

When Our Prayer Seems Unanswered

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

April 21, 2024 PM Sermon

Reverend Peter Jonker

Mark 14: 32-42

This sermon will talk about unanswered prayer. Many people would say there's no such thing as unanswered prayer. God answers all our prayers and his answer is either 'yes,' 'no,' or 'wait.' That's right I think, but it doesn't really make the problem go away. The real problem isn't unanswered prayer; the real problem is when God answers 'no' or 'wait' in situations where that answer makes no sense to us. So when people talk about unanswered prayer they're actually referring to the times when God says 'no' or 'wait.' So, when I refer to unanswered prayer in this sermon, you can substitute 'no' or 'wait' if you want.

Gerald Sittser, the author of the book *When God Doesn't Answer Your Prayer*, admits that unanswered prayer is one of the most difficult problems of his faith. For him the problem is personal. Based on his other writings, some of you may know that Sittser experienced a terrible tragedy in his life 15 years ago. Driving home from a family outing, the car his family was in was hit by another car driven by a drunk driver. Sittser's wife, his Mother and his 4-year-old daughter were all killed; taken away from him in a terrible instant.

An event like this leaves behind all sorts of lasting problems and anguished questions, but for Sittser one of the most acute problems was the problem of his prayers. That very morning, the morning of the accident, he had prayed, as he always did, for the safety of his children. In his morning devotions he had asked God to watch over Diana Jane and protect her from harm. This was the same prayer he offered every morning with faith and sincerity. But that day was not safe for his four-year-old daughter.

In the days after the accident, as he sat down to pray, as he tried to lift his heart to heaven, a skeptical voice would chatter away in his head: "Jerry! What are you doing on your knees! What's the point of all this!? You prayed for Diana on the day of the accident and it made no difference, what makes you think these prayers are going to make any difference today?!" Anyone who has ever fervently prayed for something good, only to be met with what feels like cold silence, knows that skeptical voice. If you have experienced unanswered prayer you have heard that voice, whispering in your own head, telling you, "You're wasting your time."

The problem of unanswered prayer becomes sharpest when a number of factors come together. There are several ingredients that make up the question of unanswered prayer. First, there is the fact that we have a general knowledge of God's will. We know, because of what has been revealed to us in Scripture, what pleases God and what displeases him. We know what kind of things bring praise to him, and what sort of things bring him grief. For example: we know God wants his people to live full lives of service to him. Then, for the next ingredient, you add a real life situation that is not what God wants, some brokenness that is obviously out of step with his will. For example: Someone in your family is plagued by depression, one of those really dark depressions where they can't function and cannot find joy. Then, as a final ingredient, throw in all those Biblical passages that tell us, God will most certainly answer the prayers of his people. For example: ask and you shall receive, your prayer can move mountains, nothing is impossible with God.

These three ingredients mix together in the life of a Christian and you find yourself drinking a bitter cup of disappointment. These three ingredients mix together in the life of a Christian and you find yourself on your knees saying, "God, what on earth is going on?! My sister is depressed. It's a terrible burden for her and her family. She can't serve you the way she once did; she can't bear fruit in your kingdom, Father heal her I humbly pray. You said that anything we ask in your name you would do; Father, I'm asking! I'm pleading! I'm begging. Please do something! How can you not respond to this prayer?" Barbara Brown Taylor expresses well how this makes us feel sometimes: "Why do any of us keep praying?" she writes, "Why do we keep tossing the coins of our heart's desires into pools of still water that swallow them up without a sound?"

Fortunately, the Bible doesn't just have stories of answered prayers, and teaching about answered prayers, there are also stories of unanswered prayer, stories like Jesus in the garden. Even Jesus knew the frustration of having your prayer hit a brick wall. Jesus comes to the garden of Gethsemane to pray. He is praying that there may be some way for him to be spared the agony of the cross. Jesus does not want to be tortured and killed. It's pretty clear that he knows his mission is to rescue humankind from their sins, and he has

always known and predicted that this rescue would include his death. But now that the day is here, he begs God to find another way.

Jesus' prayer is prayed in faith. There's no doubt about that. You can't impugn the faith of Jesus. Jesus' prayer is also passionate. The Bible doesn't usually say too much about what Jesus feels, but here you get three separate descriptions of his inner feelings: Jesus is distressed, he is agitated, he is deeply grieved to the point of death. He is so desperate that he literally throws himself on the ground and cries out to God. Many of the pictures of Gethsemane that you see show Jesus on his knees in the garden with his hands folded and his face upraised to heaven with a vaguely pleading look on his face. This is not the picture the text gives. The sense of the Greek suggests that Jesus collapses on the ground in agony. You should imagine a man lying on his face, his hands on his head, his shoulders shaking: "Abba! Father! For you all things are possible! Remove this cup from me!!!"

Not only is the prayer full of faith and passion, it's also anchored in God's promises. "Father, nothing is impossible for you!" In effect Jesus quotes himself. Multiple times in his ministry Jesus has said, 'nothing is impossible with God!' and he has told the disciples that God could give them whatever they asked in prayer! As he faces his death and prays for another way, Jesus claims the promise that the Father has made: "Father, I know you can do this!!! You can change this!!! It's possible for you!!!"

