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## Why Do My Prayers Go Unanswered?

Our sermon series, “Why?” addresses questions that have been asked since man first walked upright on earth. If God is good, why are so many allowed to suffer?; how can I believe in a God that lets bad things happen to good people? Jesus says whatever we ask for in prayer with faith, we will receive—we can even move mountains with prayer; does that mean my unanswered prayers reflect my lack of faith? Why does God seemingly answer trivial prayers—yes! the perfect parking spot!—and ignore me during my greatest need?

Why do some prayers go unanswered? Well, to start with, there are many kinds of prayer, and some prayers do not need answering: a prayer of praise or a prayer of thanksgiving stands alone, and connects us to the divine in our joy. We say a corporate unison prayer on Sundays: we’re not looking for answers; we’re asking for guidance or to have our eyes opened as to how we can do God’s will. When we recite the 23rd Psalm as a prayer we remind ourselves to be comforted by God’s enduring goodness and mercy. And the prayer that Jesus taught us to say is a succinct reminder of his message: to trust God, to do God’s will, and to forgive others as God forgives us.

And some prayers do not deserve answering: many of us watching a baseball game on TV find ourselves praying that the next batter hits a home run. But someone rooting for the other team may be praying that the next batter strikes out. Does God count the number of fans praying on each side before causing a result? I ...don’t think so. Though I’m not completely sure, because the Chicago Cubs did win the World Series in 2016.

Or how about prayers that would impinge on another’s free will? “I pray that Mary Lou fall in love with me...” Are we asking God to

control Mary Lou's inclinations? What if she, at the same time, is praying that I get lost and never darken her doorstep again? No, it's clear that prayers of this sort are not likely to receive a lot of heavenly attention; God is content to let us work out these kind of problems by ourselves.

But then there is prayer coming from genuine need. You've all heard of the foxhole prayer—a prayer arising out of desperation, as from a soldier in a wartime foxhole. Even people who have never set foot in a church in their lifetime, when confronted with existential distress, will turn to prayer, and the prayer often involves some bargaining, something like this: “God, I haven't always been your best follower, but get me out of this jam, and I promise for the rest of my life I will...” followed by a promise that may or may not be kept.

We ask God to deliver what we want, and we promise something in return. We are practicing the “Art of the Deal” with God, and are let down if God seems uninterested in the transaction. It is normal to pray when we are anguished—this happens frequently in the Bible—because those are times when we realize the truth of Psalm 100: it is God who has made us, and not we ourselves. So much of life is spent thinking we're in control, and when we're not, when we feel like we're being tossed around like a life raft on a restless sea, we look for rescue. Even those unaccustomed to daily prayer will summon a plea to a higher power when under extreme duress. But cowering in a foxhole does not put us in a very good bargaining position with God, desperate as we may be.

Can we convince God to listen to our pleas? Let's look at three stories from the Bible to gain some insight.

Prayer worked for the prophet Jonah. His foxhole moment was in the belly of a giant fish; after three days, this started to get a little old. He prayed to God this way: “I called to the Lord out of my

distress, and he answered me; as my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; 'I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!' Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land."

Jonah proposed a deal with God—let me out, and I will sacrifice to you with thanksgiving—and God accepted the deal. Jonah subsequently convinced the inhabitants of Ninevah to repent, so God clearly had plans for Jonah and good reason to release him from the fish. Jonah gets a whole book in the Bible for his story: he disobeys God, is swallowed by a fish, prays for deliverance, deliverance is granted, he preaches to a wicked city God is ready to destroy, the inhabitants repent, and the city is spared.

So it seems God does answer prayers—at least, sometimes. But keep in mind that we'll never know how many folks were living in fish-bellies who didn't get out, because their stories didn't get into the Bible, just as not every soldier crouching in a foxhole is able to escape a barrage of mortar shells.

Why do some prayers go unanswered? Even in the Bible, not all prayers requests are granted; our second example is a famous unanswered prayer in the New Testament: the Apostle Paul writes in his Second Epistle to the Philippians of a thorn in his side that he prays three times for God to remove, yet God declines to do so. What was this thorn? There are many theories; most believe it was a physical affliction, such as malaria, migraine headaches, or worsening vision caused by macular degeneration or glaucoma. But whether the thorn represented a physical, spiritual or emotional affliction, it affected Paul greatly, and he turned to God in prayer.

Yet his request was not granted, even after repeated pleadings to God. Yet though his suffering remained unrelieved, he actually did

receive a reply from God; as he writes in his letter, “Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

As someone in our Bible study group said the other day, God does answer our prayers, and sometimes the answer is “no.” Paul accepted “no” for an answer, and embraced his affliction, seeing it as a way that God was perfecting his soul, deepening his humility, strengthening his dependence on God, and thus fortifying his ability to spread the Gospel. Paul trusted God’s plan, even when it was not an easy path.

Let’s face it: there is suffering in the world. People who ask how a loving God could allow so much suffering are really wondering why God didn’t create a world where people don’t get sick, where earthquakes and floods do no harm, where people only laugh and never cry. That kind of world sounds heavenly, I guess. But right now, I am glad to live in this world, and grateful that God has given me life, and a chance to grow closer to the Divine every day. Perhaps someday I’ll understand why the world is the way it is; as Paul says; “Now we see only a dim likeness of things. It is as if we were seeing them in a foggy mirror. But someday we will see clearly. We will see face to face. What I know now is not complete. But someday I will know completely, just as God knows me completely.” There is suffering in the world, and there is also the solace that God can provide, and the promise of greater and greater understanding if we walk the path set out for us.

Now let’s look at the third story: The one who prays is none other than Jesus himself, in the agony of Gethsemane. He had

predicted the Passion to his Disciples several times, so he well knew what lie just ahead, the torture he would have to endure, the death on the cross, the end to his earthly ministry which was just gaining momentum. He left the Disciples to be by himself, and got down on his knees. "He said, 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup of suffering away from me. Nevertheless, not My will, but Thine, be done.' An angel from heaven appeared to Jesus and gave him strength. Because he was very sad and troubled, he prayed even harder. His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground."

This passage from Luke shows the human side of Jesus, and at first glance, it appears that the prayer request was not granted, for Jesus indeed drank from the cup of suffering; moments after this prayer came the arrest in the garden. It is part of the survival instinct of all creatures to try to avoid pain, and who among us might not ask, "God, just wondering, but have You considered another way to accomplish your divine goals, maybe one that doesn't hurt so much?"

But look closer. After acknowledging to God his humanness, and recognizing with clarity the tribulation that lay ahead, his true prayer followed: "Not my will, but thine, O Lord, be done."

This is the essential prayer, the prayer that must lie at the heart of any request we make of God. "Not my will, but yours." This simple phrase puts anything we ask of God in the proper context: God knows better than we do what is best.

It is always okay to ask favors of God. We can pray for others, invoking healing energy to flow to the one prayed for, and many of us have seen healing take place through prayer; this is selfless; it follows the command to love our neighbor. And we can pray for ourselves, too, but always the heart of the prayer must be—Thy

will, O Lord—and then to accept the outcome, and trust the divine wisdom.

God had plans for Jonah, and answered his prayer. God had plans for Paul, but denied his pleas—and Paul accepted that. God had plans for Jesus, and Jesus was all in, for his whole life was dedicated to doing the will of God.

Let us practice all kinds of prayer, and not just from the foxhole, but every day. Let us praise God, thank God, pray for others, and, yes, pray for ourselves—in a trusting spirit.

Finally, let me remind you of the one kind of prayer that is always granted, for it is the prayer that God most wants us to pray. “Lord, let me grow closer to you every day. Let every step I take bring me closer to the divine.”

This is the prayer Jesus promises will be answered: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” Whether times are tough, or we’re blissfully coasting along, God is always available to us; we can simply knock on the door.

So I will close by reciting the lyrics to a song you may know, that is based on a 13th Century prayer, a prayer that God will answer. It goes like this:

Day by day  
Day by day  
Oh Dear Lord  
Three things I pray  
To see thee more clearly  
Love thee more dearly  
Follow thee more nearly  
Day by day

7

Amen.