

McCabe United Methodist Church
How Do We Make Sense of God's Will? (Part 2)
"Why Do My Prayers Go Unanswered?"
2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Luke 22:39-42
January 6, 2013
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A pastor had a beautiful little girl that he adored. One day she asked him why he always bows his head for a moment before beginning his sermon. Her father was excited to learn she was watching so closely. He responded: "Honey. I'm asking the Lord to help me preach a good sermon." "Well," she answered, "Why doesn't he help you?"

This is the second week in our series about Making Sense of God's Will. Last week we talked about why innocents suffer. I suggested it's because of the natural order of God's creation and because of human actions. Today we're going to look at unanswered prayer. I know a lot about this topic...because I've had a lot of prayers go unanswered.

Pastor Adam Hamilton shares a story about a woman in his congregation who lost her faith because of unanswered prayer. He writes:

A woman in my congregation, after years of fertility treatments, finally conceived. She and her husband were filled with joy. But early in the pregnancy she became extremely ill. By her fifth month doctors informed her that if she continued to try to carry the child to term she would not survive. While she was willing to take that risk, her family was not. The child was unable to survive outside the womb. The baby died, and the mother lived.

She wrote to tell me of the experience. "I had never wrestled with the will of God. Now my life and faith depended upon it. I had always thought God could and would do anything if enough people prayed—but people had and God didn't. Who was God? What good is God?" (Chapter 2, Why?: Making Sense of God's Will)

She eventually regained her faith in God, but it took a long time and a lot of care and attention from her family and friends.

This is a common question. Why didn't God act? Why didn't God answer my prayers?

On the other side of this coin are the people who say God answers all their prayers. "I found a parking space close to the door. God answered my prayers." "I found the jacket I wanted on sale. God answered my prayers." "I made a touchdown in the big game. God answered my prayers."

These light hearted comments trivialize the importance of prayer and the important questions about what it means to say God is with us.

In today's scripture lesson we hear two examples of unanswered prayer. The first was the Apostle Paul asking to be healed from an infirmity and the second was Jesus asking to be spared from the cross.

People have been asking questions about unanswered prayer since the time of the Old Testament. Psalm 22:1-2 reads:

- ¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

So, stop and think of all the times we've faithfully prayed for our children and family members and it seemed like our prayers were unanswered. When we don't get the new job we wanted...we are disappointed. When we've prayed for someone's safety, but their injured or has a serious health problem...we are confused, when we pray someone will be healed, but they die...we are angry. These are all examples of unanswered prayer.

Some people say that if we are faithful God will answer our prayers. You just have to have faith...you just need to believe. I don't think this is always true.

I know of a situation where two women were dying of cancer. Both families, with young children, were praying for their moms. Both families sought to strengthen their relationship with God. Both families were faithful. Both women believed they would be healed by God.

But one of these women lived and the other died. One family rejoiced saying their prayers were answered. The other family overheard their comments and asked God: Why? Why did my mom die? We were faithful! We prayed just as hard as they did.

There are biblical examples of Jesus healing people before they were faithful. What we typically think of as their faithfulness was not an issue.

1. Blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-51) was healed. Not because he asked for forgiveness and professed his faith in God, but because he believed the Son of God could heal him.
2. When Jesus came upon a funeral procession he met a woman who had already experienced the death of her husband and now her son had died. Jesus, out of mercy and compassion brought the boy back to life. (Luke 7:11-17)

Jesus did all these things because he, Jesus, was holy; not because the people he healed were holy. So, in the Gospels...answered prayer was more about Jesus ability than peoples' faithfulness. When Jesus walked the face of the earth all things were possible. Now Jesus is in heaven, at God's right hand.

One of the most important questions we need to address is...how we understand the purpose of prayer. Do we pray because we want God to perform miracles, like a cosmic magician? Or do we pray because we recognize God is our creator and savior and because we want God's guidance for our lives and our world?

Jesus taught us how to pray through the Lord's Prayer. There are at least four essential elements to this prayer: praising God, seek guidance, recognizing God's kingdom is on earth and in heaven, and the forgiveness of sins. When we pray the Lord's Prayer we aren't asking for anything and we never go away feeling like our prayers haven't been answered.

As I've studied scripture, walked with friends and family members through very difficult situations, and as I've grieved with a family at the death of a loved one; I've learned one important thing. The best way to answer prayer is with your presence: just showing up, taking time to listen, and offering your words of concern...are an answer to prayer.

Why are our prayers unanswered? This question could be a sermon series all by itself. On the floor of my home office you will find multiple sheet of paper we questions,

undeveloped thoughts, and bible verses that I didn't have time to include in today's message. I simply hope that my thoughts have helped you wrestle with the question how does God want us to pray and what does it mean to say our prayer was unanswered.

*The content in today's message is heavily dependent upon chapter two of Adam Hamilton's Book: Why?: Making Sense of God's Will.