

The Mystery of Unanswered Prayer
All-Access Pass ~ A Series on Prayer
Isaiah 55:8-9, 2 Cor. 12:7-10, John 11, selected verses
March 22, 2009

Earl Favinger was a long-time member of this church who died recently at the ripe old age of 92. More than once when I visited Earl, he would tell me that God *always* answered his prayers. Not only that, but Earl said that God answered his prayers *immediately*. Wow. I never really knew what to say to Earl when he told me that. I couldn't relate to that kind of response from God. It was hard to believe. But Earl believed it. That was his experience. How could I argue with that?

If you've been following this message series on prayer the last few weeks, this may be the message you've been waiting for. Because today we're going to talk about *The Mystery of Unanswered Prayer*. We've said that, through Jesus, we have an all-access pass to God. We can come to God and speak freely and frankly with Him about whatever is on our minds. Whatever: Anything and everything. Let's review our memory verse [message inserts]: *Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.* We boldly come into the throne room of the King of the universe – HOW do we approach? *With confidence, boldly, free* to say anything to God. WHY do we approach? *So that we may receive mercy* – mercy is *not* getting what you deserve – *and find grace* – grace is getting what you *don't* deserve – and these *help us in our time of need.*

This verse seems to suggest – as many other verses of Scripture do – that when we approach God in prayer, He *will answer* with mercy and grace and help. So here's my question: Have you ever prayed for something, ever asked God to do something or *not* do something and you didn't get the answer you wanted, or you got no answer, as far as you could tell? How many of you have ever experienced *unanswered prayer*? A rather silly question, isn't it? I expect we've all had that experience.

Jesus said in Mark 11:23-24: “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” Wow. Those are the words of Jesus. He says, “I tell you the truth,” and I believe Him. But I gotta tell you, this has not always been my experience. I've prayed for people to be healed, I've asked earnestly for the mountain of disease to be thrown into the sea, and it was not. The person was not healed, they died. Or they continued to suffer. Was the problem with me, with what I prayed, was my faith too little? “O me of little faith”? I bet you've wondered these things, too. And yeah, I know sometimes we talk about death as the ultimate healing. And I really believe it is. But that's not what I was praying for. So are Jesus' words true or not?

I believe that God *always* responds to our prayers. Sometimes He says, “Yes.” We love that! This message is not about those prayers. I believe God always answers our prayers. Matt. 7:7-8. But sometimes we get answers we don't like. And sometimes we don't recognize God's response as an “answer,” because it is different from what we asked for.

First of all, it must be said that there is a certain mystery about prayer, because prayer involves communication in the spiritual realm. Many times our prayers are answered in ways that we can't see in the material realm. And many prayers are answered in ways different from what we asked. Kathleen Norris, in her wonderful book, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, says this: "...many Christians seem to regard prayer as a grocery list we hand to God, and when we don't get what we want, we assume that the prayers didn't 'work.'"¹ Have you ever thought that? I think that's a wrong way to think about prayer. But what *should* we think when it seems to us that our prayers didn't "work"? When we ask and *don't* seem to receive, when we knock and the door *isn't* opened, as far as we can tell?

Sometimes the request itself is wrong, and God says, "No." We see an example this in Matt. 20:20-23. There are all kinds of wrong reasons for our prayers. Sometimes – maybe *most* times – our requests are self-serving, materialistic, or immature. Sometimes we ask God for things that on the surface look like they are very compassionate and caring prayers. But often, they are really selfish prayers. Very often our prayers for healing are really more about us – our fears, our doubts – than about the sick person being healed. So if you sense God saying "no," check your motives. Are you praying for something that will result in God's glory, or your own? As Isabella grows up, Larry and Jennifer will not give her everything she wants. She will ask for things and they will say "no." Even though they love her very much – *because* they love her so much – they will say "no." We know that not everything they ask for is good for them. We have a greater perspective on life, more experience, than our children do. So we don't give them everything they ask for. Neither does God. Sometimes God says "no." And when He does, we must trust that God knows what is best for us and others better than we do.

We often ask God to remove hardships and challenges from our lives. We don't want to go through pain or difficulty. Very few of us pray, "Bring it on, God. Bring me trouble and pain and difficulty." But God often uses the trouble and pain and difficulties we go through to teach us something. Sometimes God says "no" to our requests to help us to grow. We see this even with the apostle Paul. We heard in the reading from 2 Corinthians that Paul was "tormented" by a "thorn in the flesh." We are never told what this "thorn" was, whether it was a physical ailment or an emotional challenge or some sin Paul struggled with. But we are told that it was a torment. And Paul pleaded with God to remove it. But God said, "no." God said, "My grace is enough. My grace is all you need, my power works best in your weakness." Even a spiritual giant like Paul did not always get a "yes" to his prayers. Most of us do not "delight" in weaknesses, hardships, difficulties, as Paul said he did. But what is Paul really saying here? He is saying that *in the midst* of his troubles, his pain, his weaknesses, he learned something. When he was in the most pain, in the most trouble, having the most difficulty, *that is when* he experienced God's power the most. And so the "no" he received to his prayer was actually a blessing to him.

See, we live in a culture that medicates at the first sign of pain. We don't like to be even uncomfortable or unhappy for five minutes. We ask God to take away hardships. Many of you are right now asking God to remove some "thorn" from your life. Maybe you're even begging God and have been for days or weeks or even years to take away your pain, your sorrow, your challenge, your difficulty. But you see, God wants to *use* hardships to teach us something we need to know *more* than we need to have the difficulty or pain removed: God uses these things

¹Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, p. 351.

to teach us that *His* grace is enough to get us through *anything*, that *His* power works best when we recognize that we are powerless and unable to accomplish anything on our own, and need God. Paul asked God to take away his pain, his struggle. But God said, “You don’t need less pain. You need more of Me. My grace is all you need.” Paul needed to know *that* more than he needed a pain-free, easy going life.

Sometimes, it’s not that our request is wrong, but that the TIMING is wrong. When the timing is wrong, God says “slow.” Anybody ever noticed that God’s timing for things is not the same as yours?! Sometimes God says “slow” because He has something better in mind for us than what we are praying for. And so then the question is this: Will you trust Him while you wait? Do you believe that God really does have your best interests at heart and that what He wants for you is far better than what you want for yourself? Isaiah 55:8-9.

Sometimes God doesn’t say “no” or “slow” but “grow.” Sometimes, God delays because He wants us to persist in prayer for a time in order to strengthen our faith in Him. Our faith would never grow if all our prayers were answered instantaneously, would it? Now, God is not on some kind of ego trip. It’s not that *God* needs to know how much we trust Him. It’s that *we* need to know that God can be trusted. We need to know that God’s ways are so much better than our ways. God’s time may not be *our* time but He is always *on* time. God is never late. God’s timing is always perfect. We need to know *that* more than we need to have our prayers answered immediately. We need to know that we need God more than we need an answer to our prayer. What we really get when we pray is more of God – a closer, deeper, more powerful and power-filled relationship with God.

Sometimes God delays His answer so that we can change what we’re asking for. Have you ever had that happen? You’re praying and praying for something and as you continue over time to pray, you begin to sense that you should pray for something *different* than what you started with. People often ask, “Why should I pray if God already knows what He is going to do?” Here’s why: Prayer doesn’t so much change God as it changes *us*. Because prayer puts us in communication – in direct contact – with God. It’s supposed to be a two-way conversation, remember. Not only do we tell God what we want Him to do, but when we stay connected to God in prayer, He can tell us what we need to know. Sometimes God delays His answer so that we can grow in certain qualities like endurance, trust, patience, and submission. Remember: God loves you just the way you are, but He does not intend to leave you that way. Growth is a normal and necessary part of the spiritual life. You should expect to grow if you are a follower of Jesus. We just had a whole series of messages on that.

Unanswered prayer is very often a catalyst for spiritual growth because it causes us to develop in these areas. When God says “no” or “slow,” examine what God is doing in *you* while you wait, or after you get what you believe is a “no.” Maybe God is not saying “no.” Maybe He’s saying “You need to grow.” What is God teaching you? What is God doing in you as you wait and pray? Waiting for an answer to prayer is so difficult for us in this instant culture of ours. Maybe God is waiting to see if you will decide to enjoy where you are now – to see if you can be content in the midst of your trouble or your pain or your uncertainty, to see if you will trust Him and continue to obey Him – while you are waiting for Him to answer. Maybe God is waiting to

see if you *will* persist – if you will pray and keep on praying with passion, fervency, even desperation.

But sometimes, God just seems to be silent. He's not saying "yes" or "no" or "slow" or "grow." He seems to be saying nothing at all. Anybody ever been there? Where you feel like your prayers are just bouncing off the ceiling and nobody is listening? One example of God's silence in the New Testament is found in [John 11:1-6, 17-22](#). Eventually, Mary comes out to meet Jesus and says the same thing. Now, you know that Mary and Martha had been praying desperately for their beloved brother to be healed. They sent for Jesus because they believed that He would come and heal their brother. But Jesus didn't go right away. He delayed so long that Lazarus died. And even though *we* know what Jesus' purpose was in waiting, Mary and Martha must have felt like God was ignoring them. Maybe even that Jesus didn't love them, didn't care about their pain and their fear and their despair.

[Vv. 38-44](#). Mary and Martha were no doubt hurt and confused by God's silence in response to their prayers. But Jesus had a reason for the delay. "Did I not tell you that *if you believed*, you would see the glory of God?" Sometimes God's silence is preparing us to see something so spectacular, so unexpected, grand and glorious, that we would never even imagine it, let alone ask God for it. But we must trust Him. We must believe – and keep on believing even where we do not see – that God's Word is true and that He is faithful to all His promises. That He is able to do exceedingly, abundantly, far above all that we could ever ask or imagine or think. Oh, you better know Eph. 3:20.

Sometimes it's not that the request is wrong or that the timing is wrong. Sometimes God is silent because *we* are wrong. I think that unacknowledged, unconfessed sin is perhaps the biggest barrier we face to answered prayer. [Isaiah 59:1-2, NLT](#): Listen! The LORD's arm is not too weak to save you, nor is His ear too deaf to hear you call. It is your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, He has turned away and will not listen any more. The Scripture is clear that God will not hear us if we refuse to acknowledge and confess our sins. If you feel like no matter how desperately you pray, God is not answering your prayers, ask Him to reveal the areas of your life that are out of line with His will and standards. What behaviors and attitudes do you need to acknowledge and turn away from? Listen: Sin separates us from God. Period. We cannot "approach the throne of grace" at all – let alone with confidence, boldy – if we continue to disobey God. You cannot expect God to answer your prayers if you are thumbing your nose at His will and His ways, the clear commands of Scripture. He will not do it.

Answered prayer encourages us to pray more or to keep on praying. But unanswered prayer often has the opposite effect: We are tempted to give up on prayer when we are met with the silence or "no" of God. If that is where you are today, let me encourage you to press on! Ask and keep on asking God. Seek and keep on seeking God. Knock and keep on knocking and God *will* open the door. Now, what you find on the other side of that door may not be exactly what you asked for. But even if you do not get what you want, if you keep on praying, you will get what you need: More of God. A greater sense of His presence and His power, a deeper understanding of His love for you and His purposes for your life.