

Prayer: the Human Element

The Element of Mystery
The Agony of Unanswered Prayer
See Mark 14:32-42 (and other passages)
September 17, 2006

Two years ago I was driving my daughter from Long Island to Wheaton, Chicago when our car started sputtering on the freeway. I happened to be right by an exit so we coasted into Blakeslee, Pennsylvania. Our cell phone didn't work and it was 7:30 in the morning so I said a quiet but desperate prayer to God. We coasted down a hill until our car happened to die right in front of the local police station. The police dispatcher said, "O, are you ever in luck. Jimmy the tow truck guy just called and he's right around corner." Jimmy came within three minutes, picked us up, towed us to his shop and even dropped us off for breakfast (which just happened to be Blakeslee's own "Chat N' Chew" Restaurant). Jimmy just happened to have a cancellation so he got us into the shop immediately. It just happened to be a loose connection on the battery so we pulled on to I-90 in one hour. We praised God for the power of prayer.

Compare that story with another story: a friend of mine was struggling with depression. Lonely and confused, she wandered on one of our Long Island beaches, pouring her heart out to God. "God, just give me a sign – one sign! – that you are really there." As she prayed a lovely, lone seagull began circling over her head. "Could this be the sign of your goodness, Lord?" she wondered. As she watched the beautiful bird floating gently in the sky, she stood frozen on the beach as the seagull emitted a blob of grey, slimy "seagull doo-doo." The grey glob plummeted from the sky and landed right on her head. Touché!

The Problem Stated: Why does God seem to answer some prayers in a quick, tidy and even miraculous fashion; but then other prayers – which are just as sincere, God-honoring, and faith-inspired – seem to hit the ceiling and bounce back? We pray, we cry out, we trust Jesus for great things and reasonable and God-honoring things; we pray boldly and passionately and then zilch, nada, silence. We pray for healing and our loved one dies. We pray for God to save the marriage and then the divorce papers come anyway. We ask God to remove temptation – the lure of lust or the craving for alcohol or our persistent rage and bitterness – and the temptation grows greater. Most of us don't want to talk about this. Nobody wants to come to small group or worship service and say, "Hey, I have another unanswered prayer I'd like to share." But everyone has one, two or an entire bag-full of unanswered prayers.

And then the Bible seems to increase the tension. Jesus himself made some astounding promises about answered prayer. "Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (Mark 11:24). And he said, "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:14).

Last week I said that we should come expectantly and pray boldly with freedom and confidence (see Ephesians 3:12). Hold that message in tension with this one. We should ask God for great things (see Jeremiah 33:1). But what if we don't receive answers - or at least the answers we expected. The Bible is a very earthy, honest and human book. This morning I want to explore four examples of unanswered prayers in the Bible. When I picked these passages I wasn't hoping to discover a unified theory that neatly explains every instance of unanswered prayer. But as we walk through these passages we'll also learn that unanswered prayer may be more mysterious and more hopeful than we thought. And we may also discover that God (the Triune God of the Christian story) is bigger and better and more loving than we ever dared to imagine.

On your insert you'll find "Unanswered Prayer #1 – Psalm 88." This is called a prayer of lament, an honest and heart-felt crying out to God from a place of pain and confusion. About one-third of the psalms (the prayer book of the Bible) contain laments. Let me read an excerpt from Psalm 88. Every other psalm of lament eventually returns to hope and trust in God. So the psalmist cries out to God in his pain; he even yells and argues with God, but eventually, he'll come around and say something like, "But I still trust in you God." Psalm 88 is the exception to that pattern. The psalmist prays, he cries out, he believes the right things about God, but help doesn't seem to come. The final verse trails off in the unresolved tension and doubt and hurt.

Perhaps you'd like to slice Psalm 88 out of the Bible like the American president Thomas Jefferson surgically removed 90% of the four Gospel account of Jesus. Psalm 88 isn't upbeat. It doesn't end like a typical American sit-com with the happy music coming on while the family hugs and everything gets resolved. But Christians believe that the Bible is God's Holy Spirit inspired word. So Psalm 88 is God's dark, messy gift to us.

I need to say this because I've heard so many sermons and Christian talk that seems to simplify the mystery of unanswered prayer. Unfortunately, in the process these messages fail to honor human suffering. I don't want to fit in a category on an outline. Or I've also heard Christians say that our prayers remain unanswered because we did something wrong. We didn't follow the formula or have enough faith.¹ That's a possibility, but it certainly doesn't explain everything. I don't see any bad theology or spirituality in Psalm 88. A contemporary physicist and theologian named John Polkinghorne said that every scientific theory must be "tough, surprising and exciting" or it probably isn't true.² The same holds true for the way we think about faith: it must be tough, surprising and exciting.

