

Why? Do My Prayers Go Unanswered?

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Matthew 21: 21-22 Jesus answered them, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive."

Today we start a series of sermons entitled, "**Why?**" Today we look at, "**Why do my Prayers Go Unanswered?**" The next week, on 9/11, "Why Do the Innocent Suffer", "Why Can't I See God's Will for My Life?", and finally, "Why God's Love Prevails."

Why? That is a question we ask a lot in life. Why this, why that. The Psalmist in Psalm 22:2 writes, "O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest." We hear scripture that seems to contradict that as in John 15:7; "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you." Then hear the Christ in Luke 22:4, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." Yes, no; yes, no. Why? Why?

Ever had unanswered prayer? You prayed fervently, diligently, yet it went unanswered. A woman had much difficulty getting pregnant. Finally the couple became pregnant. But complications developed in the 5th month, the doctor said, "both of you can not live. If the child lives, you will die, and vice versa." The baby died despite the woman's pleas and incessant prayer. She struggled with her faith because of God's apparent silence. She said all the church prayed for the child to live, but to no avail. Her response was to say, "What good is God?" The woman turned from her faith and she gave up her pulpit in the small church she served. Yes, she was a pastor.

Disappointment for us is usually the result of our unmet expectations. Expectations are often shaped by the Matthew 21: 21-22 text we opened with and others like it. Whatever we ask will come to fruition provided **we have faith enough**. In my own experience I prayed for the girl in the hospital, and yet she died. We pray for the job to come available so we can work, yet we go months without work. We pray for safety for our child, and something happens to the child. Hear me Church; hear these wrong reasons that some people say why your prayers go unanswered:

1. You are not seeking to please the Lord; 2. You have unconfessed sin in your life. 3. You pray with improper motives 4. You lack faith.

Frankly I find those reasons wrong and difficult to stomach. You love your child, spouse or friend and someone says you should have fully sought to please God and then your loved one would not have died. That is poor reasoning, and horrible theology. Jesus heals because he is holy, not because he **heals those who are holy**.

If Christ is a savior of grace it seems counter intuitive that Christ would not have grace enough to heal me when I ask. And if I am a sinner, Romans 5: 8 says that our Savior "gave his life for us while we were yet sinners."

Faith is important in prayer. We faithfully trust that God hears and cares, and God can act as we have prayed. So how much faith do we need to have for our prayers to be answered? Mark 9: 14-32 is the story of the epileptic child whose father says to Jesus, "If you are able, please heal my son!" Jesus' reply, "If, you are able! All things can be done for the one who believes." And the man replied, "I believe, help my unbelief." The incomplete faith of the man moved Jesus, so too the story of the mustard seed and our faith. Jesus is saying that the smallest impulse of faith would touch the heart of God.

Jesus speaks frequently with **hyperbole** which is an overstatement or exaggeration to make his point. We realize that Jesus does not want us to cut off our hand if it causes you to sin, or to pluck out your eye if sin results. That is hyperbole. Jesus is saying that sin is serious business and we should avoid it in every way possible. Just as you say, "I am so hungry I could eat a horse," you don't really want to eat that much. When someone says, "I was so embarrassed I could just have died." Well the ambulance was not called. That is hyperbole. I suggest that Jesus' hearers understood He was speaking in hyperbole when he said, "Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, and you will receive." (Matt. 21: 21-22.) They didn't think they could pray for wealth and have it, or pray for the Romans to suddenly leave the country. They understood Jesus intimating, "Pray boldly. Go to God with your burdens and lay them down. Trust that God DOES hear your prayers."

What if every time you prayed for something, you got what you wanted? Say you wanted to go on a date with a person, and they did not want to go with you. Would God override their free will and force them to do something they did not want to because of **your** prayers? If we pray for instantaneous healing which does happen at times, but if we prayed for all sick people to get better, we would not need doctors, nurses, and an immune system. We would not need to care for ourselves or be careful how we lived. Everything in life is connected in some fashion. All we would need would be prayer and I don't think that is what Jesus intended for us.

There are two unanswered prayers in the Bible I'd like to mention. **The first** is the Apostle Paul praying to have this "thorn" removed from his body. (2 Corinthians 12: 7-10) He prayed three times for removal to no avail, but instead received the word of God saying, "My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness." God didn't heal Paul, but gave him grace to live with the struggle. God was in the midst of Paul's struggle daily. Paul saw every insult and hardship as a chance to draw closer to God through his hardship. "When I am weak in self, then I am strong in Christ."

The second unanswered prayer is Jesus' prayer. Luke 22:42 recounts Jesus' prayer the night before he is to be killed. "Father...take this cup from me." Jesus in essence is saying to God the Father, "Deliver me from this. No arrest, trial, flogging, torture, crucifixion." But Jesus' was hung on the cross, and must have felt that same sense of disappointment, grief, absence of God's presence as he died on the cross as we might. We too can feel that same way when our prayers go unanswered.

