

WHAT YOU PRAY FOR

(chapters one and two)

Don Wharton

I asked for strength,
and God gave me difficulties to make me strong.

I asked for wisdom
and God gave me problems to solve.

I asked for prosperity
and God gave me brawn and brains to work.

I asked for courage
and God gave me dangers to overcome.

I asked for patience
and God placed me in situations where I was forced to wait.

I asked for love
and God gave me troubled people to help.

I asked for favors
and God gave me opportunities.

I asked for everything so I could enjoy life.
Instead, he gave me life so I could enjoy everything.

I received nothing I wanted.
I received everything I needed.

“Look to the Lord and His strength;
Seek His face always.” Ps. 105:4

ONE

Pastor Jackson Freeman opened the sacristy door ever so slightly and peeked out at the congregation gathering for Easter Sunday services at 79-year-old St. Peter Lutheran Church in Mission Ridge, Ohio. He counted only thirteen people before he silently closed the old wooden door and dropped his head in disbelief.

“Thirteen people... on Easter Sunday,” he muttered softly even though he wanted to shout it out loud in anger to God and anyone else within earshot.

He heard Wiley Grissom, the sixty-eight-year-old chairman of the church elders, coming up the back stairs toward the sanctuary side entrance to the small room behind the altar area. As he did every Sunday, he greeted pastor by asking him if he needed anything before service started.

“How about some more people in the pews?” Jackson answered.

“We just need to pray, Pastor... and have more faith,” Wiley said with a small but confident smile. “We’ll make a comeback. You haven’t even been here two years yet. You’re a good worker. God will reward you. You’ll see.”

“Thanks, Wiley. Oh, happy Easter.”

“Happy Easter to you, too, Pastor. I’m gonna light the candles now. That okay?”

“Sure. It’s almost time to start.”

After Wiley left to light the candles, Pastor Freeman sat down on the folding chair in the sacristy and whispered, “God, I am a sinner and have fallen short of your glory. But today, I have the opportunity to proclaim that my sins and the sins of everyone have been washed away by the blood of Your Son, Jesus Christ. He is risen! The battle is over, and

the victory is won.”

He paused to collect his thoughts.

“I thank You for everyone who is out there this morning. Help me to open up Your Word and proclaim the message of Your grace today.”

He heard the organist begin playing a prelude. “Lord, I really am grateful for the small number of people out there. Speak to each one of them today. In Jesus name, Amen.”

Jackson stood confidently knowing full well it was a privilege to proclaim the Gospel today and every day at St. Peter. He opened the sacristy door and saw Violet Berning sitting at the organ keyboard, the lamp over her music accentuating her scrunched up face as she missed a note, followed by a series of two more quick slip-ups. It would have been almost funny if Pastor didn’t think it was one of those little things that drove new people away instead of pulling them in. The old-time members of the church were used to Violet’s facial contortions by now.

It’s Easter. Let’s proclaim Jesus, and pray the church can have a resurrection of its own someday... soon.

Violet brought her prelude to a soft close, and Pastor Freeman walked down the two steps of the altar area and stood between the two sections of old wooden pews, facing his congregation which had risen in numbers to sixteen or so, if he counted correctly.

“He is risen.” Jackson proclaimed.

“He is risen indeed,” answered the congregation in low muffled tones.

Pastor smiled at his flock. “We can do better than that,” he insisted. “He is risen!”

“He is risen indeed,” was the response, not much louder, but with a bit more enthusiasm and a wave of smiles.

“That’s much better,” he said, even though it wasn’t *that* much better.

“This is the high holiday of the Church year. Resurrection Sunday. We celebrate Jesus rising from the

dead and proclaiming His victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil. No matter what we're going through in our lives today, we can rejoice because salvation is upon each of us. He is risen!"

"He is risen indeed," the congregation dutifully replied, this time with volume *and* enthusiasm.

"Let's sing our first hymn." Pastor nodded to Violet who promptly stepped on the wrong foot pedal bass note with the opening chord, scrunching her face in the fluorescent light of her music lamp.

