

## Why, pt 2 *Why Do My Prayers Go Unanswered?*

2 Corinthians 12: 6 – 10

I believe in the power of prayer... I truly do.

It started to occur to me, however, after reading chapter two of Adam Hamilton's book, ("WHY... Making Sense of God's Will") that while that statement (I believe in the power of prayer) is one that I could have sincerely uttered, really, all my life - especially my 'professional life' as a pastor – exactly *what* I would have meant by that has changed, it has evolved, over the years.

If you were able to go back in time, even just twenty years ago, and if you were to ask me, "Do you believe in the power of prayer?" I would have said, "Of course I do! I'm a pastor!" But, if you continued to press the question, and asked, "So, what does your *prayer life* look like?" Or, "What are your *prayers* about?" an honest answer would have been that my prayer life was very hit or miss, rather formal, and when it got personal, my prayers were almost always about *petitions*. I.e., my prayers mostly consisted of my asking God to do this or that thing for me, or for someone else. As someone put it, rather bluntly, my prayers were mostly "Me trying to tell God how to run things", (or at least strongly *suggesting!*)

Then a watershed event occurred in my spiritual life – which I've shared with you before – it took place about 13 or 14 years ago, at a Pastor's Prayer Summit. I spent two whole days and parts of two others with a group of about 90 pastors, spouses, and church workers, with no agenda other than to pray, read Scripture, sing songs *a capella* (& eat and sleep!) It was a paradigm shifter for me, in that my practice of prayer totally changed that week.

Instead of simply being a means to approach God with a laundry list of needs, prayer started to more become a way to build intimacy with God. Prayer became one of many, but the main means to know God better. Not simply knowing *about* God, but knowing God. Seeking God's face. I was introduced that week to the concept of Spirit-led prayer, in which there is a lot of silence – listening – and not nearly as much talking, waiting for the Holy Spirit to lead to a subject, or to reveal an insight about something (usually about myself or a Scripture passage).

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I didn't know at the time of that first Summit how dramatically that experience would change my life as a disciple of Jesus, but I did realize that week that this kind of prayer was important, that it required time, and that it needed then, to be a disciplined part of my life. And so, I made a covenant with God (and with the people of this church, many of you were here for that message) to set aside a block of time every week (which would be Monday afternoons) to 'get apart' and meet with God. (Its where the name for our website came from!) And, I've pretty much kept that covenant.

Not that this has been hard to do! For me, it has become something like physical exercise – if I don't do it, I miss it! In fact, those two things have converged somewhat, in that my Monday afternoons are typically spent walking through the woods somewhere - sometimes with a raincoat on, sometimes with snowshoes! And, I've expanded this (thank God for dogs!) to include a prayer walk every night, and that, too, has become an important time to end each day, as well as other moments during a typical day that are spent in conversation with God.

I don't share this to try to make you think that I'm some kind of 'super-Christian' or spiritual 'giant' – I'm know I'm not – but I say it to share this with you: my prayer life now, the *prayers* themselves, are very different than, as I suggested, those of 20+ years ago. And I didn't realize *how* different they were until I read this week's chapter in our book!

Last week, in beginning to try and lay a more solid theological foundation for us to understand God's will, we touched on a couple of widely held beliefs about how we relate to God and God to us; beliefs that, I'm convinced (along with Adam Hamilton) are misguided, and even toxic to our faith. We talked about how God's first priority with us is *not* to make us comfortable. The truth is that everyone suffers – the good, the bad, the ugly.

It's not that God *wants* us to suffer, or be miserable, but we are free-willed people who live in a flawed world, a world that is constantly breaking down (and sometimes taking us with it), a world in which there are people (including ourselves) who are making bad decisions all the time that sometimes result in hurt to others, a world in which there is disease, and natural disasters,

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and death. In other words, we live in a world in which things can go wrong, and they often do. And no one is excluded from that.

Next week we'll be looking at a beautiful picture of how, in spite of that, we can approach the unknown future with confidence and joy, not in fear; but for today, I want to think about this very important subject of prayer; and try to answer this question: "What is the point of prayer as we live in a world in which we are not typically protected from bad things happening, from suffering, or from the effects of evil (whether it is our own or someone else's)?" What is the place of prayer?

