

McCabe United Methodist Church

Prayer 101 (Part 4): Unanswered Prayers
Isaiah 55:8-9 * John 17:20-21: February 8 & 9 , 2014
Pastor Rick Fossum

Lord, listen to your children praying. Lord, send your Spirit on this place. Lord, listen to your children praying. Send us love. Send us power. Send us grace.

Let's sing this chorus once again. Use the words to put yourself in a praying frame of mind.

Lord, listen to your children praying, Lord, send your Spirit in this place; Lord, listen to your children praying, send us love, send us power, send us grace.

"Lord, listen to your children praying." That's us! We are God's children. God hears us when we pray.

Today, is the fourth message in a series we're calling *Prayer 101*. We started this series by talking about 'why' we pray. Is prayer simply a way to ask God for stuff or to ask God to help us out of some trouble? Or, is there more to prayer? Hopefully, we discovered that one of the main reasons we pray is to grow and maintain a relationship with Jesus Christ. Through prayer, we grow closer to Jesus and closer to the persons we are meant to be.

Two weeks ago, we looked at praying like a child. In the Bible, there's a special place in the Kingdom of God for children. In fact, there's something about children that Jesus wants us to know about. There's something about children that Jesus wants us to be like.

Last week, we looked at paying attention. Prayer. It's you and I paying attention and making time for what's important to us.

Today, we'll ask the question, "**Why do some prayers go unanswered?**"

A man suffered from chronic health issues for years and for years, he prayed and prayed for healing, but instead of getting better, he continued

to get worse. Someone asked him about his prayers. The man replied, **“Well, I’m not sure if praying does any good. God doesn’t seem to listen to me.”** Why do some prayers go unanswered?

A young woman, while growing up, was abused almost every night by a family member in almost every way imaginable. The woman said, **“I cried out every night for God’s help, to make it stop. But God never answered.”** Why do some prayers go unanswered?

A middle-aged woman has been addicted to alcohol for far too long. She lost her job, her family and most of her friends. Her constant prayer was this: **“God, please help to me stop. I’ve had enough.”** But, she kept drinking. Why do some prayers go unanswered?

I could go on with more stories about unanswered prayers. I’m sure you could add stories of your own. Unanswered prayers cause people like all of us to ask hard questions. Why doesn’t God hear us? Why doesn’t God care? Why does God hide from us? Why do some prayers go unanswered?

The Bible is full of stories about unanswered prayers. In Habakkuk, the prophet cries out, **“O Lord, how long must I cry for help, but you do not listen?”** In Psalms 22, we hear the Psalmist say, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** If you remember, those are the same words Jesus repeated when he was dying on the cross. Job talks about God like this, **“But if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him.”**

Why do some prayers go unanswered? *“We don’t know for sure”* is the best answer. I think this is what the prophet Isaiah was trying to say in our Scripture reading today. We don’t know God’s ways or God’s purposes or God’s mind. Listen to how Isaiah explains it, **“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”**

-Isaiah 55:8-9 (NRSV)

Who knows the mind of God? Not you. Not me. Not anyone. Yet, I believe that God does answer prayers . . . all prayers. This is what I’d like

to talk about this morning. I believe that God answers our prayers in one of five ways. There may be more or less, because again, who knows the mind of God?

In your bulletin today, I've added a worksheet called '*How Prayers Are Answered*'. I invite you to write down the five different ways I believe God answers our prayers.

First, I believe that God answers some of our prayers by saying '*no*'. How many fathers or mothers are here today? How many times has your son or daughter asked you for something and you said '*no*'? '*No*,' you can't spend the weekend with your girlfriend or boyfriend. '*No*,' we're not buying you a muscle car. '*No*,' you're not old enough to have a cell phone. '*No*,' you can't watch that 'R' rated movie.

In some ways, God is like a mom or dad. .

And sometimes, God says '*No*' because we want to change things that can't be changed. Disasters, diseases, accidents are just a few examples of things that we can't change.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once said, "**What discord should we bring to the universe if our prayers were all answered. Then we should govern the world and God. And you think that we should govern it better?**"

Sometimes, God answers our prayers with a '*No*'.

Second, sometimes God answers our prayers with a '*Not Yet*'. A lot of us are not patient people. When we want something, we want it now. God's timing is different.

Again, parents have you ever said to your son or daughter '*Not Yet*'. Do the dishes first. "*Not Yet!*" Do your homework. '*Not Yet!*' Wait until you're sixteen. Sometimes, God answers our prayers by saying '*Not Yet*'.