Sometimes the explanations aren't easy. For instance, Christian author Jerry Sittser and his wife prayed every night as they tucked their three children into bed that God would protect them. Then one evening a drunk driver careened across the center line and struck the van driven by Jerry's wife. In an instant Jerry lost his wife, his four-year old daughter

¹ One of the classic books on prayer is called *With Christ in the School of Prayer* by Andrew Murray. Murray stated confidently, "This is the fixed and eternal law of (God): if you ask and receive not, it must be because there is something amiss or wanting in your prayer."

² Quoted in *The Many Faces of God* by Jeremy Campbell, page 259.

and his mother. (I will get back to Jerry so you can stop worrying about him for a few minutes). Jerry said that the worst advice he received fell into two categories: “It’s a tragic loss, but God must have an important mission for you.” To which he wanted to say, “You mean I didn’t have a mission before the accident?” Or people would say, “I guess your wife and daughter were special to God so he took them.” To which he wanted to say, “You mean *we’re* not special to God? Besides, if that’s true, we should start praying for our loved ones to die right now.”

Why would I start with Psalm 88? Won’t it just undermine our faith? God isn’t threatened by our honest questions. God knows that sometimes life feels like and looks like Psalm 88. Perhaps Psalm 88 describes your life – or at least part of your life – this morning. God views the agony of unanswered prayer with utmost seriousness. God doesn’t fear our questions or our pain. God even provides the words we need to express our agony and doubt.

Of course that doesn’t take us off the hook. There are problems within our hearts that contribute to the agony of unanswered prayer. Let’s look at “Unanswered Prayer #2.” In the story of Jonah, Jonah prays all the time, but most of his prayers are shallow, petty and self-serving. Jonah wants God to incinerate the Ninevites, the brutal enemies of Jonah’s people. Instead, God shows mercy and allows them to repent. This makes Jonah very cranky. In verse 1 of chapter 4 he is “greatly displeased” and “angry.” He’s so unhappy that his prayer request consists of a one-line prayer: “Now, O Lord, take my life away, for it is better for me to die than to live.” It’s straight, direct and bold; but rather than granting Jonah’s request, God simply says, “Have you any right to be angry?” Then God sends a plant to provide shade over Jonah’s head in the hot desert sun. At last, God is acting reasonable and lining up with Jonah’s agenda. Then God destroys the plant and lets Jonah sulk in the hot sun. Now Jonah is miserable and mad again. Jonah’s heart is like a piece of driftwood floating in the ocean: when God arranges the circumstances of his life to his liking, Jonah is up; when the circumstances don’t line up according to Jonah’s wishes, he’s down and full of complaints.

I think Jonah is a ridiculous human being and his prayers are puny and pathetic. But then I wonder: from God’s perspective, do my prayers – even some of my best prayers – look like Jonah’s prayers? Apparently they do because God would say later in the New Testament Book of James, “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?” Then it turns a spotlight on our prayers: “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:1-3).

It’s true. As one author says, “Unanswered prayers excavate our hearts.” In other words, they show what’s really in our hearts. Yes, there is a mystery to unanswered prayer. No, there may not be a simple answer. But that doesn’t mean that our prayers aren’t riddled with our agenda, and thus, even if they’re not selfish, they still have a limited perspective and scope. For instance, we pray for a parking spot, which means that if God grants our request ten other people won’t get the spot. We pray for our children to ace the test, but it’s graded on a curve, which means that someone’s kids will fail. We prayed for our

nation as we starting bombing Iraq, but we largely ignored the fact that Iraq has 600,000 confessing Christians who were also calling out to God in the name of Christ. Does God only hear American prayers? We pray to be delivered from temptation and lust, but we never really want to let go of the pleasure it brings. We quote Mark 11:24 (“Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours”) but then we ignore the next verse – “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father I heaven may forgive you” (Mark 11:25).

My point is this: let’s pray, but let’s remember God’s ultimate objective in prayer: God wants to change us, not just our circumstances. Sometimes God chooses to remove and revise our circumstances; sometimes God chooses to leave our circumstances and *revise us*. Jonah wanted God to change his circumstances, to annihilate the Ninevites, to give him a nice shade tree. But God wanted to change Jonah, to excavate his heart by removing his self-pity, his lack of love and his pettiness. *But, you ask, why would God do that to me? Why wouldn’t God change my wife, my kids, my co-worker, my job, my finances, my neighbor, my leaders, my health, my depression, my temptations so that I can be happier and serve him better? Is that too much to ask?*

You see, God has a goal for our lives. It’s a goal that God is passionate about. The Bible even says as God pursues this goal He is like a “consuming fire.” The goal is not to make us comfortable and happy; God’s goal is to make us more like Jesus (see Romans 8:28-29). God is passionate about this. God will fight – fiercely and passionately – to see this happen for you and in you. Why? Because God works for His glory and for your good.

