

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

The Grace Trifecta, Part I: Prayer

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Hi, I'm Alison Gingras, and founder of Reconciledtoyou.com. I am very excited to spend a few sessions with you this month as part of the Pray More Novenas Lenten retreat. What I'm going to be talking about in the next... for my three sessions is what I call The Grace Trifecta of prayer, sacrament, and scripture. We're going to look at how these 3 amazing gifts from God help us to grow closer to Him, and how we can use them during this time of Lent to do just that: To find ourselves anew in Christ, in who we are created to be by Him.

First, let's start with a prayer. *In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Dear good and gracious God, we thank You so much for this opportunity to be together. Lord, we ask You to open up our hearts and our minds to the message that You have for us in this moment. Lord, I ask personally for Your work and Your will to be done, and for me to get out of Your way. And we ask all of this in Your most precious name, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Well, the funny thing about being here with you today is that I almost said no. About 2 years ago, I was diagnosed with a hand condition called atopic dermatitis. It has no real cause, and therefore no real cure. Basically, my hands, they get inflamed, and they peel, and they're just really unattractive. My husband teases that it looks a lot like leprosy, and perhaps I should, when I'm going down our hall in our home, that I should yell "I'm clean! I'm clean!" He's right. I probably should. And they make me very self-conscious. And the idea of coming on a video and sharing my story with you includes with at my hands, because I'm just one of those people who talks a lot with their hands. I'm trying not to, but it's hard. I get very excited, especially when I'm talking about Jesus.

But the more I prayed about it, the more the Lord continued to show me what good He was doing with this condition. This chronic condition. And just all these different lessons started to kind of unfolded before me. I started to see so much of how... that everybody has some chronic affliction that they deal with. Some, like myself, is on the outside, and people can see it. Others, it's on the inside, and it's a daily struggle. I've had a battle with anxiety for most of my life, so I get that internal one too. You look fine in most situations, but inside you're really struggling to hold it together. Oh, trust me, I get that.

And for some of us, it's also a spiritual affliction. It's a spiritual struggle, to believe in God, regardless of the circumstances or the situation in your life. It's so

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easy... it's not easy I should say. It's not very easy to trust people you can see. Trying to trust the unseen God can sometimes feel unsurmountable. But as I go through this condition and spend all of this time and energy trying to find cures and to find relief, I've discovered that God is... He's always with me, and especially during this time of Lent we can really spend more time figuring out how He's with us, and where He's with us. And through these beautiful gifts of prayer, sacrament, and scripture, I hope that you yourself can discover, in your own affliction, where God is carrying you through it, where He is holding your hand, or guiding you, and making good. Because He promises that, in Romans 8:28, for all those who love Him, that He will bring good even the worst conditions. That might be the Allison abridged version of Romans 8:28, but I believe in His promises. He doesn't make them lightly. And I believe in the scriptures and what they have to teach me, and to teach us.

So I almost said no, because every once in a while you'll get a glimpse of these hands, and I'm so glad that I didn't let my fear and my desire to hide what was going on to keep me from bringing this message to you. I really believe with my whole heart that it's like this best-kept secret. That God loves us so much, that He didn't just put us here and say "Good luck. I hope you figure out this whole life thing, and perhaps maybe I'll see you in the end." No, He gives us this life, and He gives us free-will, and He asks us to use it to come to know Him and to love Him, to serve Him in this world and in the next. And if we do that through these great gifts of prayer, sacrament, and scripture, you're going to see how easy it truly is.

So, with this session, I'm going to spend the remainder of it kind of focused on the prayer aspect. The next, we'll look at scripture. And the last, we'll look at the sacraments, particularly THE sacrament of reconciliation, since it is Lent. And it's my favorite. You don't create a ministry called Reconciled To You and not love the sacrament of reconciliation. You'll see in the third session that I wasn't always like that. I was quite the confession chicken. But something very humorous happened to cure me of that. But let's focus today on prayer.

I'm a journaler. You keep seeing me look down. That's because I've written in my journal. When I was, you know, praying about what the Lord wanted me to say, because the Holy Spirit is the one who's really bringing this message, I am just here as His spokesperson, His ambassador. 2 Corinthians, 5:20, to be an ambassador for Christ, that's what I hope to be. I want everyone to be reconciled to God. And if I can be in any small way a piece of that reconciliation, then I feel blessed and honored, and that's what I've offered to God to be. So I went to adoration and I sat with my journal, and I said "Lord, I just... I want to know what it is You want me to bring. What message are You asking me to share?" And the

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first thing that came to my mind was “Do you have a plan for Lent? Do you have a plan for life and, more importantly, do you have a plan for life with Christ?”