We're off to a good start. Pastor sighed and opened his hymnal to number 199, "Jesus Christ is Risen Today. Halleluia!"

As pastor sang with enthusiasm, hoping the congregation would be inspired to do the same, he glanced over the crowd, noting the regular members who were worshipping today and hoping he'd see an unfamiliar face, visiting for the first time.

Martha Holcomb was standing by herself in the third row on the left with that constantly forlorn look on her face.

Eleven-year-old Jimmy and his mom Stacey were singing from one hymnal raised between them.

Richard must be on another business trip.

Opal Hersheimer stayed seated on her aisle seat on the right side next to her son Mark, the accountant, who was visiting from Toledo as he always did around tax time.

Wiley Grissom stood next to his wife Jean and glanced down the aisle often and proudly at his three grandchildren who were dressed in their finest and flanked by the Grissom's daughter and her husband.

I don't see the Andersons or the Carlisles. Pastor Freeman was disturbed at first. *Those guys are my other elders.* But he quickly figured that they must be visiting their families today and celebrating Easter with them.

Violet made another glaring error and Pastor Freeman

glanced her way in a reflex action. He noticed a pretty blonde woman, probably in her early twenties, who had slipped into the row nearest to the organ during the first verse.

She's new. Related to Violet maybe?

TWO

The service progressed, and as the people sang the final verse of the closing hymn, Pastor Freeman walked to the center aisle area again and motioned for the congregation to be seated.

“I hope you all have a great Easter Sunday today. Do we have any visitors with us?”

Jackson almost laughed out loud. He asked that question every Sunday, but it had been many weeks since any visitor had answered the call.

Violet Berning called out from the organ bench. “My niece Angela is visiting today. She’s on her way back to the University of Nebraska-Omaha from her home in North Carolina.”

Angela nodded shyly to the congregation and flashed a quaint smile. “Go Big Red,” said Pastor Freeman. His words garnered a silence that begged him to move on without an explanation of his comment.

Aw, forget it he thought.

“Welcome, Angela,” he said instead. “Well, I’ll be in my office all week if you need to get in touch with me. And I’ll be in the back to greet you all as you’re leaving today.”

He reminded the group one more time, “He is risen.”

“He is risen indeed,” was the response from the group, sounding more like the unenthusiastic reply they had given at the start of the service. Pastor Freeman made no attempt to encourage more passion. Instead, he walked briskly down the aisle toward the front door of the sanctuary as Violet Berning began playing a postlude piece.

Mark Hersheimer, the stone-faced accountant, ushered his mother Opal by the arm slowly but directly down the aisle ahead of the other parishioners.

“Pastor, that was a lovely sermon,” Opal said. “Do you know my son Mark from Toledo?”

“Yes. Hi, Mark. Good to see you again. Happy Easter to you.”

“Yes,” Mark stuttered. “Happy Easter.” He turned to Opal. “We need to get going, Mom. Got to beat the restaurant crowd.”

“Oh, I wish you would let me make Sunday dinner for you,” Opal said as Mark moved her forward with his arm locked firmly around her elbow.

“I don’t want to put you out,” said Mark. “Besides I have a client meeting back in Toledo later this afternoon.”

“On Easter Sunday?” was Opal’s response. She stopped abruptly and turned back to Pastor Freeman. “Give me a call this week. I’ll have you over for tea.”

“That would be nice,” Jackson said.

Martha Holcomb stood patiently waiting while Opal and her insistent son made their way through the door and down the front steps.

“Happy Easter, Pastor,” she said meekly.

“Happy Easter to you, Martha,” he said as his eyes caught a bright ray of sunshine through the open front church door. “We’ve got a beautiful day today, don’t we?”

“Yes,” she said. “And it’s warm enough I can finally sit out on my front porch.”

“Sounds like a good way to spend the afternoon,” he said. “Happy Easter.”

Martha smiled as she shook Pastor’s hand. *Happy?* she thought. *I can’t remember the last time I was really happy.*

Jimmy and his mom Stacey approached next. “Happy Easter to you. Is Richard on the road this weekend?”

