glory of God was clothed in the person of Jesus Christ so that it could be mediated to us. The Word of God was clothed in human flesh so it could be mediated to us so that we could handle it, so that we could understand it, so that we could see it, so that we could relate to it. It says the Word in John chapter 1, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we've seen His glory, the glory of God. Glory is of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. Later on in verse 18, one of my favorite verses in the entire Scripture, no man has ever seen

God. Raw, direct, even Moses, as he met with God and saw Him face to face, quote unquote. It was mediated through cloud, through the backside of God going off into the distance.

No man has ever seen God, the only God who is at the Father's side. Our old translation says, who is in the bosom of the Father. He has made Him known. He has communicated to us. He has helped us understand. He has been the bridge between us and the unfiltered holiness of God. So that now what we could say, have mercy on us, is a real prayer. It's a real cry. Not for what's not available, but to help us receive and realize what has already been poured out for us. Lord, have mercy on us.

[16:50] Have pity. Praise God you do. The third prayer, satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. This is the central joy and confidence of almost every psalm. God's steadfast covenant love. His chesed is the Old Testament word. It is the loyal, faithful covenant love of God. It's the promise of God that says, I will never forsake you or leave you. It is the astonishment at the grace of God, which has been poured out and established for us a relationship.

It really rolls back to Genesis chapter 15. I encourage you to read that sometime and reflect on it repeatedly in your Christian life. This covenant that God made with Abraham that was exemplary and in fact, initiatory for all of the redemptive covenants that came from the throne of God to us. And it's a covenant in which God says, Moses, I mean, excuse me, Abraham, you're to be prepared for this, but frankly, you're going to be on the sidelines because I'm going to do it all. I'm going to not only tell you what to do. I'm going to actually do it. And it's going to be me who makes the covenant, which is in history or in type, a two-way covenant. But in this case, both ways, both ways in between the sacrifices, Genesis 15 and back out through the sacrifices, both ways from God to us and from man to God, both ways are done by God himself. And may that knowledge satisfy me.

May that be enough. Now, that's a really substantial prayer for me on a daily basis because I honestly want more. For me, I have a primary, I have primary drivers in my life. I want to achieve things. I want to accomplish things. I want to be pretty much perfect. And I want everybody around me to think I'm perfect. And I can, you know, anytime I say that to myself, you can see how foolish that is, but I kind of fall back into that. May I, I want to be, I want to be able to say that I've done everything perfectly. My wife, Sally, doesn't have that fiction, but her drivenness is around closeness and connectivity with family. So she wants to be at the very heart of things. And there's this hunger.

You know, some people have a desire that no matter what else they experience, that there's this ultimate unruffled peace. Really, we're infinite almost. Our capacity for seeking satisfactions, apart from simply the knowledge that we're held in the love of God, is pretty much infinite. So it's a daily question on the table for us. Where are we finding our deepest satisfaction? Therefore, this is a daily prayer. Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love. May that be what satisfies us. May the knowledge of that be what we live on day by day, moment by moment. Verse 15, make us glad for as many days as you've afflicted us and for as many years as we've seen evil. I love the realism of this. It's sort of a right-sizing prayer to me. May we simply have as many good days as we've had tough days. I could be just happy enough with that. Not that I have to have 97% happy days, happy, happy, happy, but that I can have as many good days as tough ones. The fifth prayer, verse 16, let your work be shown to your servants and your glorious power to their children. Open our eyes to see the work of God in the world, to help us see where God is changing lives and changing history and intervening. And that prayer is such an important prayer. We struggle so often to see where God is at work or if he is at work. We want to see changes that quickly flow into a movement in a society and we want everything to be changed at once. Yet what is usually happening is much more modest. So this is a prayer to God, give us eyes to see those modest things that you're doing, the daily things that you're doing, and help us to see the multiplication of modest efforts, the modest efforts of faithful Christians that really make a difference. There are examples that I have been seeing lately, and it's one of the privileges of this coronavirus time. I'm spending a lot of time on the phone talking to people and finding out what's going on in their world and in their lives. And what's really impressed me as I tell you two or three examples is just how small they are on a daily basis, but how they've added up to big things over time. I was recently talking to Bishop Quig Lawrence, who is the suffragan bishop of our diocese, sort of an assistant to me. And he has just described to me an enduring friendship with a number of pastors of color in his hometown of Roanoke, Virginia. And these are just deep friendships and deep confidences with one another that have been forged

over faithful meeting together over meals, over coffee, talking and praying together for years on end. And so this time of crisis actually in those relationships and in the unity of Church of the Holy Spirit, Bishop Quig and other pastors and leaders in the city of Roanoke has not been particularly challenging. I mean, they've had things to talk about, but they have common faith and they have a common foe because they have shared gospel mission.

[22 : 27] And this is just simply long-term faithfulness and friendship that can really make a difference in a society. So therefore, Quig and the efforts and resources that he represents are free to work together with people that they've already established friendships with. All these suspicions of what are you doing this for have long been put into the background. I think about Christchurch Winston-Salem led by Ben Sharp and they have a food bank that they've been giving, that they've opened up every month like clockwork for about 12 years, 10 or 12 years now. And they feed 80 to 100 families a month with a week's worth of food. That's a lot of food. And every Sunday, I mean, excuse me, every Saturday that they have this once a month, they literally have 25, 30 people from the church who come. They've been accumulating food and all, all week long or, you know, all month long.

