

Lord, Teach Us to Pray – Part 8
Overcoming the Obstacle of Unanswered Prayer
Crosspoint – Dave Spooner – June 19th, 2022

Intro:

- Prayers that are not answered may be the number one reason people do not pray or do not pray more. Everyone in this room has prayed for things that have not been answered. Looking back on it, some of the prayers were silly, stupid, or just plain selfish. However, some were extremely serious and urgent, and God still did not answer. At least not in the way we asked or in the time frame we wanted.
- Just this past week, I again prayed for a teenager named Brooke, who I have been praying for for years, to be healed of debilitating headaches that she has been plagued with for most of her life because of an issue with her hearing. Instead of getting better, they have gotten worse. This summer, she has to spend every week day away from her parents to learn to communicate with sign language because she will lose her ability to hear. I prayed for one of our church leaders who has been enduring significant back pain for weeks that doubles him over in the mornings and is excruciating at times. He is not getting better but progressively getting worse. I prayed for one of our elders in the hospital who is enduring the worst pain of his life because of kidney stones. The pain was so bad that all he could do was cry out in anguish for relief, and pray for mercy – with the hope that God had not abandoned him while he continued to be in the hospital.
- There are others of you in this room who have suffered with chronic, enduring pain for decades, with little or no relief in sight, and who continue to cry out to God for help. There are others who have cried out to God because of abuse and have suffered unimaginable things. The list can go on and on and on.
- So, how are we to reconcile the experiential reality of horrific pain, suffering, heartache, and loss with the theological reality of God our Father, who is good and perfect and loving and powerful and just; who is with us and has the power to change things in a moment, yet allows pain and sorrow and injustice and suffering to continue?
- I am going to offer two scriptural solutions this morning to bring light to these questions, and to help us think about them in a biblical way. This will provide perspective for us and will anchor us securely to the rock of hope so that we will be equipped and encouraged to deal with these realities.
- The first thing we much understand is God’s higher purpose.

Understand God’s higher purpose

- We are going to find God’s higher purpose in “unanswered prayers” through three unanswered prayers from the New Testament.

The unanswered prayer of Mary and Martha

- These two sisters called out to Jesus, telling him that their brother, Lazarus, was sick with the expectation that He would heal him (John 11:3). Jesus did not. Intentionally. He let him die. The

prayer of the sisters was not answered. This death caused severe grief and suffering. Jesus did not answer this prayer because He had a higher purpose. The ladies wanted a physical healing, but Jesus was after something much greater: eternal life. Because of this unanswered prayer, they had a conversation about death, and Jesus told them that in this life, what we go through and what we endure matters, but where we are in eternity matters most. He told them through tears that He was the resurrection and the life. What they wanted was easy. What He gave them was best. *God's higher goal is eternal life.*

- Rebecca McLaughlin, in her book *Confronting Christianity*, writes this: “This story illuminates both suffering and prayer. We often see prayer as a means to an end: God is a cosmic vending machine; insert prayer and expect results to drop into your hand—or kick the machine in anger when they don’t. But the story of Lazarus upends this idea. Jesus is not a means to an end, a mechanism through which Martha can change her circumstances. He is the end. Her circumstances drive her to him. It’s not that her suffering or our suffering doesn’t matter: it matters enough to bring tears to the eyes of the Son of God! But it matters like a first meeting matters to marriage, or like birth matters to motherhood. It is an entry point to relationship, a relationship formed through suffering as much as through joy. If, as Jesus claims, the goal of our existence is relationship with him, finding him in our suffering is the point” (McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity* (pp. 202-203). Crossway. Kindle Edition).
- Illustration of Mike Douglas and Chris Norman.

The unanswered prayer of Jesus

- When Jesus was right on the edge of the ultimate reason why He came to earth—to save sinners by giving His life as a sacrifice for many—He prayed this prayer:

Luke 22:42 ESV

Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.

- Jesus knew what was ahead of Him. He did not want to drink the cup of wrath against the sins of the world. His prayer to avoid this suffering was not answered. Why? Because His suffering was necessary for a *greater joy*.

Heb 12:2 ESV

for the joy that was set before him endured the cross

- Now, skipping out on the betrayal, the beating, the crucifixion, and the abandonment by the Father would have brought Jesus great joy. However, there was a greater joy that was available through the Father’s higher purpose. He had a *greater joy* in mind and did not give Jesus a lesser joy, but held on and held out for the greater joy.
- Jesus entrusted Himself to the will of the Father, knowing that what the Father had in mind was of greater value. This faith and trust in the Father was seen in His prayer, of “thy will be done.” He was willing to ask God for what was needed to endure what He was called to do. This is the greatest measure of success in prayer—putting ourselves through faith and trust into the will of

the Father, trusting that His will is better than ours. His will may bring us through huge difficulties, but the temporary pain of the present will give way to a greater joy that will have eternal value.

