Kate Bowler is an associate professor of American religious history at Duke University. She has taught there for more than 20 years. Four of her books have made the New York Times bestseller list. The only book of hers that I have read cover to cover is entitled, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (Oxford University Press 2013). This book received widespread media attention and academic praise as the first history of the movement based on divine promises of health, wealth, and happiness.

In 2015, everything seemed to be going well for Kate. She had married her high school sweetheart, loved her job, and had given birth to her firstborn son. But she was then unexpectedly diagnosed with Stage IV cancer at age 35. Her subsequent memoir was titled, *Everything Happens for a Reason (and other lies I've loved*).

At Amazon.com there is this statement concerning her terminal diagnosis. "The prospect of her own mortality forced Kate to realize that she has been tacitly subscribing to the prosperity gospel, living with the conviction that she can control the shape of her life with 'a surge of determination.' Even as this type of Christianity celebrates the American can-do spirit, it implies that if you 'can't do' and succumb to illness or misfortune, you are a failure."

I agree with Kate's critique of the prosperity gospel. It is a serious and thoroughly unbiblical distortion of the biblical gospel. It insists that it is always God's will for you to be physically healthy and financially prosperous. Falling short of that is a clear indication that you lack the sort of faith that God always responds to with blessing.

But I want to voice one objection to her most recent book, *Everything Happens for a Reason (and other lies I've loved).* I would prefer that she had written a book entitled, *Everything Happens for a Reason* ***(but you may never know what it is).*** I think the apostle Paul would agree with me on this. After all, this is the man who wrote Romans 8:28, to the effect that "we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." Paul also wrote Ephesians 1:11 where he says that God "works all things according to the counsel of his will." And we see this yet again in our passage for today. More on that in a moment.

PAUL'S BRUSH WITH DEATH

Before we go any further, let me provide a brief sketch of Paul's experience so that we might have a framework for understanding the profound spiritual lessons that follow.

Sometime between the writing of 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, most likely no earlier than the spring of 55 a.d. and no later than the summer or fall of 56 a.d., Paul had what he considered a singular and altogether unique brush with death that transformed his perspective on life and ministry and, above all, his relationship with God.

Twice in v. 8 he uses a word, best translated "beyond" (*huper*), that indicates he viewed this experience as unparalleled. When one recalls his statement in Philippians 4:13 ("I can do all things through him who strengthens me"), what he describes in 2 Corinthians must assuredly have been in a category unto itself in terms of its severity and potential for ending Paul's life.

Paul uses vivid, if not shocking, terms to describe the depths of despair to which he was subjected: the burden was both "beyond measure" (or, "so utterly burdened", ESV) and "beyond our strength" to endure. The word translated "despaired" is a compound verb, the components of which "point to the total . . . unavailability . . . of an exit . . . from oppressive circumstances, a situation prompting not so much acute embarrassment as unnerving despair" (Harris, 154).

Scholars have long speculated on the nature of this affliction. Was it a literal and quite physical confrontation with "beasts" in the arena at Ephesus (1 Cor. 15:32)? Was it the life-threatening circumstances of the riot at Ephesus, instigated by Demetrius the silversmith (Acts 19:23-41)? Was it exposure to extraordinary persecution and peril from his enemies, or perhaps a sentence of death passed against him by a civil court, or possibly some unidentified hardship like extended hunger or a near-death experience during the course of one of his many imprisonments?

I'm largely convinced that Paul has in view some recurrent illness, a painful and obviously life-threatening affliction, the burden of which was so severe as to expel all hope of survival. This affliction threatened to squeeze every breath of life from my body. It was crushing in every sense of the term. Of course, we'll never know for sure he's talking about. What's most important is how it transformed Paul's perspective on life and the lessons we should learn from it as well.

One additional factor needs to be noted. The word translated "sentence" (*apokrima*) of death in v. 9 appears only here in the New Testament and might be rendered "response" or "answer" or something similar. This suggests that while in the throes of this horrific affliction Paul made inquiry, either of himself (according to Margaret Thrall) or of God (according to Murray Harris), to which the reply came: ***"You will die!"*** Of course, we don't know any of this for certain, but one thing is clear: Paul didn't die at that time and was convinced that God would deliver him yet again in the future (v. 10a) from similar encounters with death. So, Harris is probably right in saying that "the divine verdict must have signified something like, 'Not death now, but ultimately death from a similar *thlipsis*" (i.e., "affliction," 156).