They open it up and it's open for like five or six hours and there's 80 or 100 families that come in. I was talking recently with a deacon in our diocese, Teresa Kincaid, who's the leader of our prayer ministries. And she and her husband, Craig, have been going to have lunch in a primarily African-American nursing home for 12 years now. And she was just telling me about the deep friendships that have been established and the ways that they have built relationships and the ways that it shifted from the first year when they came in kind of as outsiders and there was suspicion and they started studying the Bible together, but it was like four or five people and how that shifted in that year too.

And the people within the nursing home, the residents began to lead the Bible study and, you know, and how they really have taken over and Teresa and Craig now just come in and bring lunch. But now instead of five, six, seven people, the entire nursing home, except for those who are too sick, always come for lunch, always come for Bible study. And just the joy that they've had together, the ways that they've established strong friendships over the years. And again, these are small things, but these are the work of God, the work of God through faithful people. And I think that the faithfulness of God to us that's exemplified in the steadfast love of the Lord plays its way out in the faithfulness of the work of God and his people through the faithfulness of God's people in the world. The sixth prayer, verse 17, let the favor of the Lord, our God be upon us. And I think we're circling back to this overarching mercy. It's a bit of a repeat to the first prayer, excuse me, second prayer, have pity on your servants. But I think it's because we need so deeply to see the mercy of God.

[25 : 09] And so for me, the question that I have when I get to this prayer is what is the color of the sky? It's kind of a silly prayer, but it's the way I think of it. What do I see as the background of all of life?

Do I see pain, problems? Do I see stress? Or do I see mercy? Because I believe, again, I'm going to say it again, that the vanguard, the first move of God toward us is always mercy. And if we have eyes to see, and that's what we're praying for is eyes to see, I believe we will see God's mercy constantly played out in our lives, things we don't deserve.

We don't get what we deserve. We have blessings we do not deserve, and we do not get the tough things that we deserve, no matter what. And then the final prayer, this last half of verse 17, establish the work of our hands. Yes, establish the work of our hands. May what we do matter. May we be able to make a real contribution. And I think that's so important for us. It's so important for you because you live in Washington, D.C., in that area. And most of you have come there, moved there at some point in your life in order to make a difference. That's really a driving force. And I think one of the big issues of people who live in the seat of power is the disillusionment that comes with how little impact political power can have and what its limits are. Yet we have to do it, and we got to participate, and we want to do so with good faith. How can we do something that really matters? And the crisis in our systems, our political and governmental systems, I think hits you harder than perhaps it does many people because you're living close to it. So this prayer, frankly, to me is more precious for you than just about anybody I can imagine. Establish the work of our hands. May what we do matter. My wife Sally writes devotions for a prayer movement called 8at8pm.com. I encourage you to consider joining that. Almost 13,000 people have daily prayer through that medium. You can go online with that. But she wrote a devotion this week that has

really been meaningful to me about this issue. She was writing about the feeding of the 5,000. And as she reflected on the conversation between Jesus and his disciples and what he does, she asked the question, could it be that the disciples are tired of other people's needs? They say to Jesus, send the people away to find food. But Jesus pushes back. You give them something to eat. And it's hard not to read a bit of sarcasm or at least irritated exhaustion into their response. So you want us to walk to the next village buy and bring back enough food for 5,000 men and some women and wives and kids? What village would have food for 5,000 extra people at a moment's notice? You must be kidding Jesus. And as Sally and I were talking about, she said, how many semi-trailers are you going to have to bring in for that one? Christ's only response is have them sit down in groups of 50. Now that's a job they can do,

[28 : 14] Sally goes on, tell people where to go and where to sit, but to what end? And while they are busy arranging the crowd, Jesus gathers the small bit of food the disciples have scavenged, five loaves and two fish. Jesus looks upward to heaven and blesses the food before him.

Then he begins to break it and give it away and then break it and give it away and then break it and give it away until everyone eats and what is left over is gathered into 12 baskets. Did it ever look like a gigantic buffet on an ocean liner? As the disciples came back to Jesus again and again for another basket of food to distribute to those groups of 50, did they ever wonder if the next time there wouldn't be any left? It was an impossible situation, but somehow the need was met and leftovers abounded. We live in a world of impossible needs. Who has the answers? Who has the means? Who can solve the hatred, the contempt, the division, the disease, and the distrust that threatened to consume us? Does Jesus expect any one of us to come up with a large enough answer to set this world right? If we can't do that, what can we do? Perhaps we need to do what the disciples ended up doing. Keep returning to Jesus time after time, day after day. Receive from him a basket's worth of wisdom, of love, of patience, of compassion, and trust. Give today's provision away and come back again tomorrow. I think Moses is a great guide for us on this pilgrimage of life and faith. He was a leader of a nation of Israel for almost 40 years of the most difficult and recalcitrant and rebellious divisive nation we can ever imagine. His view of the world is brutally honest. It's corrective to us.

It's unflinching in its honesty, yet he does not despair. He's settled and he's at home with God. He faces each day honestly, prayerfully, and ultimately hopefully. And he prays these prayers. Thank you for this day. It's a gift. Lord, have mercy upon us. Be merciful to us. Help us to be satisfied with nothing less than your steadfast love. Lord, may we have as many good days as we've had tough days. Help us to see what you're up to. Give us an encouragement. Again, let your favor be overshadowing us. And Lord, help what we do make a difference in the world. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.