In August of 2010, thirty-three miners in Chile survived when their mine collapsed. The men were working 2,200 feet underground. That's almost a half mile. Hours later, the miners finally heard from the people above ground. The miners started celebrating. They were being rescued,

but not right away. A thirty-one ton drill was needed to create a pilot hole from the surface to the spot where the miners were trapped. Then, a larger bit was needed to make the rescue hole. This hole was less than 30 inches wide. The men were brought up through that hole in a special cage. It took three hours for one man to ride the cage to the surface. The last miner was finally rescued at Christmas, about five months later. Do you think that last miner's time table was different than Gods'?

Sometimes, God answers our prayers with a '*Not Yet*'.

Third, (and this might be the hardest to understand) sometimes God answers our prayers by helping us to accept whatever has happened to us. In II Corinthians, Paul is complaining to God about a "**thorn in my flesh**" as he calls it. Paul said, "**Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'.**"

Sometimes, God answers our prayers by helping us to accept our "**Thorns in the flesh.**" Our divorces. Our health problems. Our financial problems.

Joni Eareckson Tada was born in 1949. As a teenager, Joni enjoyed riding horses, hiking, tennis, and swimming. On July 30, 1967, eighteen-year-old Joni dove into the Chesapeake Bay. She misjudged the shallowness of the water and suffered a fracture between the fourth and fifth cervical levels. She became a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the shoulders down.

For the first two years, Joni experienced depression, suicidal thoughts, and religious doubts. Then, she accepted her paralysis, learned to paint with a brush between her teeth, became a best-selling author, recorded several musical albums, starred in a movie about her life and married Ken Tada in 1982.

Sometimes, the answer to our prayers is God helping us to accept what has happened to us and helping us through the challenges we face.

Fourth, sometimes, *death* is an answer to prayer. In almost every nursing home, when you walk down the halls, you'll see patients sitting in their chairs staring at who knows what. If you take the time to stop and talk

to them, your likely to hear these words, **“I don’t know why I’m still here. I’m ready to die. I’m ready.”**

I can remember when my Grandma Mohn died. She was in her seventies. She was in the hospital battling cancer. It was a painful time for her and for us. One night, she had a dream or what I call an *‘out-of-body’* experience. She felt herself floating in the air. She was taken to a place where she was surrounded by people she had known. It was a peaceful place and beautiful.

The next day, when she told us about this experience, she said, **“I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t want to come back here.”** She died a few days later.

Sometimes, *death* is God’s answer. Death isn’t always the terrible enemy that robs us of life. Death can be a gateway . . . a gateway into heaven where there is no more crying or pain or suffering or death.

Finally, God answers some of our prayers by saying ‘Yes’. From asking God to help us find a set of lost car keys to asking God for a medical miracle, sometimes God says ‘Yes’.

A few years ago, I was visiting a woman who had been diagnosed with cancer. The doctors said it was aggressive. They needed to begin treatment immediately. Yet, when she went back for further testing, the doctors were amazed because the cancer was almost gone! They couldn’t believe it. They couldn’t understand it.

And the woman? She called it a miracle.

Sometimes, God says ‘Yes’ to our prayers. This is the part I least understand. Why are miracles given to some and not to others? I don’t believe that it’s a matter of faith or lack of faith. For me, the bottom line is **“I don’t know why.”** Hopefully, one day we’ll find out.

Sometimes, God’s answers our prayers with a ‘Yes’.

A young pastor planned a garden party for the UMW (United Methodist Women) ladies of the church. The party was going to be held in the church garden under the old oak tree.

The day of party came, and to his horror, he realized that he had forgot to invite Mrs. UMW to the party. This was a 'no-no' in the first degree. Mrs. UMW was a force in the church. You didn't want to mess with her.

The pastor quickly called Mrs. UMW and begged for her forgiveness. **"I'm sorry,"** he said. **"This was a mistake. It was not intentional. Please come!"**

Mrs. UMW replied, **"Pastor, beggin' won't you help now! I've already prayed for rain."**

I believe all prayers are answered, but they're answered in God's own way.

I know that some of you are hurting because of unanswered prayers in your life. It wasn't my intention today to make matters worse by giving easy answers to hard questions. I simply believe that God does hear us when we pray and in God's own ways, our prayers are answered.

Come back next week, and we'll finish this prayer series by talking about the Lord's Prayer.