Lent is this time to slow down, to spend 40 days looking at “Where am I right now spiritually? Where am I being called to?” There are the 3 tenets of Lent – we have the prayer, fasting, and alms giving – “And how can I use those 3 things to grow closer to God? Through prayer, alms giving, and fasting?” Well, again, we’re looking at prayer, which is also part of what I call The Grace Trifecta. Prayer is this just gift, this conversation that we can have with God. It’s one of the things I like about journaling, because sometimes my brain is kind of all over the place, and I want to be able to bring it in. And if I’m just trying to organize the thoughts on my own, it doesn’t work.

But sometimes I find – well, not sometimes, all the time – I find when I write them down, that I can organize them better. And it also gives me something to look back on, when God has spoken to my heart, and I can go back later and go “Oh my gosh. Look at this. This is where God was, you know, sharing this with me here. And here I’m seeing it come to fruition.” Or “This is what I was prayer for then, and thank goodness it didn’t happen, because this much greater thing happened.” Or just... it’s just a wonderful way to have a conversation with God and to have a record of it. And that’s really what prayer is. Prayer is really just a conversation with God. It’s this time of opening our hearts to Him, our hearts and our minds, lifting them to heaven, and letting Him speak to our hearts. That’s part of free-will. He’s not going to burst His way into our lives, He’s such a gentleman. We have to invite Him in. We have to cooperate with the grace that He has abundantly available for us in order to really fully embrace the life He has for us.

Now, what is grace? That was one of the things that, when I started to come back to the church about 10 years ago, I kept hearing all the time. Grace this and grace that, and I thought “What is grace?” I had no idea. So, this is the Allison Abridged version of grace: Grace is the undeserved yet freely-given gift of God’s Holy Spirit within us. It’s that gift, that spirit, that’s His, that He places in ours that allows us to live a holier life, to make better choices, to seek Him out, to understand, you know, the gifts of the Holy Spirit. That’s all this gift of grace that He has for us. Well, the funny thing about gifts is they’re not very useful if they’re not received, opened, and used. And sometimes we can get lost on how to get this grace from God. So there, we go back to that trifecta of prayer, sacrament, and scripture.

And prayer, well, there’s no wrong way to pray. I hear that a lot in my ministry work. “I don’t know how to pray.” Or “I don’t know if I’m praying right.” Any time you give your attention to God, and ask for Him to come into your life in a deeper way just to enlighten you in some way, how can that be wrong? It’s how

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you like to pray. It's how you feel the more comfortable. And honestly, I go through seasons of prayer. I may pray one way at some point in my life. For instance, this is how I found Pray More Novenas. I was in a place in my life where I was really trying to get to know God. I was struggling to kind of embrace this life of Christianity for the first time, and someone had shared with me a novena a long, long time ago when I was a young woman, and I knew that it had really impacted my heart.

So I wanted to pray them more, but I didn't know how to remember them, because I have a little ADD and I kind of forget things. And I loved that the email would come right to my inbox every day, and I would never forget. So that's how I discovered Pray More Novenas. And then I did, you know, those different parts of my life, and whatever they're offering one, quite honestly, I pray it. Because how can that be a bad thing? To pray this 9 days, to a saint, to our Blessed Mother, and to ask for an intercession, for a little extra grace and a little help with things. So when I'm in a season of real despair, I find myself praying more and more novenas. There's one by Saint Teresa of Calcutta. She called it the Flying Novena, some call it the Emergency Novena, and she would say nine Memorares in a row, and then she'd say a tenth in thanksgiving, because she knew our Blessed Mother would help her in one way or another, and I love that.

And I do that one and quite often. I have to be very honest, that one gets a lot of use in my life. But there's the prayers that you know from your childhood that are the Our Father, Hail Mary, the Glory Be, the Rosary. But this is looking at the scriptures, but there's also just talking to God. Just before I, you know, wake up in the morning I always thank Him for the day and ask Him to guide me and be with me for the day, and before I go to bed at night I do kind of an examine, where I just think about where, I during the day, I've been with God, or near Him, or away from Him, what I could have done better, what I did right. Just thanking Him and praising Him always for the gift of faith in my life, and asking Him to continue to pour out His blessing upon me, that I may always know Him and strive to know Him better. And that can sometimes be a difficulty, especially when you're faced with a condition, in my case this atopic dermatitis, that just doesn't go away, and there's nothing that I can do about it.