- We must continue to believe that God in the end will bring us greater joy. The pain and the cost in the present will result in things that are far greater and grander than the price and the pain.

The unanswered prayer of Paul

- The Apostle Paul, who surely was living for God, did not have all his prayers answered. God had empowered him in incredible ways. He also endured incredible difficulties. Often these two things coincided. Paul was given “surpassing great revelations,” and with them he was given a gift that he did not ask for. Paul wrote:

2 Cor 12:7-10 ESV

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

- God’s ultimate goal for us is to “**conform us into the image of His Son**” (Romans 8:29). This is the highest and main goal. This is what God is aiming at. The price we pay is worth the result. Sometimes our prayers are not answered so that we can display Christ-likeness. The image of God formed in us is of far greater worth than any other comfort we can receive.
- It was critical that Paul remain humble, because if he did not, his ministry would be diminished and the gospel would be tarnished. With great revelation comes great temptation for pride and abuse of power, to think we are something great versus proclaiming the one who is truly great. God in His mercy provided a “thorn in the flesh,” that was a messenger of Satan that harassed Paul. This flies in the face of our thinking. We think because we are in Christ and are following Him that we should be free of all spiritual oppression and pain and suffering. Why does God allow this, and why does God, our good Father, give us this? Because he always focuses on the greater good and the higher purpose.
- Paul learned through this that God’s grace was sufficient. Would you be okay with that answer? Can you be okay with that answer? Is God’s grace sufficient for you? Are you willing to know experientially that His power is made perfect in our weakness? Why do we remain weak at some points? So that the power of Christ can rest upon us. Having the power of Christ rest upon us is greater than and more valuable than our own perfection, power, and might. God does this so that we can know and experience His strength in our weakness.
- The Apostle Peter echoes the same thing:

1 Peter 1:6-7 ESV

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

- *Having a proven faith is of far greater value than having an easy path.* God knows this and says “no” to some things to give us greater things. Your faith, which is proved by grieving in various trials, is more precious than any earthly riches. Because you have this faith, it will be turned in for eternal riches that will be far greater than what we imagine—the praise and glory and honor that will come at the revelation of Jesus Christ.
- The apostle John, who was one of Jesus’s closest friends, said this about prayer:

1 John 5:14-15 ESV

And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

- We have anything we ask for *if it is according to His will.* So we really need to ask ourselves and investigate what the will of the Lord is and then pray that way. For example, instead of praying for more money, we should pray: help me to be grateful / help me to be generous / help me to be a good steward. *We so often want what is easy, and He wants what is best.*
- Should we pray for healing—absolutely—and with it, we should pray that His will be done. We should pray for the grace and strength to persevere in hardship. We should pray that we would represent Christ well in it. We should pray that with it, God will conform us into the image of His Son. We should pray to see things we are to be grateful for. We should pray that He will be glorified in and through these things. “Help me to persevere, help me to have compassion, help me to see your grace, help me to see your goodness—Jesus, show me where you are, show me what you are doing.”
- When we pray, we need to ask ourselves some questions about our prayer which will help us to pray more effectively.
 - Am I praying for God’s glory?
 - Am I praying in line with scripture?
 - Am I praying with humility and faith?

Understand it will not remain this way forever

2 Cor 4:16-18 ESV

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

- The outer self is indeed wasting away and will continue to fade, and our inner self is being renewed day by day. The eternal weight of glory, which is beyond all comparison, will be worth it all, and it will last forever. God helps us to keep our eyes on what matters most and what is the greater good and the greater glory.
- Rebecca McLaughlin makes this helpful observation: “The Bible begins and ends with happiness, but the meat of the story is raw. Christians are promised that one day, God ‘will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore’ (Rev. 21:4). But we are not promised that God will not allow us to cry in the first place. What end could possibly be worth all this pain? Jesus says He is” (McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity* (p. 206). Crossway. Kindle Edition).

Conclusion and Communion

- Keep your eyes on the prize. He will show you His goodness and His glory. The weight of His glory is incredible. Continue to trust Him and pray that His will be done. Continue to know that He is working in you and through you during this life. Continue to ask for the image of Christ to be made and seen in you. Continue to call out to Him and ask Him to help you see where He is working, because He is working.
- Trust God for the greater and higher good. Pray that His perfect will, will be done. Ask that we will know His will. Trust Him for what is best. Know “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28) For He is good and makes all things beautiful in His time. We don’t always know the answers and the reasons, but we can trust the one who does. He will never leave us nor forsake us, and He is good.