

Sunday 30th April 2017

Rising Above

Introduction

- Jonathan and I have been facing a few challenges recently, and I want to share what God has been teaching us about how to cope when life gets tough – He’s given us some really practical things to do when life is difficult.
- This is a very simple message – there’s nothing earth-shatteringly new in it, but hopefully something that I share this morning will resonate with people and help others in a similar situation.
- We’ve had some on-going family issues for quite a few years, and in January this year it was like Groundhog Day – nothing had moved on, if anything the situations were getting worse, and we were getting more and more stressed.
- During that month, we felt that we should dedicate February to praying into the situations, and asked some well-trusted friends to stand alongside us in that. Trevor prayed for us and felt that God was saying that He wanted us to ‘rise above’ our circumstances. This really resonated with us, as we want to get on with our lives and all that God’s called us to do, whilst not ignoring or neglecting those that we love – or pretending everything’s great when it’s not!
- But how do you ‘rise above’?! You can’t just will yourself to do it. This is how we are learning to ‘rise above’...

Praise

- The Psalms are a fabulous source of praise songs written in dire circumstances.
- I love David’s honesty with God, telling Him how he really feels about the situation he’s in, but moving on to praise God even though he’s still in his difficult circumstances.
- For example, in Psalm 22, the first 21 verses alternate between reflections on David’s present dire circumstances and memories of the Lord’s past faithfulness:

Read Psalm 22:1-21

- David doesn’t hold back, he tells it like it is. He shares his anguish with God, and his sense of alienation from Him (v.1-2), yet later on reflects on his past relationship with God, and past intimacy with him (v.9-10).
- Sometimes we feel as though God has abandoned us, we feel alone, can’t feel His presence with us. But the Bible tells us that *“The Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you”* (Deuteronomy 31:6 NIV).
- We need to develop intimacy with God when, maybe, we don’t feel like we ‘need’ Him, when life’s going well, so that when life does get difficult we already have a solid relationship with Him, so even if we can’t ‘feel’ His presence, we know with certainty that He’s there.
- We can’t praise God for what He’s done in the past, or recall times of His tangible presence, if we haven’t cultivated a relationship with Him and had those experiences.
- So, in our difficult circumstances Jonathan and I praised God for things He had done in the past for us – answered prayers, guidance, healing. It’s a great way of getting your eyes off yourself and your circumstances and fixing them on Jesus – the solution to your problems!
- Going back to David in Psalm 22, he also praised God for His character:
 - v.3-5 *“Yet You are **holy, enthroned** on the praises of Israel. Our ancestors **trusted** in You, and You **rescued** them. They cried out to You and were **saved**. They **trusted** You and were never disgraced.”*
 - v.19 *“You are my **strength**.”*

- Again, we can praise God for his character, for who He is. We can use Scripture to help us with this, reading out loud verses or turning them into prayers; we can write down our proclamations of praise; we can sing – there are lots of ways of praising God – the hardest thing when we’re struggling is to make that first step to get our eyes off ourselves and fix them on God’s goodness.
- We need to anchor ourselves in the truth that God is good.

Psalm 103: 1-6

“Let all that I am praise the Lord; with my whole heart, I will praise His holy name. Let all that I am praise the Lord; may I never forget the good things He does for me. He forgives all my sins and heals all my diseases. He redeems me from death and crowns me with love and tender mercies. He fills my life with good things. My youth is renewed like the eagle’s! The Lord gives righteousness and justice to all who are treated unfairly.”

Thanksgiving

- This brings us nicely on to thanksgiving – being thankful and cultivating an attitude of thankfulness, whatever life’s circumstances.
- Again, past experiences can help with this – thanking God for His faithfulness in the past, for example.
- We can all find things to thank God for: our homes, friends, family, His provision to us – big and small.
- I thank God for things as I’m going about my daily life: blossom on the trees, a sunset, a short queue in Sainsbury’s, a parking space!
- Again, these things lift our eyes off our circumstances and onto His goodness to us.
- It’s also important to be thankful to God IN and FOR the situation we find ourselves in.
- So, for example, thanking Him that He hears our prayers, that He will answer our prayers; thanking Him for the people involved in the situation, even if they are a source of stress for us – God still created and loves them! Thanking Him for His power to heal and anticipated healing. Thanking Him for what we will learn through this situation, how He will help us (and others) to grow in it.
- Thanking God in advance for His resolution to the problem not only cultivates a thankful heart, but develops our faith as well, as we declare that we trust God to intervene and help us in our situation.
- Again, in the Psalms, David exalts us to be thankful:

Psalm 92:1-4

“It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to the Most High. It is good to proclaim Your unfailing love in the morning, Your faithfulness in the evening, accompanied by the ten-string harp and the melody of the lyre. You thrill me, Lord, with all You have done for me! I sing for joy because of what You have done.”

- Psalm 136 is a great example of declaring thankfulness to God – 26 verses of David giving thanks for different things interspersed with *“His faithful love endures forever.”*
- The verb phrase ‘Give thanks’ used here refers to the Hebrew word *yadah*, which signifies speaking out loud concerning the praiseworthiness of God or a person – there’s power in declaring praise and thanksgiving out loud: Romans 10:17 says that *“Faith comes from hearing...”* – we develop our own faith by declaring our praises out loud so that we not only say them, but HEAR them, too.

