

“WHY DO MY PRAYERS GO UNANSWERED?”

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Text: Matthew 6:5-15

“Our Father, which art in heaven...” When we pray, we pray to God. Have you ever wondered if God is paying any attention?

I read a story once about a woman who was dying in a hospital bed. Her two daughters were by her side. All day one of the daughters had been praying vigorously and passionately. But when the family’s pastor came to the hospital room, one of the daughters whispered to him, “I just can’t seem to get my prayers past the ceiling.”

How many times have we stood before a silent God and wondered why our prayers were not answered? Why do our prayers go unanswered?

On September 11th, hundreds of men and women were trapped in planes and buildings praying that God would rescue them so that they might live. But they died. Why?

A man finds his wife has cancer. He prays for healing for her, but it never seems to come. The cancer grows. The life fades. She dies. Why were the prayers not answered?

Look at the Bible and you will find many times when prayers **were** answered. We remember these stories well. Abraham’s servant prayed for God’s direction in finding a wife for Isaac, and God led him to Rebekah. Moses, standing before the Red Sea, prayed for Israel to cross over on dry land. Hannah prayed for a son and the result was Samuel. When Elijah prayed for a manifestation of God’s power, the fire came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifice.

We tend to forget, however, that there are many times in the Bible that prayer was left unanswered. Once in a while, we read in the Bible about those saints of God whose prayers simply didn’t seem to “get past the ceiling.”

Moses begged God to let him lead his people into the Promised Land. Moses died on Mt. Nebo, his prayer refused. Paul prayed three times for the removal of that “thorn in the flesh.” He never tells us exactly what that meant, but whatever it was, he prayed earnestly that it would be removed from his life. But it wasn’t. Instead, he was compelled to make the best of it for the rest of his life. Even Jesus prayed a prayer that was left unanswered. Jesus cried out in the garden, “Take this cup of suffering from me.” He prayed that he would not have to suffer death on the cross. Instead he had to suffer the pain of it. The Bible is full of unanswered prayers.

One of the struggles we have with prayer is our frustration in dealing with unanswered prayer. Take a look at Habakkuk. We find that he opens the book with a struggle over unanswered

prayer. In 1:2, the prophet is pleading with God, *“How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not save?”*

In verse 13, the prophet tells God in prayer, *“Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?”*

How do we deal with unanswered prayers? Why is God sometimes so silent? The answer differs from one situation to another. No one answer becomes a blanket response to satisfy all situations.

1. We Misunderstand Prayer

One reason is maybe that we sometimes misunderstand the nature of prayer. We pray out of selfish motives. True prayer is God-centered. That is why the Lord’s Prayer teaches us to always begin our prayers by addressing God himself. But we often turn prayer into a self-centered activity.

In the New Testament book of James, we are told (4:3), *“When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”*

The object of prayer is that God might be glorified. At times we think of prayer as an Aladdin’s lamp which we use to glorify self. We often think of God as a genie who is at our bidding and command. Or we treat God like he is Santa Claus and we are giving him our want list.

A theologian once said, *“Our prayers often reduce God to nothing more than a Cosmic Bellboy, who is neither very bright, nor very reliable.”*

Can we not pray for ourselves? Of course, but we should pray for ourselves unselfishly. Unselfish prayer for self is prayer which seeks not self-centered comfort, but Christ-centered conformity to the will of God. Prayer is not an end in itself but a means to a greater end which is to glorify God.

The Bible promises that God will hear our prayers. It never says that God will obey our orders—and sometimes that is the way we treat prayer. So, of course, God may not answer such self-centered prayers.

2. Unbelief Blocks Prayer

Another reason why prayer may go unanswered is that the person offering the prayer does not believe.

In the Lord’s Prayer, we are given a pattern of prayer in which we address our prayers to God, our heavenly Father, with whom we have a personal relationship. This is a God in whom we believe. But many people do not believe and prayers go unanswered simply because they do not know to whom to address their prayers.

The prayer is simply an empty ritual, or perhaps it is simply spoken as a superstition. It's like rubbing a rabbit's foot. Or reading a horoscope. Even people who don't believe in superstition may occasionally practice these, thinking, "What's the harm?"

