

Thimble Faith or Bucket Faith

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The Early Church At Prayer – Acts 12:6-19

Today, I have a thimble and a bucket with me on the platform.

I brought them, because it is a visual way of expressing an old saying:

If you bring God a thimble, He'll probably fill it.

If you bring God a bucket, He'll probably fill it.

If you bring God a thimble and ask Him for a little peace, a little security, a little comfort, a little protection, enough help to get you through the day, some small travel items under 4oz for personal well-being—if you bring a thimble, He'll probably fill it.

What if you brought God a bucket? (IMAGE OF THIMBLE AND BUCKET COULD BE BEHIND TEXT FOR THE REST OF THE TALK IF IT WORKS)

What if you asked God to make your life a daring adventure of faith;

What if you ask God to use you way beyond yourself, or your agenda, or your own talents; What if you asked God to pour out blessings on the people around you—people

that you see, people that you carry in your heart—and to make you into a radiant agent of sacrificial Love.

Bring God a bucket, and He'll probably fill that too.

So the question for us in this message is:

What are you bringing to God in your heart right now?

And the challenge is:

Go for the Bucket!

The funny thing in the reading today is that the early church was indeed going for the bucket in prayer that night in Acts

They were praying for Peter in that room – Peter who was in prison – and that was no small prayer – that was a bucket prayer because...

Peter had two layers of guards between him and freedom,
He was also bound with chains
With an iron gate in front of him

Herod had just killed James with the sword – if a king killed you with a sword – rather than just a stoning - it meant you were a threat to the political establishment

And the people loved Herod for it – the Jews especially – so Herod thought “Hey I’ll do it again and he threw Peter into prison too for his own popularity sake, and he began to persecute all Christians”.

It was a dark time for the church. A scary time.

Now the great thing about Luke is that he is a master storyteller, and in the midst of all of this dark persecution, he actually inserts humor in this account...

Acts is one of the books in the Bible that has the most humor;

Some Christians assume that the Bible could never, or should never, be funny; so they ignore the humor even when, as here, it jumps up, wagging its tail demanding attention.

So...I would say that Rhoda takes the prize for being the comic star; but what about the church at prayer as well?

Here they are praying fervently for Peter.

Here is Peter, released astonishingly in direct answer to their prayers.

Here is Rhoda, so excited at hearing his voice that she forgets to open the door, (leaving Peter in the street which was very dangerous for him as an escapee to be out there) and runs in to say, “It’s Peter! It’s Peter!”

And **Here is the early church, so full of faith, so trusting in God, that they tell her – PRAISE GOD! Our prayers have been answered! (True or False)**
NO!

They tell her she is mad. She is out of her mind

Then when she insists – they tell her she is misinterpreting the voice
Or else she is hearing his angel – in other words Peter is already executed (so get used to it)and you are hearing his ghost speak to you from the dead– You Crazy Woman!

This is funny. You could make a sitcom out of this scene...

You know what else this passage is?

It is strangely comforting to me because...

Luke is allowing us to see the early church for a moment not as a bunch of great heroes and heroines of the faith

But as the same kind of muddled, half-believing, faith-one-minute-and-doubt-the-next sort of people as most of us are when we pray.

We believe, but we don’t believe... at the same time!...We have faith, but not really because we worry and live in fear.

No different than the early church.

James had just been murdered by Herod! How were they to know that God would rescue Peter?

Their faith was shaken by what had happened to James...they believed and they didn't believe

The other reason I find it comforting is because it would be easy for skeptics to dismiss the story of Peter's miraculous release from jail as just a pious legend

Except for the fact that **nobody constructing a pious legend out of thin air would have made up this ridiculous story of Rhoda and the praying-but-hopeless church.**

This story has the ring of truth: ordinary truth, down-to earth truth at the very moment it is recounting this extraordinary event.

And that's how God works doesn't he?

God works in the down to earth events; God works in and through our praying-but-hopeless selves – to do the inconceivable.

Despite their doubt, thought, the early church was asking, weren't they? - praying a BUCKET prayer.

They didn't believe it when it happened, but they had enough confidence to ask; to

Ask that God do the impossible...even in their "I believe...I don't believe" state of mind.

Friends we are called to do the same.

I ride horses, but its just for fun and exercise.

When I watch people who are in Grand Prix event jumping beautiful



thoroughbreds...over 6' jumps I stand in awe

My little dusty ring where I work out on my sweet but clumsy standardbred who jumps reluctantly over 2' poles don't even come close to what these riders can do

...