Prayer

- We committed to praying daily for the situations that were troubling us throughout February.
- We also asked others to pray alongside us.
- If you don't have that network of support around you (prayer chains, accountability partner / mentor, friends), ask God to provide it – we did this a few years ago when we felt a bit isolated and lacking support, and now we've got lots of people who we can ask to pray for us and support us, not just in Freshwaters, or even in Harlow, but across the country and a few overseas.
- We frequently need to be committed and persistent in prayer – we often find ourselves praying the same thing over and over again.
- I haven't found anywhere in the Bible where we're told to just pray once, then either receive an immediate answer to that prayer or complain that God didn't answer our prayer, but there are plenty of places where we're told to endure, to persevere, to be patient... we must be persistent in our prayers:

Romans 12:12 tells us to *“Be patient in trouble and keep on praying.”*

1 Thessalonians 5:17 simply says, *“Never stop praying.”*

- Often as we're praying, or reading our Bibles, a phrase or Scripture will jump out at us as being pertinent to the situation we're praying about – we can then write that down and use it as a basis for praying.
- We've got lists of Scriptures at home that we use when praying for different situations, and currently have a post-it note stuck on the front of our Bible with key phrases to pray for a particular situation.
- We need to be prepared for the way that God wants to answer our prayers, too – and His way is so often different to ours, both in timing and method!
- As we found in February, God's answer to our prayers can very often involve us changing, NOT the situation - though we continue to pray in faith for the situation to change, too – but we do that from a place where we aren't burdened by it and accepting God's resolution may not match ours!
- When Connie Sinnott was in Harlow last month, she spoke about carrying burdens in our spirits, not in our souls. She said that if we carry a burden in our soul it affects us and drags us down – we need to carry it in our spirit so we can pray about it and leave it with God.
- So often we want to find solutions to problems so that they can be resolved quickly – we tried this with some of the family situations we were faced with. We had loads of bright ideas initially about what might help and what 'should be done', and tried some of them, but they all failed, and some actually made the situation worse temporarily!
- We need to get to a place where we can truly hand over these situations to God and take our hands off them – waiting for Him to instruct us if He wants us to do something, rather than generating our own 'good ideas' and going ahead with them.

God's Perspective

- The final key we learnt during this time was to get God's perspective on the situations we were facing.
- Again, Connie Sinnott spoke about asking God to show us the situation from His perspective. She talked about inviting Jesus to stand behind us, then stepping back onto His feet to see things from his viewpoint.
- I asked God to show me a particular person from His perspective and, instead of seeing a thoughtless, selfish person who had no regard for the feelings of others (my view), I saw a scared child, curled up, trying to protect themselves from hurt – and it has profoundly changed the way I think and pray about that person.
- When we are waiting for God to intervene in situations we have to hold onto the truths we know about Him: He is trustworthy; faithful; relentlessly good.
- Psalm 9:9-10 says, *"The Lord is a shelter for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. Those who know Your name trust in You, for You, O Lord, do not abandon those who search for You."*
- If we accept that God's Word is truth, then we can agree with that Scripture and know, in our heads, that God is truly our shelter and refuge, fully trustworthy and faithful – but what about when He doesn't answer our prayers the way we want Him to? What if He seems to be taking too long? What if he wants to change us, but our situation is going to remain the same?
- Do we then have doubts about God's goodness? Do we question whether God is really good and faithful to us personally? Do we wonder whether God will let us down? Can we truly trust Him with those situations and people who are dearest to us?
- Will we choose to trust God's goodness regardless of what things look like from our perspective?
- As I said earlier, we need to anchor ourselves in the truth that God is good.
- And if we ask for and gain God's perspective on our situation, it brings a measure of understanding and insight, which can help us to pray as we rise above the situation.
- As we got towards the end of February, we found that our perspective had changed. We were carrying the burdens in our spirits, not our souls, and felt that we just needed to love and show love to the people involved. The situations themselves hadn't changed – and still haven't – but we've changed as we've praised, been thankful, prayed and gained God's perspective.

Conclusion

- We have to continually return to these things to maintain our 'risen above' status, because things happen that try to drag us down again. We need to recognise when we're being dragged down and ask God for help to rise above again, using the tools that He's given us.
- On the very last day of February, as we ended our month of prayer for Jonathan's family, we got a call from my sister telling us that she'd been diagnosed with breast cancer.
- It hit me really hard initially, I was so shocked that I went around like a zombie for a few days. I was tired, not sleeping well, not hungry – and then I recognised that I was being dragged down by the situation and asked God to help me rise above this situation, too. Which He did!
- He has enabled us to be **thankful** in the situation, for a good prognosis and for Rachel having a really positive attitude; to **praise** Him for being a healing God, and one who can use this situation to bring salvation to Rachel, George and Jake; we're **praying** for both her healing and salvation, and have asked others to join us in that – and the post-it note on the front of our Bible is for Rachel: for peace in her heart, for fear to be banished and for revelation of God in her life. God has given us His **perspective**: He loves Rachel even more than we do, and wants to see her healed, saved and at peace – this is a difficult situation which God wants to turn around for good.
- We're carrying the burden for Rachel in our spirits not our souls – and we're much more use to her like that than being dragged down by her situation and being unable to function properly.

- We can't force ourselves by an act of will to rise above our circumstances, but we can cultivate an attitude of fixing our eyes on Jesus and HE will lift us up.
- In the well-known words of Isaiah 40:31 *"Those who trust in the Lord will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint."*
- This is all really simple stuff that we all know about in theory, but it can be harder to put into practice – sometimes we want to wallow, but we must resist that temptation, because it doesn't help the situation and makes us feel worse! Sometimes we want to fix it ourselves, but we need God's guidance before we go ahead with our bright ideas!
 - Praise
 - Be thankful
 - Pray
 - Get God's perspective

Psalm 40:1-3

"I waited patiently for the Lord to help me, and He turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire. He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along. He has given me a new song to sing, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see what He has done and be amazed. They will put their trust in the Lord."

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

"Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus."