

Making Prayer Your Second Language

“The Gift of Unanswered Prayer”

2nd Corinthians 12:7b-10

If you happened to notice the sermon title that was printed in the bulletin this morning, you probably thought that was a mistake, didn't you? **The Gift of Unanswered Prayer?**

You probably thought to yourself, *“Unanswered prayer isn't a gift, it's a curse. It's a hindrance. It's an obstruction. It's a dilemma. It's a setback. He must have meant: ‘The Gift of Answered Prayer.’”*

No, the bulletin is correct. The title of my sermon this morning is: **The Gift of Unanswered Prayer.** I got that title from one of the great theological “giants” of our day – **Garth Brooks.** He wrote a song several years ago entitled *“Unanswered Prayers.”*

Let me set the background of this song for you. He tells in the opening verse of how he and his wife went to a hometown football game and he ran into his old high school flame. The “love” of his life, or so he thought, when he was 17!

And as he introduced this old friend to his wife, he thought back to the way things used to be. He remembered how she was the one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. He remembered how that at night he would get down on his knees and pray to God that this young woman might become his wife.

He'd pray, *“God, if You will only grant me this one wish, I'll never ask for anything else again.”* Now as he remembers back to that day and that prayer, let me tell you his response. He sings:

Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers
Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs
That just because He doesn't answer doesn't mean He don't care
Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.

He goes on to say:

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She wasn't quite the angel that I remembered in my dreams
And I could tell that time had changed me

In her eyes too it seemed
We tried to talk about the old days
There wasn't much we could recall
I guess the Lord knows what He's doin' after all.

Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers.

We're in the middle of a series of sermons entitled **Making Prayer Your Second Language.** Two-way communication is at the heart of any relationship. If you can't communicate then you'll never have much of a relationship. And so this matter of prayer is an incredibly critical part of your spiritual life because what is prayer? It is simply the way we converse with, communicate with, and connect with God.

Now over the past four weeks we have talked about some of the essential elements of prayer – **Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.** I want to shift our focus a bit these next several weeks and talk about some of the difficulties we encounter along the way as we try to truly learn and become proficient in the language of prayer.

Now one of the very first obstacles we bump into when we try to make prayer our second language is this matter of **Unanswered Prayer.** Everyone who takes God seriously and who takes prayer seriously must deal, sooner or later, with this problem of unanswered prayer. For instance:

- **Here's a minister. He has given his life to serving the Lord, to ministering to people. He comes from a wealthy family. He could have gone into the family business and had a rather comfortable life. But he chooses to follow the Lord and then after he has been in the pastoral ministry for just a few years, his wife is diagnosed with terminal cancer. She has maybe a year to live...or less. They have 3 young children. He prays. His friends pray. The elders of the church anoint her with oil and pray over her in the name of the Lord. But nothing helps. The treatments don't work. She gets worse. He prays but she dies. And Dad and two sons and a daughter and relatives and friends and church members have to deal with this problem of unanswered prayer.**

- **A godly mother and father pray for their wayward son. He was raised in the church. He went to Sunday School. He knows his Bible. But when he left home, he left all of that behind. He's not a bad son. He's just away from the Lord. And they pray and pray and pray for years but nothing happens. He remains a prodigal son and Mom and Dad have to wrestle with this issue of unanswered prayer.**
- **A young man prays fervently for deliverance from an overpowering temptation, but the struggle just never seems to end. In fact, it seems that the harder he prays, the worse the temptation becomes. He knows all about the promises in the Bible about answered prayer, but he is left to tussle with this issue of unanswered prayer.**
- **A wife prays for her husband. Their marriage is in trouble. He has become cold, distant, unresponsive, unreachable. They're in counseling and out of counseling. Some days he seems deeply concerned about their marriage and other days it's like he could care less. He threatens to leave. She prays. He says there's nothing there anymore. She prays. He stomps out of the house. She prays. She prays desperately. She has her friends to pray with her. She prays that God will change his heart. She prays that he'll come back. She prays for the survival of her marriage. But he doesn't change. He doesn't come back. Her marriage doesn't survive and she is left to grapple with this issue of unanswered prayer.**

Now I wish I could tell you that these were all hypothetical situations, but they're not. They are people that I know, they are people that I'm close to, they are people whom I have prayed with who have experienced the trauma of unanswered prayer.

And so, let me just say it again. **Anyone and everyone who takes God seriously and who takes prayer seriously must deal, sooner or later, with this problem of unanswered prayer.** We are forced to face a dilemma of faith. *If there is a God and if He really does answer prayer, why doesn't He answer my prayers?*

Perhaps you can remember a time in your own life when you prayed, really prayed, said all the right words with all the right motives, even asked your friends to join you in prayer, deeply believing that only

God could help you, and you waited and waited and waited, but God never seemed to answer.

We don't talk about this problem very much around the church. I suppose that's because we're afraid that if we admit that our prayers aren't always answered, it will cause some people to lose their faith in God. And so a lot of good, devout, deeply religious people have this secret hidden deep in their hearts that they don't want anyone else to know about. They really question whether God actually answers our prayers.

They question it because when it really counted, God didn't come through for them like they expected Him to. So in their hearts, deep in the inner chambers of their soul, hidden behind a smiling face, rests a profound disenchantment with the Almighty.

So we're going to talk about it this morning. There's a man in the Bible who had to wrestle with unanswered prayer and I think there are some things we can learn from him and from his experience that will help us when we have to face this dilemma of unanswered prayer.

His name is **Paul** and we find his story in the book of **2nd Corinthians**, the **12th chapter**, beginning with **verse 7**. Paul had a problem. We don't know what that problem was but he referred to it as a **"thorn"** in his flesh, a **"messenger of Satan"** sent to torment him.

Bible scholars for centuries have speculated as to what this problem might have been. Some scholars have suggested that this **"messenger of Satan"** was an actual person who just made life miserable for Paul, who was always opposing him and harassing him and criticizing him and damaging his ministry.

Some scholars have suggested that this **"thorn in the flesh"** was some physical illness that sapped his strength and usurped his energy and limited what he was physically able to do for the Lord. Still other scholars suggest that that this **"thorn in the flesh,"** this **"messenger of Satan,"** was some kind of besetting sin, some kind of human weakness, some kind of persistent and powerful temptation that just wouldn't let go of him and with which he had to struggle year after year after year.

We don't know what this big obstacle was in his life but we do know that he prayed about it and prayed about it and prayed about it for deliverance...but God didn't answer that prayer. He didn't remove it from his life. Listen to what the Scripture says in Paul's words.

There was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 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." 2nd Corinthians 12:7-9 NIV

Can you imagine that? Here is the apostle Paul, probably the greatest Christian who ever lived, the man who introduced Christianity to Europe, the man who wrote more books in the Bible than anybody else, praying desperately about a need in his life...and God not answering his prayer!

I think we can learn something from that. In fact, I think we can learn several things from it. Let me mention at least three.

First of all, **Unanswered Prayer Sometimes Happens To The Very Best Of Christians.** Here is **Paul**. He is a man of prayer. He is a man of faith. He is a man who walked obediently with the Lord. God performed some incredible miracles in Paul's life.

But here in our Scripture lesson he prays, he pleads with the Lord, not once but three times, for God to remove this obstacle from his path and God doesn't do it. He doesn't answer his request. He doesn't say "yes" to this legitimate need in his life.

Think about **Joseph**. When he is a young man his jealous brothers throw him into a pit and leave him there to die. *Do you suppose Joseph prayed when he was in the bottom of that well?* Of course, he did! He must have prayed, "**God, get me out of this. Get me back home. Deliver me from these treacherous thugs who have betrayed me.**"

But God didn't get him out of this mess, did He? Fortunately, he wasn't left in that pit to die, but he was sold into slavery. *Don't you suppose Joseph prayed all of the way to Egypt, "God, don't let this happen—don't let them put me into slavery. Set me free."* But God

didn't do that, did He? He didn't answer that prayer.

While he is in slavery in Egypt he is accused of a crime which he didn't do. He was honest, he was pure; and it cost him. He is thrown into prison. For more than two years he languishes there. *Don't you suppose he prayed every night, "God, get me out of this place! Vindicate me! Intercede on my behalf."* But nothing! It was like God had forgotten him or even abandoned him.

Don't you think there were many, many days when Joseph probably thought, "My prayers are just meaningless! Why pray?"

Or think about **Abraham**. The burning desire of his heart was to have a son, an heir, someone who would carry on his name and his work. God had said that he was going to be the father of a great nation, but how can you be the father of a great nation when you can't even have a son?

He must have prayed fervently, "**God, help my wife get pregnant.**" Yet for almost a hundred years he remained childless. *How many years did he pray for that need?* Who knows? If he prayed it just once a day that would be over 20,000 prayers and each time the request was not answered. He was turned down.

Now here's my point. *Have you asked God for something that seems right, legitimate, in accordance with His will but He has said, "No"? He hasn't answered your prayer? Nothing has happened?* Well, listen, you are not alone. **Unanswered prayer sometimes happens to the very best of believers.**

Good people can pray good prayers that are sometimes given a negative answer by God. So, if that happens to you, don't lose hope. Don't lose faith. Don't quit praying. It happens to the very best of saints.

Now here's the second thing we can learn from Paul's experience – **When Unanswered Prayer Happens It Is Usually Humanly Unexplainable.**

Do you remember what God says to us in Isaiah 55? " 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord. '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 NIV).

Usually when God doesn't answer some prayer in our lives, we try to figure it out. We try to make sense out of it all. We try to understand why God said "no". ***"Well, it must be this reason."*** Or, ***"It must be that reason."*** And we can end up with some totally erroneous kinds of reasons and assumptions.

That's what **Job's** "comforters" did—those three guys who came to comfort him in the midst of his distress but ended up just making life miserable for him. They said, ***"There must be some reason why God isn't answering this prayer. Job you must have sinned. You must have really goofed up in some way or God wouldn't allow all of these horrible to occur in your life. He would deliver you. He would answer your prayer."***

But what was happening in Job's life was humanly unexplainable. Neither Job nor his "comforters" nor anyone else here on earth could have possibly known about that conversation in heaven between the Lord and Satan. They didn't know that Satan had accused God of putting a hedge around Job, giving him preferential treatment, and that the Lord was testing Job, trying him, proving and perfecting his faith.

Now here's the thing I want you to get. **Some things that happen in our lives are humanly unexplainable.** You'll worry yourself sick trying to figure out what can't be figured out with human understanding. You'll just see part of the picture.

Do you think Paul totally understood why God didn't remove this "thorn in his flesh," this "messenger from Satan" from his life? The only explanation God gave to him was, "Listen, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." What does that mean? I don't know. Do you know? I don't think Paul really understood it, but it was all he needed.

He said, ***"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me"*** (2nd Corinthians 12:9 NIV).

One of my preaching professors in seminary, **Dr. Donald Demaray,**

used to say, ***"We need to put a little box in the back of our heads with a sign on it that says, 'To Be Opened In Heaven,' where we can put a lot of our questions and our doubts and our uncertainties and our unanswered prayers...and have faith that when we get to heaven then we'll know and understand all of the whys and reasons and motives."***

If we try to figure out here on earth what can only be explained in heaven then we'll just worry ourselves sick, lose faith in prayer and arrive at all kinds of wrong assumptions.

Now here's the third lesson we learn from Paul's experience – **When God Says "No" To The Prayers Of Believers It's Usually Because God Has A Higher Purpose In Mind.** *Wasn't that true in Joseph's life?* Joseph was just worried about himself and his own predicament but God was at work behind the scenes and in Joseph's life to protect and save and bless a whole nation.

*Do you recall the story of **Monica**, the mother of **Augustine**? She prayed for years that her brilliant but undisciplined son would be saved. Augustine decided to go to Rome one day, but Rome was a very wicked place and she prayed desperately that God would somehow change Augustine's mind and prohibit him from going to that awful place.*

But God didn't answer her prayer. One day she stood on a hillside and watched a ship take her son to Rome. God didn't answer her prayer. But while Augustine was in Rome he came under the influence of a godly man by the name of **Ambrose**, the Bishop of Rome, and was gloriously saved and became one of the greatest Christian writers and theologians who ever lived.

God said **"no"** to her prayer because He had a higher purpose in mind. In this matter of unanswered prayer, I have always been encouraged by these words of a poem I stumbled across somewhere.

**I asked God for strength, that I might achieve.
I was made weak, that I might learn to obey.
I asked for health, that I might do greater things.
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.**

**I asked for riches, that I might be happy.
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
I asked for power, that I might have praise of men.
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.**

**I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life.
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing I asked for, but all I hoped for.
I am among all men, most richly blessed.**

So here is what you do when your prayers aren't answered.

- 1. Keep on praying as long as you can.** Sometimes God's answers are delayed for reasons beyond our knowledge. Unless He gives you a reason to stop praying for that request, keep praying.
- 2. Give God the right to say "No" to you.** It will save you from a lot of unnecessary worry, anger, frustration and despair.
- 3. Keep on doing what you know is right.** That was the key to Joseph's life. Although he didn't understand it all, he just kept on serving God and doing right. Keep on praying, keep on believing, keep on reading the Bible, keep on obeying, keep on following the Lord. If you stay on the course in the darkness, eventually the light will come and you will be glad that you did not turn away in the moment of disappointment.