I admire those people. I'm very impressed by what they do, but I can't relate to them. I could not ever be what they are.

I admire them, but I don't identify with them. It's like they belong to another species.

Sometimes we can think about the people in the Bible as if they are another species from us.

We admire them, but we don't relate because we think they are so different
When in reality they are just exactly like you and me
And friends if the early church, with all their doubt and uncertainty, can bring a bucket sized prayer request to God, in their hour of need
And see him answer their prayer – fill their bucket – so can you.

You don't need to be content with just a thimble – pray big, even if you doubt – and be astounded

Scripture is full of stories of people who are bucket pray-ers—people who might not be very good people, people who might not have much faith, but they bring their buckets to Jesus and Jesus answers their prayer.

Maybe you hear Bible stories like this, it pumps you up. You get inspired.

Maybe
you think about times in your life when you've experienced that kind of thing, or stories like that about other people.

But maybe not . . . maybe not.
Has anybody in here ever prayed, but it seemed like you didn't get an answer?
Has anybody in here ever prayed, but secretly inside you felt like you didn't think it was going to happen?
Anybody in here ever gotten discouraged and given up praying about something?

Anybody in here ever been so overwhelmed, or so full of doubts, that the truth is—secretly—that you didn't even bother to pray at all?

I've been there...I've done that.
And you wonder...How much faith does it take?

**What does God require in the Faith/Belief department?
What's the minimal level of certainty I can have and still have my prayer be effective?**

I want to look at another story in the New Testament – Mark 9; It's a father who comes to Jesus and pours out his heart – he has an epileptic son...who seizes, and foams at the mouth and contorts and throws himself down thrashing to the detriment of his life!

The father makes this prayer to Jesus:

If You can do anything, take pity on us and help us. If You can.

Now that's not a prayer of real strong faith.

If You can do anything . . .

That's not a great compliment to Jesus.

That's not the kind of prayer that is ever going to be turned into a praise song.

You'll never go to a church service

where somebody stands up on the platform and starts singing with a mike

Heavenly Father. If You can do anything . . .

Probably wouldn't get published by Hillsong;

So to the Father's request "if you can"

Jesus picks up immediately on the "if You can." Then he says these staggering words—words that this man and you and I can hardly dare to believe:

Everything is possible. **Everything is possible. (Mark 9:23)**

But then he adds the words that makes the father grow pale....**for him who believes.**

For this man, that's good news and horrible news . . . "for him who believes." I can't believe!

I like how Mark puts it. He says the

man responds immediately—immediately—because it is so close to the surface in this man that it just comes pouring out of him:

I do believe. Help my unbelief!

Help me overcome my unbelief. I believe, but I doubt. I want to believe, but I'm afraid.

What will Jesus will do for this "faith-impaired" guy?

Jesus walks to the man's son, rebukes the demons, heals the boy, takes him by His hand, lifts him to his feet, restores him to his father.

So, **How much faith is enough?**

If You can . . .that's not a very big faith statement...

Just enough faith to come to Jesus and ask Him.

It is not my job to conjure up a feeling of certainty; it is not my job to try to increase my faith...if I don't have it, I can't make it happen.

It's my job to simply come to Jesus and ask him to fill my bucket. It's His job to increase my faith.

James says:

You don't have because you don't ask God. (James 4:2)

So what are you asking God for? Where's your Bucket?

A while ago my Bucket request after years of being in the ministry was...
God, help me to know how to connect with You in a fresh way in the mornings when I first wake up. I want to have that sense of being connected with You.

Frank Laubach, who writes wonderfully on prayer said this....:

All you need to do in order to start God speaking is fix your attention on

Him first thing in the

morning. Look up at the ceiling and say:

Lord, speak. I'm listening.

If your own noisy, feverish ideas have subsided enough, there often begins to flow a gentle train of ideas fresh with the clean flavor of heaven.

I wanted to start the morning like that with:

a gentle train of ideas fresh with the clean flavor of heaven

And it began to renew my spirit, and helped me connect with God in a deeper way.

I wonder...

How often does God want to give me help with something, and I don't ask?

How many times do I go through a day with anger, or fear, or joylessness, or selfish preoccupation, because I just don't ask? I just don't bring the Bucket?

That's all the early church did ...they just asked ...they aren't certain...but they ask...**HELP PETER!**

Full of doubt, unsure and wavering, upset about James' recent execution by Herod, they look up and they say "HELP!"

Anne Lammott says that she only prays two kinds of prayers

"Help me, Help me, Help me!" and "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

And then when Peter knocks at the door...they are overjoyed!