We know as Believers in Christ that Jesus' was not abandoned or forsaken; because Jesus' death and resurrection was used by God so that the tomb would be empty and the world would be redeemed.

This teaches us that like Paul and Jesus, each of us have times when our prayers are unanswered. We are not abandoned or deserted by God. We are not cast adrift and alone. God is with us and God works through situations from which we have not been delivered even though we asked.

Sometimes even Garth Brooks the country western singer gets it right. He has a song entitled "Unanswered Prayer" in which a young man prays for this particular woman to be his, to fall in love with him then he believes the world will be made right. But the woman does not fall in love with him. Years later he meets the love of his life, raises a family and reflecting back at a school reunion when he sees the former flame, he gives thanks to God for the unanswered prayer. He would not have had the life he currently has. Sometimes it is in the looking back we see where God has walked with us, lifted us, supported us, and encouraged us through others, when prayers seem to be unanswered.

One of the ways God does answer prayer is through others. When we go to Tanzania to serve orphans, when we feed the hungry through our LRUMC food voucher program, or provide clothing for those in need through our Clothes Closet, we are being an answer to prayer to those who have needs. And the ones we have served become an answer to our prayers for God to change us and to shape us and to grant us joy.

I know God does not suspend another's free will to answer my prayers. I can pray for God to make someone come to faith or buy my house or love me, but I can't expect God to make someone do those things to only benefit me.

We know that God does not always deliver us from suffering. Recall Paul and Jesus. But we do know that God walks with us each step of the way in suffering and difficulty. God does work miracles at times, but a miracle, is a miracle because it is rare. Typically God works through others and through the natural world through doctors, family, friends, and words of encouragement spoken and offered. In other words---through us.

Sometimes people will blame God for an illness like cancer that affected them or a loved one. Got to blame someone so they blame God for wildfires, drought, and hurricanes. Almost as if God is punishing people because they are bad. But as Christians we realize that creation was broken with Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden. Ever since, nature has been part of a broken world in need of restoration.

As human beings that are part of the created order we love the high and low tide, the full moon, a warm sun, gentle falling rain and a lovely blanket of new fallen snow. But we know too much rain can become a flood, a mild wind becomes a devastating tornado, warm sun becomes a drought, and gentle snow becomes a blizzard. But that is nature, just as we know that God did not cause me to nick my face while shaving or the little kid to touch the barbecue grill out of some God directed meanness, God does not punish us with natural disasters. That is part of a fallen creation, a broken creation.

But God gives us the pain sensor to draw a hand away and to get it tended to with medicine. We have brains that allow us to flee storms, and to later rebuild.

I thank God for nature, for the world and for God. Knowing that God, who is perfect, is **ultimately responsible for all things, yet not necessarily directly**. If God becomes this puppet master, then why do we need intellect, creativity, free will and free choice?

God is not a divine vending machine that responds when we insert a prayer. It's not "pray, get God's attention, receive a miracle." Sometimes we pray to tell God how to run the world. Prayer is about relationship. Relationship with the creator, and how we are shaped in that relationship by listening to God, by working for the Kingdom, by conversing with God. We pour our hearts and souls out to God knowing he hears all prayers.

I told you about the young pastor who lost her child and turned her back on God, blaming God. The end of the story is that she later came to adopt three little girls who needed parents. Lives were immediately changed. Where there had been sadness and anger, now there was hope and love. Where there had been disappointment now there was excitement and hope for the future. God never abandoned this woman. Instead he comforted, walked with and assured her. And five lives were forever changed.

I want to tell you how a Fredericksburg, TX native thought of prayer in his life.

"I asked for strength that I might achieve. I was made weak that I might learn to humbly obey. I asked for health that I might do great things. I was given infirmity that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy. I was given poverty that I might be wise. I got nothing I asked for, but everything I had hoed for. Despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered." words of Adm. Chester Nimitz.

This I think is the meaning of prayer. If you are in the midst of a constant unanswered prayer, thinking God does not hear you, remember Paul and Jesus and their unanswered prayers. One was given strength and reliance on God in all things. One was redeemer for all humanity.

God walks with us through our needs, our hurts, our disappointments, our unanswered prayers. God hears your prayers, and walks hand in hand with you through the difficult times. God will give you what you need and yes, your prayers will be answered. Perhaps not in the way you deem needed. But God will answer your prayer in the way that pleases him, serves him, honors him, and in a way that your life might be a testament to God to transform the world and others in it for Christ. If you are seeking His voice for your unanswered prayer, take hope. God has heard your prayers. Be hopeful. Glory to God. Amen.