

WHAT ABOUT UNANSWERED PRAYER?

An overweight businessman decided it was time to shed some excess pounds. He took his new diet very seriously. He changed his driving route to work in the morning to avoid passing by his favorite bakery. He even prayed that God would help him to lose weight. One morning, however, he arrived at work carrying a gigantic coffee cake. His coworkers scolded him, but he replied "This is a very special coffee cake – God wanted me to have it." He explained. "I forgot and accidentally drove by the bakery this morning and there in the window were a host of goodies. I felt this was no accident, so I prayed, 'Lord, if you want me to have one of these delicious coffee cakes give me a sign, let me have a parking place directly in front of the bakery.' And sure enough," he continued, "there it was. The eighth time around the block, there it was!"

Today we are starting a 4 week series on prayer. I want to start by asking if you have ever wondered why God doesn't grant every prayer we pray? As a pastor this is a question that I get asked all the time. The question goes something like this; "the Bible says 'ask and it will be given to'. I keep asking so why haven't I received anything?" Let's look at this verse:

Matt 7:7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. 9 "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 11 If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

Have you ever heard someone say something like this; "I've been praying for my husband to stop drinking, and he hasn't stopped." "I've been praying for a job, but I can't find one." "I've been praying for my wife's depression but nothing has changed." "I've been praying for guidance, but no guidance has come." I have spoken to many people who wrestle with this - the agony of unanswered prayer. How does God respond to our prayers?

1. God Says NO - the request is wrong

God answers prayer in a number of different ways. The first is with the answer NO. In verse 11 it says that God gives His children GOOD GIFTS. If we ask God for a fish, He will not give us a snake. But what happens when we ask for a snake? There are such things as wrong or inappropriate prayer requests. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray He told them:

Matt 6:9 "This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, 10 your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

In prayer we seek that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Sometimes we just don't understand what God's will is for our lives.

Remember the time when Peter, James and John accompanied Jesus to the top of a high mountain. Suddenly God's full glory descended upon Jesus. The three disciples stood back in awe as they saw the transfiguration. They were so taken with this that Peter asked

Matt 17:4 Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters -- one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

In other words, Peter asked "Jesus, allow us to build shelters up here, and we'll just live up here the rest of our lives, and we'll bask in your glory." God's response to Peter was, in a word, NO. He said He would not grant that request. There was work to do and His plan was not to stay up on the mountain basking in God's glory. The answer was NO. Sorry Peter, wrong request.

One time James and John asked Jesus if they could make reservations for the best two seats in heaven:

Mark 10:35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." 36 "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. 37 They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

Jesus answered by saying NO. God's kingdom is not about position and power. The request was wrong. Another time, Jesus and the disciples were traveling through Samaria. He sent messengers ahead to prepare a place to stay but the request for help was denied.

Luke 9:51 As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. 52 And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; 53 but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. 54 When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" 55 But Jesus turned and rebuked them,

The disciples were upset by the Samaritan's response and asked that they be destroyed. But Jesus came to transform people, not to torch them so He said NO. Do you see the point I'm making? The disciples walked with Jesus and were still fully capable of making inappropriate requests. When the requests were wrong, Jesus said no.

1 John 5:14 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything *according to his will*, he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us -- whatever we ask -- we know that we have what we asked of him.

All of us are capable of making wrong requests to God. I am. You are as well. I have made wrong requests in the past and will probably make wrong requests in the future. There will be times when God says NO. In hindsight I can thank God for saying NO to prayers I thought at the time were appropriate. Now by hindsight I say, "Thank you, thank you, thank you that you said no to that particular request."

Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right – Abraham Lincoln

One Grandmother had a granddaughter who overheard her talking to her son (the girl's father) about an occasional heart problem – a loud beating – that she would experience when she would try to sleep. One evening her father heard his daughter's concerned prayer: "And Lord Jesus, please make Grandma's heart stop beating so she can get some rest."

If you have been praying diligently about a matter and sensing resistance from heaven perhaps you need to review your request and ask "is this what God really wants for me or not?" Maybe the request is a cop-out on your part, an unwillingness to face a real issue. Maybe the request is destructive in ways you don't understand. Maybe the request is self-serving. Maybe the request is shortsighted. Maybe the request is too small, and God might have something better in mind.

2. God Says SLOW - the timing is wrong

The second way that God sometimes answers prayer is the word SLOW. In other words, the request is OK but the timing is wrong. Parents, have you noticed that the two most awful words in the English language to little children are the words NO and NOT YET. They hate hearing that!

You start a long trip in the car and 15 miles from home the kids start asking "Are we there yet?" What do you say? "Not yet." It is four days from Johnny's birthday and he says, "Can't I open my present? It's close enough!" What do you say? "Not yet." Your daughter says "Mom, I'm nine, and I want to wear whatever I want including makeup to school every day." How do you respond? "Not yet"

Children hate those words! We all do. The child in all of us wants God to meet every need, to grant every request, to move every mountain as soon as we ask. But our all-knowing, all-wise, loving Heavenly Father deems it best to say sometimes very caringly to his children, NOT YET.

God is no more intimidated by our childish fixation on instant gratification than our wise parents were. He simply chooses from time to time to shake his head at our immaturity and say, "go ahead and kick and scream, but the answer is NOT YET." It is important for us to understand that God's delays are not necessarily God's denials. Often God isn't saying no, he is merely saying NOT QUITE YET. He wants us to trust Him that He knows what He is doing.