Whether we face physical illness or financial stress or relational disappointments, we find it hard to see in it anything remotely approaching a "purpose" or "reason". Such disillusioning experiences strike us as random and senseless and lacking all value. It defies all logic. It leaves us feeling as if 2 plus 2 will never equal 4. Often the best we can do is write it off as an attack of the enemy, never discerning the divine design in our distress.

But as overwhelming, excessive, and burdensome as this brush with death was for Paul, *he knew that God was in it!* The ***point*** of it all, says Paul, "was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (v. 9b). For those who regard all such anguish and suffering as pointless, this may come as a considerable shock.

One can almost hear Paul saying to himself before he ever said it to the Corinthians: "I've grown too self-reliant. I've become accustomed to trusting in my own gifting, my education, my reputation, my depth of theological insight. I'm dangerously close to taking credit for what only God can do. I'm on the brink of blasphemy!" This is no small matter. Trusting in oneself is an affront to God, and he won't have it!

How far will God go to ensure that Paul (as well as you and I) doesn't trust in himself and his own skills and spiritual savvy? How seriously does God regard this tendency in the human heart, whether Paul's or yours or mine? To what lengths will he go to guarantee that he alone gets the glory? In Paul's case, God knocked out from under him every man-made prop and reduced him to utter despair. Said God: "Paul, it matters immensely to me that you not look to yourself for strength or rely on your own ingenuity. If there was ever any doubt in your mind concerning this, consider your condition. If I don't intervene and deliver you, you will most assuredly die!"

"Oh, come on, Sam. It can't be that big of a deal, can it?" Well, let's consider what it is that *self-reliance* says? It goes something like this:

> "God, I'm *more capable* than you are of accomplishing this task. God, I'm *wiser* than you are in figuring out how this should be done. God, I'm *more adept* than you are at sorting through options and discerning the proper path to follow. God, I'm *more deserving* than you are of the credit and praise for fulfilling this ministry from which so many stand to profit. And all that makes me *better* than you for figuring out what to do."

No one has expressed this more vividly and to the point than James Denney (Scottish NT theologian and pastor, d. 1917). I take the liberty here of citing him at length. Resist the temptation to skip over this paragraph. It is truly profound:

> "It is natural . . . for us to trust in ourselves. It is so natural, and so confirmed by the habits of a lifetime, that no ordinary difficulties or perplexities avail to break us of it. It takes all God can do to root up our self-confidence. He must reduce us to despair; He must bring us to such an extremity that the one voice we have in our hearts, the one voice that cries to us wherever we look round for help, is death, death, death. It is out of this despair that the superhuman hope is born. It is out of this abject helplessness that the soul learns to look up with new trust to God. . . How do most of us attain to any faith in Providence? Is it not by proving, through numberless experiments, that it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps? Is it not by coming, again and again, to the limit of our resources, and being compelled to feel that unless there is a wisdom and a love at work on our behalf, immeasurably wiser and more benign than our own, life is a moral chaos? . . . *Only desperation opens our eyes to God's love.*"

The explicit "in order that" of v. 9 (NAS; the ESV renders it "but that was to") ought forever to silence those who doubt whether God is sovereign over the troubles and afflictions of life. ***There is always design in our distress***. When you are in pain or you've suffered some catastrophic loss that sounds heartless and mean-spirited. And yet God so values our trust in *him alone* that he will graciously dismantle everything else in the world that we might be tempted to rely on: even life itself, if necessary. His desire is that we grow deeper and stronger in our confidence that he himself is all we need.

One thing to remember is that although there is always a divine design in our afflictions, God never promises to let us know what it is. Sometimes he does. He did in the case of Paul here in 2 Corinthians. But just as often God remains silent. He doesn't disclose to us what he has in mind in our suffering. We're left in the dark and it often leads to doubt and even despair. What he does disclose, and he does it without equivocation, is that there is a purpose behind what strikes us as utterly without purpose. That is where faith comes in.