Now once we accept this, once you accept that God is for you, that God is working for your good, that God is committed – passionately and even fiercely – to work for your happiness and for His glory, to change your heart, to make you like Christ, that God is even like a “consuming fire” in this goal, then we begin to look at this from a very different perspective. I realize that God honors my perspective and even my feelings, but they are very limited and narrow. As we begin to look at our circumstances from God’s perspective, our questions and our perspective begins to change. Our questions, our life, our view of God become larger and broader. For instance, we may start to ask really big questions like: How will God take the prayers of millions of Christians and work a zillion shards of circumstances and somehow make it all work out for His glory and for all good over our lifetimes and for all eternity?

But God doesn’t revise us without giving us the strength and grace to be revisable. Notice Unanswered Prayer #3 on your sheet. See 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. Paul was writing to a group of Christians who were very impressed with marvelous displays of God’s power – miracles, speaking in tongues, flashy displays of brilliance and intellectualism. Paul had performed some pretty impressive miracles in his day (see Romans 15:18-19). But now he tells a very humbling story: Paul, the great leader, the great miracle worker, the great warrior of prayer, had a problem. He had a “thorn in the flesh.” I’ve read dozens of commentaries and studies and I have no idea what his thorn was, but it bothered Paul. It didn’t appear to be God’s will. Paul called it “a messenger

from Satan.” So not once but three times he pleaded with God to remove it, get rid of it, take it away. And three times God said, “No.”

God gave Paul something else instead. God said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” God answered Paul’s prayer; but rather than remove the thorn, God gave Paul something better: Himself. God gave Paul his own power and presence.

Now you might be thinking, *That’s not a good deal. I just want out of suffering; I just want the thorn removed. I want the promotion or the new home or bigger home or a lover or the marriage saved or my child to get straight A’s or a new car or world peace or a healthy baby or ...* But more than anything God made us, wired us to hunger and thirst for him. It’s deep and it’s inescapable (see Psalm 63:1). Whether we know it or not, we long for God. So when we pray, we’re not praying to get something but to be with Someone.

Do remember Jerry Sittser, the guy who lost his wife and daughter and mother in the car accident? In his book called *When God Doesn’t Answer Your Prayers* he tells the rest of his story:

After the accident I missed Lynda (his wife) for many reasons ... At first I wished she were still alive to help keep my life going at home. I needed her, at least in part, to do chores ... (and) to drive the kids to their activities. But I have long since mastered those responsibilities ... Yes the ache remains because I miss *her*, not for what she could do but for who she is. I don’t miss a wife in the abstract; I miss the person I was married to. I still see her face ... I still miss our late-night conversations. I even miss the fights. I have come to learn that the real pain of widowhood is the loss of the relationship with the one person I had given my heart to.

Paul found the secret to this: prayer is not getting stuff from God; it’s getting in touch with God. It’s being with God as a child is with his or her Father. So why does God say no and sometimes appear to not answer our prayers? Because God wants us to find something better: himself. Perhaps God is teaching you that right now. Perhaps in what Paul calls your “weakness,” those places where God seems to allow you to flounder and be broken, God is giving you a greater, vaster, more marvelous gift than you could ever imagine: His strength.

Finally, there’s one more unanswered prayer I’d like to explore. We heard in our Gospel reading the story of Jesus right before he went to the cross. If you read the entire story from the Gospels you know that Jesus prayed with persistence and with passion. He asked with intensity – so much so that he started sweating great drops of blood (Luke 22:44). Jesus also prayed with trust and confidence. He fully believed that his Heavenly Father could have sent thousands of angels to rescue him (see Matthew 26:53). So he prayed with passionate trust, “Father, take this cup from me.” You can do it. I believe you can do it. So do it. But Jesus added one little addendum: “Yet not what I will, but what you will.” Wow! That’s a twist! Not what I will, but what you will. Jesus, as the

One who lived the life we should have lived, shows us how to do prayer: pray honestly, specifically, boldly, passionately, but pray for one thing: for God's will not just mine. Sometimes those line up perfectly; sometimes they don't. For Jesus, as perfect God and perfect Human, prayer is like a blank check that requires two signatures, not one. We sign it, we ask, we pray big and bold, but then we know that God the Father must counter-sign the check.

And God the Father does not answer the prayer of God the Son. Do you see how astounding this is? Jesus, who is God in human flesh, knows about unanswered prayer. In other words, just like us, God has experienced unanswered prayer.

If I believed that God was basically against me, a counter-weight to my happiness, a dreaded, much-feared, terrible, unpredictable, cranky, Lord and Master of the Universe, unanswered prayers would frustrate and sadden me. But as I begin to understand the Gospel, that through Christ and in Christ, God is for us and not against us, then I can trust God's good heart. (Story).

Christians look at the cross, the place where God was willing to go for us, and they say, "I may not understand many things. I do not understand prayer – why and how God answers prayer. But I have no doubt that God is able and willing to be for me. I don't need to doubt God's heart."