For me, it has a little bit to do with what I eat. I've been trying to figure out what that is and avoiding it, and it seems like whatever I'm allergic to seems to be in everything. And just looking for, in prayer, some peace, some respite, some hope in it. And I found that in prayer. I have to say that the answer to every prayer that I've ever prayed has always been the response of peace. I may not get what I've asked for, because God is not a slot machine. I may never see the answer; it may be happening and I just don't know it. But I always, always, always, have a sense, a

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great sense of peace after I have prayed, and for that I am ever grateful to God for the gift of prayer, and I do find myself praying, especially when I am the most discouraged by something. And sometimes my prayer is only the name of Jesus, or just holding my rosary sometimes, because I can't even muster a prayer because I'm so distraught, or frustrated, or just lost.

I think of Saint Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: ***Pray without ceasing. Give thanks.*** He goes on. ***This is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*** And I guess that's kind of how I think about this chronic condition, because I keep praying and it doesn't go away. And to accept that this is God's will, and all of the things that He's taught me, for instance I'm a germophobe. And so part of the worst... the worst part about this condition is that I get... I'm very susceptible to infections. I have to be very careful, which makes my germophobia just off the record, off the wall. But it's taught me a lot about trusting God, and trusting that He, He is in all situations, and that, you know, I have to live my life. I can't put myself in a bubble, trust me I tried. I get pushed out of the bubble. I would love to just hide away somewhere, but I need to be in the world. Not of it, but in it.

And so learning how to trust Him very well, and then I also think about 2 Corinthians 12. A thorn in the flesh. Three times Paul asked the Lord to remove this thorn. It's kind of left ambiguous of what this thorn is, and I believe that's because that's a way for all of us to see ourselves in that scripture passage. We all have some thorn that we keep asking the Lord to take away, and maybe it's a financial thorn, or it's a relationship difficulty thorn, or work, a difficult work situation, or a chronic condition, or... we all have a thorn. And we, I'm sure, you, like I, have asked God again, and again, and again, like Paul asked 3 times and it's still there.

And then I love the Lord's response, and I think, obviously, this is His response to us as well. This is for our reflection today, to really take this into our hearts. What chronic condition are we battling? Because we all have that spiritual condition of sin. But what is it that we keep coming to God and asking Him to remove? And maybe its still being there makes us wonder "Does He even exist? Does He even care? If He does exist, does He even care what I have to say? And is He really going to help me? Where is the peace in it?" And here is the beautiful thing that the Lord says back to Saint Paul and, again, to us. ***My grace is enough for you. My grace is enough for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.*** Paul says that the thorn keeps him from arrogance, as he experiences the amazing, mystical, magnificent work of God in his life. Okay, again, Allison Abridged Version to Corinthians 12:16.

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When we come to God and we ask Him to be part of our lives, we are probably going to experience some pretty amazing things that God is going to do. And we can get kind of arrogant in it. We can also become complacent, and I know I forget sometimes, when things are going really good, I forget I need God, I forget to pray to God. And I'm grateful, when I look down at my hands and I think "This reminds me that I need God. And this reminds me that God... that I'm sharing in God's suffering.

A few years ago, I'll leave you with this story, a few years ago I was doing a confirmation retreat. And in the confirmation retreat, there was this young man who, I don't know, he was just so broken, and his heart was so hard. And at some point he realized that the DRE had left the room. And it was just me and him and all of the kids, and he stood up and just started to berate me. Yelling, swearing, just completely laying into me about how I was a liar, and God was fake, and just he had so much anger and pain, and he hadn't really listened to anything I had said. And I lost complete control of the room and the situation, I made the bad choice of trying to engage him without the Holy Spirit, and it was just ugly.

And on the way home I was just distraught, and I called a friend, and she was like "Get to adoration. Get to a chapel and just go pray." I found my chapel was open at my church, and I slipped into the back row, and I kind of just slumped down and I was like "Lord, I don't get it. I'm trying so hard to serve You, and to do right by You, and yet this is what happened." I just... I felt so betrayed by God. And as I sat there, three very clear messages came to my heart. First, "If you wish to share in My glory, you must also share in My suffering." Two, "If you want to follow Me, then pick up your cross daily and follow Me." And last, "If I did not spare My son, what makes you think you would be any different?"

I know that was God and not me, because I'm super much nicer to myself, and I would have responded with "I'm so sorry. You poor thing. I'll do better next time." But God knew what I really needed to hear, is that sharing in His suffering is a great privilege and a joy, and saint-making, and we're all created to be saints. And I want to be with God forever in heaven, which means I want to be a saint. If I truly want to share in God's glory of heaven, I must be willing to also share in the suffering of this world, which means putting aside my pride and sharing my journey through prayer, sacrament, and scripture with you here in the Pray More Novenas Lenten retreat. We'll pick up the next session with the scriptures. From Allison Gingras, I'll see you soon.