Some are bothered by this, believing that God's orchestration of Paul's affliction was a high price the apostle was forced to pay by an insensitive and selfish God whose only concern was to glorify himself. May it never be!

God's seeking his glory in Paul's trust was the most loving and tender-hearted thing he could ever have done for the apostle! And it's the most loving and tender-hearted thing he could ever do for you! That is because in orchestrating these events to undermine Paul's self-reliance he made it possible for him to find satisfaction in the One who will never fail or falter or prove untrustworthy.

So while it's true that we will on occasion experience suffering and hardship that is more than we can handle, we will never, ever experience suffering that is more than God can handle. God can and will deliver us from all of our suffering—if not in this life, but then certainly in the life to come.

There is incomparable joy for our souls in learning to rest in God, not ourselves, in experiencing divine strength, not human weakness. Paul's affliction, as severe and unsettling as it initially may have been (or even continued to be), was the most effective way to lead him to drink from a reservoir of rest and delight and sustaining grace that will never run dry. Whatever was done to wean Paul from himself and cultivate confidence in God alone must be regarded as the highest and most heartfelt expression of love imaginable.

THE ROLE OF PRAYER IN PAUL'S AFFLICTION

If you've ever had doubts about the importance and power of prayer, and yes, all of us have, this passage is for you.

Paul has just confidently declared that the God who already delivered him from a life-threatening affliction would do so yet again (v. 10). God's purpose in Paul's suffering had worked: he no longer looked to himself but now trusted wholly in the "God who raises the dead" (v. 9).

I can just hear some conclude from this: "Well, what then is the point of prayer? If Paul is so confident that God 'will deliver' (v. 10) him, it matters little, if at all, whether or not the Corinthians pray. God's going to do what God's going to do irrespective of their prayers for Paul or, conversely, their indifference toward him. Whatever will be, will be."

That may well be your conclusion, but I assure you it wasn't Paul's! No sooner has he spoken with assurance of God's gracious intentions toward him than he enlists the intercessory prayers of the Corinthians on his behalf. What is it that Paul asks them to ask God? Undoubtedly, he encourages them to ask God to do what God has declared is his desire and character to do! Does that sound odd? Perhaps, but there it is in black and white.

God will deliver us, says Paul (v. 10a). We have put our hope in him "that he will deliver us again" (v. 10b). Therefore, based on this assurance, flowing out of this confidence, he calls on the Corinthians to "help us" (v. 11a) by praying for our welfare. Verse 11 reads as follows:

> "You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks [to God] on our behalf for the blessing granted us [by God] through the prayers of many" (v. 11).

It has been argued that the opening line of v. 11 should be rendered with a conditional force: "*If* you help us by your prayers," or as Murray Harris has translated, "provided you, for your part, join in helping us by your prayers for us" (160). If we follow this suggestion, and I think we should, it would serve to reinforce the emphasis Paul consistently places on prayer as a contributing factor to the success of his ministry (see Philemon 22; Phil. 1:19; Rom. 15:30-32).

His desire was that news of his rescue from death be the impetus for the saints in Corinth to join together in prayer on his behalf, in response to which he hoped God would deliver him yet again should similar perilous circumstances arise. If a "blessing" (ESV) or "favor" (NAS) was to be granted Paul, if his ministry was to continue with success, these believers must intercede on his behalf. And not only would he prosper as a result, God also would be glorified by the many thanksgivings that were uttered for the blessings he bestowed on Paul through prayer.

Do you see how prayer is always a win for all concerned? Look at the dynamics of intercession, how it works for the benefit of everyone involved:

> The ones who pray (in this case, the Corinthians) experience the joy of being an instrument in the fulfillment of God's purposes and delight in beholding how God works in response to their intercessory pleas (cf. Romans 10:14-15).
>
> The one who is prayed for (in this case, the apostle Paul) experiences the joy of being delivered from peril or sustained in trial or being made the recipient of some otherwise unattainable blessing.
>
> The one to whom prayer is offered (in every case, God) experiences the joy of being thanked, and thus glorified, for having intervened in a way that only God can in order to bless or deliver or save his people.

