

MY BEGGAR'S PURSE

On a visit one day to a wonderful dim sum restaurant, I was served a delicacy called a “beggar’s purse.” Its name is derived from its shape: a wonton wrapper gathered up in a tidy bundle around a dollop of savory ground meat, tied with a chive and steamed to perfection. While the subtle flavors delighted my palate, the shape and the name captured my imagination.

I thought of street beggars in China, all their earthly belongings knotted into a piece of cloth and a smaller version becoming a makeshift wallet in which to place the coins of benevolent passers-by.

Then I thought of how that mirrored me as I go to God. I am a beggar before God—in prayer as I seek his blessings in my life, and in my study of the Word as I store its treasures in my heart. I come to my Father utterly incapable of supplying my own needs without his generous provision. In his word I find wisdom, direction, motivation, security and meaningful purpose in life. In prayer, I find a love relationship, hope, release and freedom from guilt.

I go to God, spreading my beggar's purse open before him and waiting for him to fill it with the things I will need to make it through the day. He has never failed me, although I have failed him.

While I am absolutely sure that prayer and Bible study are the sustenance of the Christian life, and that my need for God is a constant factor, it is life circumstances that put me emotionally in touch or out of touch with my soul's desperation. I once believed that I would reach a level of spiritual maturity that would transcend life's busyness and distractions and my own hyperactive nature. I'm still waiting for that patient steadfastness with a measure of personal disappointment.

Still, when I'm facing a tough decision, it is the Bible and prayer (and the advice of godly friends) that set my course. I have never encountered a life circumstance that is not effectively addressed in the Bible. God has, indeed, given us "everything we need for life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). When I'm discouraged or fearful, it is the comfort of prayer and the direction of God's word that bring peace and perspective (Matthew 11:28). When I'm happily curious and searching the Scriptures for some new understanding to ground me, I'm thrilled by the practicality of this living Word (Hebrews 4:12).

I love reading Psalm 119 and measuring my current

love for the Word against David's. I always come up short of that man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14), but he inspires me to have that mark on the wall as a measure for my own enthusiasm for the precepts of God.

You might think with all this professed conviction that I'd never miss a day of Bible study. Not so. I had a friend who set as a New Year's resolution the goal of not missing a single day of reading the Bible. She did it. There are probably others who have never missed a day in the Word in years and find it unthinkable to do otherwise. But I miss a day now and then. This, in spite of my awe that so brief a tome contains the entire will of God!

I'm puzzled by college graduates who have read several books (of infinitely lesser value) in a single semester for the sake of passing a class, yet who claim not to have time to read the entire Bible.

Prayer is another thing. I may miss a good, long morning prayer once in a while, but the little comments and requests I send in God's direction throughout the day are a way of life for me now. Still, I know those times when I have a real conversation with God and pour out my heart to him are the true grounding connections in my relationship with him.

I have experienced a few periods of life when I felt buried under the weight of sorrow or fear. While these

were the times I most needed connection with God, they were also the ones in which I found it most challenging to focus. Those were the times when I had to write out my prayers just to be able to concentrate and remember that I had, indeed, prayed that day. Those written prayers anchored me and gave me confidence that a faithful God had heard me and was at work crafting the perfect response to my perceived needs. I've sometimes spread those written prayers before God the way Hezekiah did with Sennacherib's letter and asked God to look at it with me and deliver me (2 Kings 19:14–19).

One of these challenging times in my life happened several years ago. Our youngest son passed out while on a morning walk and was hospitalized for eleven days while doctors tried to determine the cause of abdominal pain so severe they could find no remedy. An uncertain diagnosis left them unable to provide much help beyond strong painkillers.

He was frightened and depressed and on a downward cycle spiritually. My own fear was consuming and left me numb when I tried to pray. I couldn't seem to voice my requests to God. Instead, I filled a journal with prayers. Matt finally learned to manage his health with a rigid diet which he has courageously followed, and he accepted the help he needed to get back on track with his relationship with God.

During some of these challenging times, I've also felt unable to concentrate on reading the Bible, so I have resorted to reading it aloud. Getting two of my senses involved in comprehension seems to help me. I try to read with lots of appropriate inflection. Particularly challenging times are not the best times for me to read Leviticus or Revelation. Still, no matter my state of mind, I always come away with treasures.

Prayer and Scripture: the priceless currency in my beggar's purse!

Occasionally, I find surprises when I open my beggar's purse in a crisis. I find God has equipped me with a new strength of character to meet the current trial. I find he's extended my ability to persevere or gifted me with hope. I've been happily surprised to find he's forged his full armor (Ephesians 6:10–18) to a greater tensile strength than I'd have ever noticed if I had not needed to go into battle.

When life's troubles blindsides you, as they most often do, you can feel unprepared and even disoriented as you stumble around, trying to get your bearings to focus on a spiritual and emotional course to see you through. I can't think of a single trial that I went into feeling fully prepared. Instead, I have felt initially frenzied and frightened, rummaging through my beggar's purse looking for the

resources that will equip me to face the current crisis: “Where’s that sword—that sword of the Spirit? I know it was right here! Snap! I should have sharpened it! Is there any patience stored in here somewhere? I never seem to have enough perseverance on hand! Hope—I get a glimpse of it and when I reach for it, it seems to have moved just out of reach behind some nasty negative obstruction.”

But usually, in the end, I’m able to pull together just the right equipment that God has supplied to sustain me.

Years ago, I volunteered to care for an elderly friend who had just been released from the hospital. She was a week or two from being able to take care of herself and had no family able to provide for her.

We gave her our guest room, just off our living room. Unfortunately, she found herself to be more comfortable on our living room sofa. I didn’t want an invalid in our living room, but I knew it wasn’t forever and her comfort was more important than my sense of the appropriate. I searched around in my beggar’s purse for the love and patience to be at peace with her needs. I barely found enough.

Her age and the condition for which she had been hospitalized made walking a slow and halting process. Our four children were still young, and I already felt

stretched with meeting their needs, but found I had temporarily added another “toddler” to my brood. I searched around in my purse for humor.

The final stretch for me was that she had limited control over her bowels, and I found myself regularly spot-cleaning the bathroom floor and sometimes the gold shag carpet in the living room. This put me at the end of my resources. It was more than I'd signed on for when I originally offered to bring my friend home. I opened wide my beggar's purse as I went to my Father, confessing my weary self-pity and begging for the ability to sweetly fulfill my promise to assist with her recovery.

I found God had put within me a pretty good spiritual imagination. Recalling Jesus' promise in Matthew 25 that when we serve others, he receives it as service rendered personally to him, I became armed with a new resolve. On my hands and knees scrubbing my soiled carpet, I pretended I was cleaning up after Jesus. It gave me the most amazing joy! I felt humbled and honored to have this great privilege of serving my Lord. Who knew that make-believe was a gift of the Spirit?

I love being a beggar at the feet of a loving and generous God.