Jesus claiming the promise reminds me of a whole movement in prayer, the movement to claim the promises of God as you pray. People say that God makes great promises in Scripture, and that in our prayer we must boldly claim those promises and we will get results. There is something right about this. Our prayer ought to take its stand on the promises of God; our whole life takes its stand on the promises of God. But for many popular pastors, this claiming of God's promises is touted as a kind of guarantee of success. Name what God promises, claim the power of that promise in faith, and prayer success will be yours. Jesus' prayer in the garden belies that notion. Jesus' faith is deep. His prayer is fervent. Jesus names and claims the promise, but doesn't get what he asks for.

For a moment it seems as though Jesus is as perplexed as we are. For a moment it almost seems as if his prayer isn't just for his situation but for the situation of the whole creation. "Father this whole situation is such a mess! Why does there have to be so much pain! Why does it have to be so hard?! Why does it have to be so brutal? Surely there is another way you could have worked this out!!! Nothing is impossible for you!" Is Jesus praying simply for himself, or for the whole creation, for the whole experience of being human? Isn't there another way? Did it have to be so hard? Did history have to include all that blood?

Whichever it is, it's comforting to know that Jesus understands the problem. The pain of unanswered prayer, the experience of unanswered prayer is part of what Jesus bore on the way to the cross. Jesus knows what we go through. He knows how we feel. We're not alone.

So...our text recognizes the problem, but does it give us any word, any guidance about how to deal with the experience? Actually it does. There are a couple of things Jesus does and says that might help us with our unanswered prayer. First of all, Jesus concludes his request to God by saying, 'Not what I want, but what you want.' Thy will be done, Father. In many ways, when we pray for something, when we ask God to do something, we are suggesting things that God ought to put on his to-do list. We dare make suggestions to God of how he might run the world. And this is OK. God asks us to make such requests. He wants to hear from us, even if he knows about the problems before we even mention them. But would we really want God to take all of our suggestions? Would we really want God to answer all our prayers, every time? If God came and said to you, "I know you are troubled when I don't respond to your prayer the way you want, so from now on, whatever you pray for, in the world, in your life, in the life of your children, whatever you desire, I'll give it to you. You're the boss." Would you want that power? I'm not sure I would. It would be a little bit like a grumbling mailroom worker of a large corporation, someone who complains about the way the company does things, suddenly being offered the job of CEO. Would that be good? In every life there have been prayers that we prayed earnestly and sincerely, places where we really wanted God to act, but where God said "No!" And thank heaven for that. The classic examples here usually revolve around old boyfriends and girlfriends.

When Jesus says, "not what I want, but what you want," it is his way of giving God the Father ultimate say in his life and in the world. It is Jesus saying that ultimately the Father understands what is best for his people and for his creation. Even though we don't understand what on earth he's doing sometimes, given the

choice, we're better off leaving things in His hands. Jesus prayer is a sort of model for us when we pray in the face of immovable situations: Pray boldly. Claim God's promises. Remind God of what He has said. Be specific with your trouble. Tell him all your needs and desires and pains. But then end by putting yourself in His hands, trusting him to take care of all things.

In verse 41-42 Jesus does something else that might help us in our unanswered prayers. After banging on the doors of heaven three times, he comes back to his disciples and sees Judas coming with the soldiers, and he says, "Enough!" Interesting response. Enough? Enough of what? Enough of the prayers of deliverance. Enough hoping that the cup would be taken away. It's as if he realizes that the cup is not going to be taken away from him. It's as if he realizes that there isn't going to be another way. The betrayer is here, the cup hasn't been taken away, so Jesus stands up and gets ready to drink it. For the rest of the story, Jesus will face his fate with patience, love, and continued prayer.

There will be times, when after repeated prayer it begins to look like we are not going to get what we prayed for. The cancer is not going away. The depression is not going to lift. The relationship is not going to be fixed. The war isn't going to end anytime soon. When that realization hits the temptation is to give up. The temptation is to pack in the prayers and give in to cynicism. The temptation is to listen to that little voice that plagued Jerry Sittser: "why even bother talking to God! It doesn't do anything!" But Jesus shows another alternative: keep going and keep praying. Pray harder than ever, but pray now that God will give you the strength to drink the cup you never wanted, and to do it with patience and grace. A miraculous answer to prayer is glorious, but when someone with terminal cancer stays faithful in prayer, and shows patience and grace right to the end, that's every bit as glorious in a completely different way.

I hope all your prayers receive quick and fulfilling answers. For those prayers that aren't answered the way you'd like, may Jesus our Lord, who knows your agony, who knows your confusion, who knows your sadness, hold you firmly and gently. May he speak everlasting promises in your ear, may he give you the strength to accept the hard reality of today, may he fill you with assurance that when your story is done, your end will be glorious.

©Rev. Peter Jonker