Thus, what we read here in 2 Corinthians 1:11 is similar to the emphasis found elsewhere in Paul's writings. On two occasions he indicated that whether or not he was released from prison may well be dependent on prayer. Although the power to set him free appeared to rest with the civil authorities, they were but instruments used of God to accomplish his purpose in Paul's life (cf. Prov. 21:1), a purpose God had determined to fulfill by means of prayer offered on Paul's behalf by the saints.

It wasn't all that long ago that we saw this work out in the life of Andrew Brunson. He served as a missionary and pastor in Turkey for many years until he was arrested and thrown in prison. He spent nearly two years in prison, no doubt wondering if Christians were praying for him. At our former church we devoted time in every weekly prayer meeting to praying for his release. So too did numerous other Christians around the world. And it was an incredible blessing, that many of you will remember, when Andrew and his wife came and spoke to our church about this experience.

In his letter to Philemon, Paul wrote, "at the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that *through your prayers* I will be graciously given to you" (v. 22). The word here translated "given" means "to graciously grant a favor". Combined with the fact that it is passive in voice indicates that Paul envisioned his physical welfare and eventual whereabouts to be ultimately in the hands of God. And it is God, Paul hoped, who had determined to act in response to the petitions of his people, specifically Philemon and his household, to secure his release.

We often wondered if our prayers for Andrew Brunson would make a difference. After praying for two years that he be released, we began to fear that he might die in that rat hole. Paul was also uncertain of the outcome. He hoped to be set free, but knew that it rested with God. The civil authorities in this case were mere intermediaries who could be moved to do God's bidding in response to the petitions of God's people. Is it too much to say that without their prayers, Paul had no hope? Is it too much to say that had Philemon and his family not prayed that Paul may well have remained in that prison? Perhaps God had purposed to secure Paul's release through another means should the saints have faltered in their prayers for him. Perhaps. But not to pray on that assumption would have been presumptuous and sinful on the part of Philemon and his household.

We find a similar scenario described in Philippians 1. Paul is again confident of his impending release from prison and ultimate vindication. Yet he also says, "for I know that *through your prayers* [there it is again!] and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance" (Phil. 1:19). Paul evidently believed that God had purposed to secure his deliverance through the prayers of the Christians at Philippi and the gracious provision of the Holy Spirit.

Paul's appeal to the Roman Christians is especially poignant:

> "I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service

> for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company" (Romans 15:30-32).

The apostle was convinced that God had suspended the success of his journeys and mission on the prayers of his people. Without those prayers, Paul was at a loss. His anxiety about a threat from the unbelieving Jews in Judea was well-founded (cf. Acts 20-21). Therefore, "his request for continued prayers was not merely a tactical maneuver to engage their sympathy, but a call for help in what he knew to be a matter of life and death" (Wiles, *Paul's Intercessory Prayers,* 269).

His plan to come to Rome and enjoy the fellowship of these saints was also dependent on prayer (cf. 1 Thess. 3:10-13). Important here is Paul's statement in Romans 15:32 where he suspends his impending journey on "God's will". He refused to presume on God's determinate purpose, never suggesting that he will make it to Rome whether or not they choose to pray for him. He eventually made it to Rome, although his arrival there was not in the manner he expected (see Acts 21:17-28:16). In any case, the important thing to note is that he believed in the power and importance of prayer as a means employed by God in the effectual fulfillment of his will.

Simply put, ***we must never presume that God will grant us apart from prayer what he has ordained to grant us only by means of prayer***. We may not have the theological wisdom to fully decipher how prayer functions in relation to God's will, but we must never cast it aside on the arrogant and unbiblical assumption that it is ultimately irrelevant to God's purpose for us and others.

Here's the bottom line: If we don't ask, God doesn't give. If God doesn't give, people don't receive. If people don't receive, God won't be thanked. If God isn't thanked, God will not be glorified. Think about it. Better still, pray about it.

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