And that's when they pray "Thank you, thank you thank you!"

Sometimes we complicate things so much.

Some of you—I know

because I've been there—you beat yourselves up:
You think to yourself...
I worry too much, I doubt too much; I waiver; I don't have enough faith.
You know what? You have enough faith, if you have enough just to come to
Jesus and say:
If You can do anything . . .
That's enough faith.
How much faith is enough? Enough faith to come to Jesus and to simply ask

Come to him with that realness that Luke expresses on the pages of Acts with
the early church astounded at Peter's release...or the realness of that father with
the epileptic son who said, "I believe, help my unbelief"...but still in the midst of
my wavering...my seesaw faith...back and forth...I am still going to ask.

Here's what amazes me about Jesus:
Jesus prefers honesty to certainty.
Jesus work in and through our human weakness, our uncertainties, our doubts to
fulfill his purposes again and again

I love that about Jesus.
He knows we're weak. He remembers that we are dust.
And he loves our weak dusty selves.
Friends, You don't have to be sure; you've just have to be real. And you have to
ask.

So come to Him. Don't try to force yourself to say:

Yeah, I can make myself believe this is going to happen.

The early church didn't believe that Peter would be released, but they asked.
The father — believing and not believing at the same time - asked.

Forced, insincere certainty, kills prayer
Sincerity, authenticity, breathes life into our conversation with God – **into our
prayer;** into our ask

Some people say:
The way to get what you want is to just claim it. Name it and claim it.
Not so. That's insincere certainty.

Then there is the teaching that goes like this... Don't ask God for something
twice, because then He'll know you didn't really
believe Him the first time.
Ever hear that one? It's a duzy but

I don't get it

If God is God, wouldn't He know if you had doubts the first time? I mean, it's not like He's sitting up there saying:

Well, I was going to give you what you asked for, but when you asked a second time, that was a dead giveaway, so I'm not going to give it to you now.

How well we complicate ...

Jesus put it like this:

When you pray, don't keep babbling like the pagans do.

Don't let your prayer deteriorate into a series of mindless, pious sounding clichés.

Just think. Just be present. Be honest before God.

Philip Yancey was once praying and he said to God "**You haven't shown up God!**"

God's response back to him was, "**Neither have you**".

In other words, stop praying in platitudes, trying to make everything okay with your words.

Trying to drum up more faith on your own

Stop pretending that you should be this way or that way in prayer - and start being honest with where you are at right now today

Show up in prayer with authenticity – in the midst of your doubt – and God will show up for you.

So How much faith is enough?

Just enough faith to come to Jesus.

Just enough faith to ask

And then, just enough faith to keep persisting, to keep asking, to keep knocking, to keep coming back. (healing service)

Just enough faith to believe that God loves me enough to welcome me back each time...

What's your BUCKET prayer?

What's your "if you can God" prayer?

What's the request you have that is so big, so beyond your power...the one that has broken your heart...the one that you haven't even asked for because, if truth were told, you don't really think it could ever happen.

Or you haven't asked for it because you think you don't have enough faith, or aren't spiritually developed enough to take it on?

I remember doing a similar message to this one years ago at another church. I had the people at the end of the service just simply ASK GOD for what they wanted. Their bucket prayer. It was so simple.

One man came up to me afterward and said, I asked God to take away my chronic pain that I've had in my legs. I'd never asked him to do this for me before. But today, because you said I could, I asked. I was kind of scared but I did it. And when I did, The pain immediately left – and my walker is back at my seat. I never had about asking God for this before...I didn't think God had time for this and if he did – I didn't think I had enough faith. Tears streamed down his face. The pain is gone!

Let me ask you...right now..

Would you also be willing, just as you are, honestly and openly, to ask God to grant your bucket request today? Would you be willing to persist in asking – even if it seems from your vantage point - impossible?

If you bring a thimble, He'll probably fill it. If you bring Him a Bucket . . .he'll fill that too

I'm not saying that you always get what you want,
when you want it.

That's not the point of this talk
But I'll tell you one thing

The only prayer that God cannot answer is the one I never ask.
The only prayer God can never answer is the one I never ask.
It's Bucket time folks...lets bring our requests to Almighty God in these next few moments

Let's come to Jesus. Let's be real. Let's bring to the One who tells us in scripture that all things are possible...our buckets...asking him to fill them ...Lord we believe, help our unbelief...lets pray in silence making our bucket requests known to God
MUSIC (PRAYER)