I heard about a kid who had an ugly bicycle. It was a hand-me-down made from the parts of other bicycles. It was so ugly it didn't even have handlebar grips. He was always complaining that his hands would slip off the slick handlebars. He pestered his dad to buy him some handlebar grips, but his dad kept refusing. One day, his dad took him to the hardware store. Near the front door, there were some new handlebar grips for sale. They were plastic and had long streamers hanging from the ends. He pleaded with his Dad to buy him some but his dad said, "No, son, you don't need those grips. Come with me to the back of the store." As he followed his dad, the boy was bitter and frustrated. Under his breath, he was muttering, "I never get ANYTHING. It's just a lousy three dollars! My dad sure is mean!" When they got to the back of the store, the owner wheeled out a shiny, brand new bicycle—complete with handlebar grips with plastic streamers. My friend's dad said, "Here, son, it's an early birthday present. I wouldn't buy you any handlebar grips because I ordered you this new bicycle!" My friend was ecstatic! As he wheeled his new bike out the front door, he never even gave those handlebar grips a glance. Sometimes when you ask God for something, He has something better in store for you!

Is 55:8 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.
9 "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

God's ways are infinitely higher than our ways. We see in part, God sees in full.

There are many times in my life when I thought my prayers were going unanswered only to find out later that God was simply saying NOT YET so that he could carefully orchestrate a greater miracle. A much greater thing than I had the faith to pray for in the beginning.

We all tend to prescribe the answers to our prayers. We think that God can come in only one way. But Scripture teaches us that God sometimes answers our prayers by allowing things to become much worse before they become better. He may sometimes do the opposite of what we anticipate. ...Yet it is a fundamental principle in the life and walk of faith that we must always be prepared for the unexpected when we are dealing with God. -- D. Martyn Lloyd Jones

Beware in your prayer, above everything, of limiting God, not only by unbelief, but by fancying that you know what he can do. -- Andrew Murray

Be very careful in insisting that you know better than God just when a prayer request should be granted. God has his reasons for his NOT YETS. Sometimes the issue is simply that we are not spiritually ready for the answer. Time is required in developing patience, trust, endurance and character. God is more concerned with our character than our comfort, instant gratification and personal convenience.

Sometimes God says NO. Sometimes God says SLOW.

3. God Says GROW – your heart is wrong

The third way that God sometimes answers our prayers is the word GROW. This means that sometimes our own actions or inactions are the problem and stand in the way of God granting the requests we seek. Look at these examples:

Psalm 66:18 If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened;

Matt 5:23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

1 Pet 3:7 Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers

It is a lot easier to point the finger at God for not answering prayer than it is to look in the mirror and to say that maybe I am the problem.

An estimated 500,000 tons of water rush over Niagara Falls every minute. On March 29, 1948, the falls suddenly stopped. People living within the sound of the falls were awakened by the overwhelming silence. They believed it was a sign that the world was coming to an end. It was thirty hours before the rush of water resumed. What happened? Heavy winds had set the ice fields of Lake Erie in motion. Tons of ice jammed the Niagara River entrance near Buffalo and stopped the flow of the river until the ice shifted again. The flow of God's grace in our lives can be blocked by cold indifference

It is no use to ask God with factitious earnestness for A when our whole mind is in reality filled with B. We must lay before him what is in us, not what ought to be in us. -- C. S. Lewis

4. God Says LETS GO – you, the timing, and the request are right

God wants what is best for us. I doubt that many of us understand just how badly He wants to touch that difficult situation or move that immovable mountain in our path. When we pray and all these things line up, we are in God's plan and the time is right then God says LETS GO because we matter to him and it's in his heart to meet your needs and grant your requests.

Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance; it is laying hold of his highest willingness. -- Archbishop Trench

God longs to answer our requests with a LET'S GO! When we know God's will for our lives, when our requests and the timing and our hearts are right then God delights in answering our requests. We always have to remember though that a request is simply that, a request. Ultimately God will answer in the way that is best. Our job is to pray. God's job is to answer.

Some things are proved by the unbroken uniformity of our experiences. The law of gravitation is established by the fact that, in our experience, all bodies without exception obey it. Now even if all the things that people prayed for happened, which they do not, this would not prove what Christians mean by the efficacy of prayer. For prayer is request. The essence of request, as distinct from compulsion, is that it may or may not be granted. -- C.S. Lewis

My responsibility is to pray, God's responsibility is to heal. If he chooses not to do so, then he's responsible for that. -- John Wimber

Shortly after Dallas Theological Seminary was founded in 1924, it almost came to the point of bankruptcy. All the creditors were going to foreclose at noon on a particular day. That morning they met in the president's office. In that prayer meeting was a man by the name of Dr. Harry Ironside. When it was his turn to pray, he prayed in his characteristic manner: "Lord, we know that the cattle on a thousand hills are Thine. Please sell some of them and send us the money." As they were praying, a tall Texan with boots on and an open collar stepped up to the business office and said, "I just sold two loads of cattle in Ft. Worth. I've been trying to make a business deal but it fell through, and I feel compelled to give the money to the seminary. I don't know if you need it or not, but here's the check!" The secretary took the check and, knowing how critical things were financially, went to the door of the prayer meeting and timidly tapped. When she finally got a response, the president of the school took the check out of her hand. It was exactly the amount of the debt! Recognizing the name of the cattleman he turned to Dr. Ironside said, "Harry, God sold the cattle!"