Let me begin with the typical understanding of prayer that I think most people hold. When people talk about prayer, the first thing that comes to most people's mind are prayers of *petition*. (Which makes sense, as the word 'prayer' itself means to 'ask'!) These are our requests for God to change what would be the normal unfolding of events in this world. The great majority of these petitions are prayers for physical healing, but they can be pretty much about anything that concerns us – prayers for safety and protection, prayers for our family, for a job, for a financial bailout (non-government!), for wisdom, for peace in the midst of storms... there is no limit.

I want to start here because of what I'm going to say next about where I've come to believe the real – i.e., the more significant – power of prayer lies. I don't want you to think that prayers of petition are somehow *wrong*... or even, immature. When Jesus was asked by his disciples to 'teach them to pray' he responded with a prayer that is filled (but not completely) with petitions. "Give us ...", "Lead us...", "forgive us", etc. The Scripture says that often, "We have not because we do not ask!" (An invitation, I should add, that comes in a context in which we are urged to 'ask for wisdom' if we lack it.)

Paul, the great leader of the early church, as we saw in the Scripture reading today, prayed *three times* for a 'thorn in his flesh' to be healed. That prayer was not answered as he had hoped (meaning, God's answer was 'no'), but notice for now, that he felt it perfectly OK to ask for it! Jesus healed many people and then promised that the same power (and greater) would belong to his followers in the future church, and that we would continue doing his work in the world to

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come. I want to say this as clearly as possible: it is OK – no, *vital* – for us to lift our needs to God, and to do so with the expectation that God hears us.

Paul says, “Cast your cares on him, for he cares for you!” I don’t know how we could do that without *praying for ourselves*. Specifically! (How else can we ‘cast our cares’ on God?) When I anoint people (whether at our Saturday night service, or in a hospital, or your home) I do it out of obedience to James 5:14, and I do it trusting that God will bring healing – *in some way or other*. In addition to that, I have seen *many, many* examples of God’s responses to prayers that I cannot explain in any other manner other than to believe that God... healed. God intervened. God changed things. I’ve seen it, and so have you.

But, Adam Hamilton reminds us of an important fact: there’s a reason we call them ‘miracles’, and that is because they are out of the realm of nature. They are then, *uncommon*, even rare. As many of these ‘miraculous’ stories I could tell you from my experience, there are many *more* that turned out quite differently than what I was asking for. And that result should be obvious – we can pray for healing, but we *all* die, eventually.

Paul’s prayer for healing was answered with a promise from Christ that he would instead be given the strength to endure this ‘thorn’, and that even beyond that, God would be glorified in his weakness. That is a key verse toward a healthy theology of prayer. The ultimate end of everything is the glory of God. God was more concerned about shaping Paul’s character through his circumstances than he was in making him comfortable. And to this man who himself healed many, God’s answer to his this request, was “No, I have something else in mind for you.”

Hamilton makes another important observation as well – when he points out that many, and perhaps *most* of our prayer requests, if they are answered directly, are answered *through other people*.

He uses the example of how his church sends mission teams to African villages to dig wells for clean drinking water. When they do this, he says, they become the answer to the prayers of those villagers. It is people, moved by God to respond! That’s how their prayers are answered.

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\*\* There is a terrible famine that is currently gripping the people of Somalia in Eastern Africa. I read this week that 30,000 children have already died. A half a million refugees. Growing daily. Think about that. Every one of them has a family... parents, brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles. 30,000 children died already, and more each day.

We blame this tragedy on a drought – and some blame God. But drought doesn't cause famine, friends. *People* cause famine. Drought causes a disruption in the food supply, but there is still enough food to go around. When Jesus walked this earth, he fed people. What would God's will be in this? As the world (FUMC?) responds to this great need, we will become the answer to the desperate prayers of these starving people. God is not likely going to drop manna from heaven to feed these them... but I know the Spirit is calling hearts to care.

