PRAYER DOESN'T WORK LIKE THAT

Posted on July 15, 2015 by Eddie

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Category: Christian Life

I generally try and avoid being drawn into futile arguments on Facebook, but sometimes - despite my better judgement - I get drawn in. Recently, on a friend's page, I saw someone claiming that some particular Christians were suffering because they were not people of prayer. Basically, the argument went that if you pray enough then you will never face persecution or hardship. Prayer delivers you from difficulties.

It quickly became obvious that nothing was going to change this particular person's mind, so I withdrew from the conversation. Life is too short for that sort of thing. However, I come across this attitude often enough, that I thought I'd write a blog post on it. In my view, the idea that if you pray enough, you will not face any sort of suffering or hardship is wrong on at least three accounts.

It Misunderstands Our Relationship To The World.

Jesus promised his disciples that they would be persecuted for following him. There were no ifs and buts, it is a normal part of the Christian life to face persecution. (Matt 24:9, Luke 21:12, John 15:20). Not only that, but according to both Jesus and Paul, suffering for the Gospel is a blessing (Matthew 5:10, Phil 3:10). The book of the Acts of the Apostles is a catalogue of difficulties that Paul and other Christians faced and what do we make of 2 Cor 11:14-16?

But surely, if we have enough faith, then things will go well for us.Â After all, in Hebrews 11 we read about some anonymous people who achieved amazing things through faith:

> *who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again.*

That sounds fantastic, butÂ read on...

> *There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection.*[Â] *Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.*
>
> [Â] *They were put to death by stoning;Â they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword.Â*

It strikes me that it takes an awful lot more faith to be sawn in two, than it does to be powerful in battle.

On this side of eternity, difficulties and persecution are to be expected. Yes, there will be a day when Christians know full victory and are delivered from all sorts of hardship - but that day hasn't come yet. When people teach that we should already be experiencing things which are promised as part of our eternal heritage are suffering from what is termed an over-realised eschatology (see here for

a good explanation). It's not a fatal complaint, but it is a serious one - in the end, there is very little difference between this and the prosperity Gospel that is widely condemned.

It Misunderstands the Nature of Prayer.

Saying that if you pray in a certain way or for a certain amount of time thenÂ *X* will happen reduces prayer to a magic formula. Perform the spell and you will get your wish. It actually removes God from the equation altogether; the focus is on what we do and what we get. But prayer simply isn't like that, prayer is a relationship, a communion with our heavenly Father. It's about getting to know him and understand him, not about pressing buttons so that he will do whatever we want. Paul prayed three times for God to remove his "thorn in the flesh", but God didn't do that, instead he brought Paul to a deeper understanding of the way that God worked 2 Cor 12:7-10. In John 17 Jesus repeatedlyÂ prayed for his Father to deliver him from the cross (Matt 26); it didn't happen, but he did find resolve to face his fate.

It Misunderstands Our Place In History and Geography.

Western Christians have lived through a strange age; Christianity has been adopted as the State religion and as long as believers didn't rock the boat too much, they were unlikely to face much by way of persecution. That hasn't been the case for most of the history of the church or in most places in the world. The problem is, we've taken this aberration and assumed that it is normal, we expect Christians to be at home in their society and to have an easy life and assume that those who are not experiencing the same thing are doing something wrong.

Of course, the truth is that it is in those places that the Church is facing hardship and trouble that Christianity is growing. In the West, where it is hard to distinguish believers from the wider society, we don't pose a threat, we don't face persecution and we don't see the Church growing in the way that it does in other places.

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