During World War II, General Patton was given the task of rescuing some soldiers trapped behind enemy lines. The weather was not cooperating, however, and the tanks could not reach the men, nor could the planes provide proper air cover. So on December 8, 1944, Patton called on Chaplain James O'Neill and asked, "Do you have a prayer for good weather? We need a break in this weather if we are to win the war." O'Neill looked through some prayer books and couldn't find the right one, so he composed the following prayer:

Almighty and most merciful Father, we humbly beseech Thee, of Thy great goodness, to restrain these immoderate rains with which we have had to contend. Grant us fair weather for Battle. Graciously hearken to us as soldiers who call upon Thee that, armed with Thy power, we may advance from victory to victory, and crush the oppression and wickedness of our enemies and establish Thy justice among men and nations.

When the chaplain delivered a copy of the prayer to the General, Patton ordered the minister to make 250,000 copies and to see that every soldier in the Third Army got a copy. Two days after the copies were distributed, there was a break in the weather and the Americans were able to advance.

A few years ago, I saw an interview of one of Patton's soldiers who had kept his copy of that prayer. He said he used it whenever he was in trouble. He said the prayer at the deathbed of his mother, and it didn't heal his mother. He said the prayer when he was diagnosed with cancer, but it didn't heal him. He concluded that prayer didn't work at all.

But prayer had been nothing more than a superstitious ritual for him. Saying that prayer at the deathbed of his mother was meaningless, because it was not a prayer for his mother to be healed. It was a prayer for moderate weather and success in battle. That prayer had been answered.

But for this man, repeating the words of this prayer had become little more than a rubbing of the rabbit's foot. Prayer is sometimes spoken without any faith or belief.

James 1:6 says that when a person prays, "*He must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.*"

3. Sinfulness Blocks Prayer

Isaiah 59:2 indicates yet another reason for unanswered prayer. Our sins cut us off from God. God's arm is not shortened nor has he gone deaf. Instead, our sins have formed barriers which block us off from God's purpose and plan.

In Proverbs 15:29, we read, *“The Lord is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous.”*

In Matthew, Jesus warned us that if we go to the altar and in the middle of our worship remember that we are in conflict with another person, we should interrupt our worship in order to repair the broken relationship. (Matthew 5:22-24)

Answered prayers are preceded by genuine confession of sin by which the barriers are broken down so that God’s message can get through.

The point is that you should work to make your OVERALL spiritual life healthy. You cannot have a healthy, effective prayer life if you ignore all other parts of your spiritual life. You cannot harbor grudges in your heart, you cannot allow hatred to be a part of your life, and still receive an answer to prayer. Prayer and forgiveness go hand in hand. You cannot be wrong with your brother or sister and be right with God at the same time.

4. Unanswered Prayer is sometimes simply answered prayer that is delayed

Sometimes, the problem with unanswered prayer is that our time is not God’s time. And what we often interpret as unanswered prayer is simply a matter of an answer that is delayed.

Jeremiah 42, the people ask the prophet to speak to God and to provide them with direction for their lives. The people tell Jeremiah, *“Please hear our petition and pray to the Lord your God for this entire remnant. For as you now see, though we were once many, now only a few are left. Pray that the Lord your God will tell us where we should go and what we should do.”* The prophet prays, and it is not until 10 days later that an answer comes.

Sometimes the answer comes far longer than simply 10 days later. It might be years later. In Psalm 40:1, we read these comforting words, *“I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry.”*

We often struggle with the problem of unanswered prayer as if it is a failure on God’s part. Many of us feel like we have a contract with God and that God is obligated to hear our prayers. We never stop to think that God might have something better in mind, or that we have misunderstood prayer. No matter what happens in our prayers and with our desires, we should always be focused on the fact that God knows best.

Whether God answers our prayers literally and strictly, or seems to do as he did with Habbakuk and seems to be silent, we are given an excellent promise in Paul’s letter to the Romans, *“In all things God works for the good of those who love him.”* (Romans 8:28)