Now, does this mean that God is not involved? Is this God answering prayers or not? This is where the greatest change has taken place in my own prayers! I'm coming to the belief that the *main* purpose of prayer is to change *us*. Yes, as I've said, for purposes that God alone understands, to advance the Kingdom, or to demonstrate his power, God will do occasionally something miraculous. God will intervene in nature. But more often than not, God works through natural means: through medical science, through the amazing healing powers of our own bodies, and *through the compassionate acts of his people*. Especially those who are sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. A sensitivity that comes through... prayer!

As we spend time with God – intimate times of listening, interacting, sharing – God's heart is 'opened' to us. We begin to see the world that God sees, and we are moved to action. God moves us to respond, to do something other than just observe. And we then, become part of the cycle of God's hearing and responding to prayer. *We* become a vital link in the way God answers prayer.

As I've come to see this in my own life, as I'm realizing that my prayers today are so much about trying to discern the leading of the Spirit in my life, trying to be conformed to the mind of Christ in my ministry, trying to be 'available' to God... my mind went back to something that I saw over 10 years ago in our visit to Israel. Our group stood on a hilltop in the city of Jerusalem...(I wish I could remember the exact location, but it doesn't really matter!)

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\*\* And our guide pointed out to the distant mountains in the east, as how one mountain was shaped very differently than the others. All the others looked like... well, like *mountains*. Inverted, “Vs”, sharp contours.

But there was one that was clearly *flat* on top, as if some giant had come along and sheered the top right off – kind of like a volcano. And our guide told us, in fact, that something very interesting happened there, but it wasn't a volcano! King Herod the Great wanted a summer palace, and with the ‘help’ of many slaves, he built one about 30 miles from Jerusalem, on a rather flat topped mountain. He named it Herodium in honor of himself! But then, he literally dug out another nearby hill, and carted it to Herodium, to build up the foundation around his fortress, giving it the conical shape that can still be easily seen from Jerusalem. This made Herodium \*\* nearly impenetrable to his enemies. He eventually was buried there! Here's a picture of an aerial view of the site.

Now, here's the thing... our guide suggested that it was this mountain fortress of Herod that Jesus was looking at when he said to his disciples: “If you have faith like a mustard seed, you can say to that mountain, ‘move’, and it will.” It was an illustration that was right there in front of them, and the people all knew about that came to be. The people knew the story! What never occurred to me until this week, was that Jesus was pointing to something in this prayer promise that was actually *man-made*. And the people knew it!

So, one Jesus' most direct and pointed prayer promises (which Hamilton refers to as *hyperbole*) was in reference to something that the people who heard him say it, *knew* was the work of a man... I wonder if there is a hint of something else here?

That perhaps, more than anything else, prayer moves and changes *people*. It changes *us*.

My prayers, these days, look like this: There are some specific requests that I boldly make, with faith, recognizing that God will on occasion, act in a way that shows his Glory to the world and circumventing the natural order. But for the most part, I realize that God is going to allow events in this world to unfold naturally. (I.e., God will, more often than not, say ‘no’ to my requests.)

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**But**, I believe those prayers (i.e., the ones that are answered ‘no’) are *still* heard, and that God uses them – and the circumstances we are praying for – to help us better understand his love, grace and presence with us in all things. Those prayers bring wisdom, hope, comfort, and relief (and in that sense, they *are* always answered).

I believe that our sincere prayers move us to action as we catch a glimpse of God’s own heart. I believe that prayers for wisdom are *always* answered – but we won’t necessarily like, or readily accept the wisdom that God gives, in our still-fallen state. I believe that prayer is a means of grace, a wonderful, soul-washing, joy-filling time where God sends us his ‘peace that passes all understanding’ even in the most troubling of circumstances.

And it is through prayer that we learn to love God, our neighbors, *ourselves*, and the world... as Charles Wesley’s great hymn suggests,

*“Prayer is the Christian’s vital breath, the Christians’ native air;  
their watchword at the gates of death; they enter heaven with prayer.”*<sup>1</sup>

May we breath deeply the breath of faith... and gain the heart of God.

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<sup>1</sup> “Prayer Is the Soul’s Sincere Desire”