“Yes, but he’ll be home on Tuesday,” said Stacey as Jimmy dropped his head and dove his hands into his pockets at the mention of his dad being out of town.

“Hey, Jimmy, you start baseball soon?”

Jimmy perked up at the mention of his favorite game. “Not for a couple weeks,” he said, “but I’m ready.”

“I’ll bet you are,” said Pastor. “The season will be here before you know it.”

Wiley Grissom and his wife Jean were next in line, eager to present their daughter and her family to Pastor.

“Happy Easter, Pastor. You remember our daughter Dawn Marie and her husband Ed. And these are the three best grandchildren in the world.”

The children all giggled, and Pastor bent down to shake each of their hands. “Good to see you all today. Happy Easter.” He straightened up again and shook Ed’s hand. “Welcome,” he said. “How’s everything over the border in Richmond?”

“It’s going well,” said Ed. “We always enjoy visiting the folks and coming to church. I like your sermons.”

“Well, thank you. That’s a nice compliment.”

Pastor Freeman glanced over Wiley’s shoulder and saw Violet Berning and her niece Angela approaching. The young blonde lady was even prettier up close than she was at a distance.

“Pastor,” said Wiley, “do you have plans for Easter dinner?”

Jackson fumbled with his words. “Well, I...”

“If you don’t have any plans, we’d like you to join us,” said Wiley. “Jean is planning a big meal.”

“That sounds good,” said Pastor, the words stumbling from his mouth, not quite sure what he was agreeing to.

“Great,” said Wiley. “We’ll be eating around 1:00. Come over any time before then.”

Jackson focused again on Wiley’s invitation. “Thank you very much. I’ll be over after I finish up here at church.”

The Grissoms all turned and walked out the door. Pastor greeted the remaining couple of people. Violet and her niece Angela waited patiently off to the side as the other families left the church, leaving the three of them alone.

“Happy Easter, Violet,” said Pastor. “Nice job today.”

“Oh, I missed a couple notes, I guess. Just gotta practice more.”

Jackson reached out and shook Violet’s niece’s hand. “Angela, right?”

“Yeah,” she mumbled as she looked up from her cell phone and weakly shook Jackson’s hand.

“You go to Nebraska-Omaha?”

“Yeah, I gotta leave tomorrow morning. My boyfriend is a basketball player and they have a tournament game on Tuesday night. I’m a cheerleader.” She perked up on the word “cheerleader.”

“A cheerleader?” he said with a fainthearted smile.

Cheerleaders had never interested Jackson. He type-casted most of them as flighty and self-absorbed. He had always preferred the quiet, intellectual females who were more approachable.

“Pastor, do you have plans for Sunday dinner?” Violet asked. “Angela and I would love to have you join us.”

Violet smiled eagerly while Angela shifted her weight and looked away uninterested.

“I’m going to join Wiley Grissom and his family today. We’ll have to make it some other time.”

“Oh,” said Violet, wrinkling up her face in that look he’d seen so many times. Disappointment resonated in her voice. “Okay, then. Well, happy Easter.”

“Happy Easter to both of you, too,” he said as Angela turned and walked away without a word or a glance for Pastor. Violet grabbed her arm and whispered something to her niece who shrugged her off as she looked down at her phone.

Jackson felt relieved that he wouldn’t have to spend the afternoon with scrunchy-faced Violet and her cheerleader niece Angela. He turned toward the front of the church and marched briskly down the aisle, eagerly removing his vestments and robe.

I feel like I dodged a bullet there.

As he approached the altar area, he was drawn to the likeness of Christ on the cross in the painting hanging over the altar. He checked his thoughts about Violet and her niece.

They're saved by grace too, aren't they Lord? Just like I am.

He paused and closed his eyes. "Forgive me," he whispered. "I need to work on that judgmental attitude thing, don't I?"

Jackson Freeman might have been the shepherd and leader of the congregation at St. Peter Lutheran Church, but he knew he still had a lot to learn about growing in his faith and living it out in the Mission Ridge, Ohio community.