

The Mystery of Unanswered Prayer

Sermon of 2020-11-22

By Major Brian Coles

[slide 1] Unsolved Mysteries is a TV program using a documentary format to profile real-life mysteries and features reenactments of unsolved crimes, missing persons, and conspiracy theories. You can still see reruns of the show on cable. But the greatest unsolved mystery never seen on that show is

[slide 2] the mystery of unanswered prayer. And I want to acknowledge Philancey, Bill Hybels, Richard Foster, and C.S. Lewis for their wise insights into this perplexing issue.

When it comes to the mystery of unanswered prayer there are no simplistic answers. 11.24 when Jesus says, "I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." So what can we say about the mystery of unanswered prayer?

[slide 3, blank] From the outset we must acknowledge that any answers we give are only partial. We are living under the mystery of God's ways and, as the apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Cor. 13.12, at present, we are looking through a mirror dimly. Only when Jesus appears will we fully know, even as we are fully known.

So we acknowledge from the outset that there is indeed a mystery as to why some prayers are answered and others are not. Take for example Corrie ten Boom tells of a miraculous little bottle of vitamins in her Nazi concentration camp

that kept yielding life-preserving drops for her sister as well as for 2 dozen cellmates' long after it should have run out.

But later in Corrie's book we read that Betsie died at the Ravensbrück camp. Did God answer a prayer about vitamins and not about Betsie?

Phil Yancey writes, "Somehow we must offer our prayers with a humility that conveys gratitude without triumphalism, and compassion without manipulation, always respecting the mystery surrounding prayer." [Prayer: does it make any difference? p.221].

This morning we will seek to discover some of the reasons why prayers go unanswered. Once we've discovered some of the reasons why prayers go unanswered, we'll look at one key insight we can take away with us

as we come face to face with this perplexing mystery. What then, are some of the reasons why our prayers go unanswered?

[slide 4] Some prayers go unanswered because they are frivolous.

"Lord, I pray it will not rain on the day of our corps picnic" can be a frivolous prayer. Or, "O Lord, help me pass this exam" will not likely be answered if the student hasn't bothered to study. It's a frivolous prayer.

[slide 5] Some prayers go unanswered because they are better off left unanswered.

As a child, Amy Carmichael prayed for God to change her eyes from brown to blue. Later, as a missionary in India,

she was grateful for brown eyes, which made her less foreign and intimidating to Indian children.

[slide 6] Some prayers go unanswered because they are self-contradictory.

These are the "Lord, grant me patience and grant it NOW" kind of prayers.

[slide 7] Some prayers go unanswered to open a door to something far better.

Edith Schaeffer, the daughter of missionaries, tells of Dr. Hoste, the successor to Hudson Taylor as director of China Inland Mission,

praying daily on a walk that lasted 4 hours as he prayed for each missionary and their children by name.

Within a few years Chairman Mao Tse Tung would evict all 7,000 missionaries from China, including all those for whom Hoste prayed.

They relocated to places like the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Singapore, dismayed at what would happen to the fledgling church in China now without any missionaries.

Yet, in their absence, under a dictatorial regime that forbade X'n evangelism, the greatest revival in history took place.

What happened in China, and is happening even today, exceeded all the prayer requests of the missionaries in the 1950's.

[slide 8] Some prayers go unanswered because if answered, they would do us in.

We simply are not ready for what we have asked.

In cases such as these it is God's grace and mercy that prevent our prayers from being answered. He does this for our good.

As C.S. Lewis writes in his *Letters to Malcolm*, "If God had granted all the silly prayers I've made in my life, where should I be now?" [p.28].

To follow up on that thought, what do you suppose would happen if God did answer every prayer?

The movie *Bruce Almighty* illustrates for us what would happen if God answered our every prayer.

Bruce Nolan (played by Jim Carrey), a TV reporter from Buffalo, NY, rages against God after a series of mishaps.

"He could fix my life in 5 minutes if he wanted to," Bruce complains.

Summoned to an abandoned building, home of Omni Presents Inc., Bruce encounters God himself (played by Morgan Freeman),

who has decided to let Bruce try being God for a week to see if he can improve matters.

Bruce uses his divine power impulsively, and like a genie, issues commands to clear a path in traffic for his new sports car,

to get his dog to use the toilet correctly, to get revenge on fellow employees and on the thugs who once beat him up.

To impress his girlfriend, he lassoes the moon and pulls it nearer the earth in order to enhance the romantic mood – simultaneously causing a tidal wave in Japan.

He hears thousands of prayers in his head all at once, just from people living in Buffalo, never mind the rest of the world, and tries to deal with the avalanche of requests.

In short, Bruce Almighty learns an appreciation for the complexity of prayer as well as a new humility and sense of inadequacy.

Immature and finite persons, like the fictional Bruce Almighty, soon realize that we lack the wisdom

to balance free will, divine intervention, and self-sacrifice, the way Jesus demonstrated while on earth.

Some prayers go unanswered because if answered, they would do us in. We simply are not ready for what we have asked.

We can also take some measure of comfort from the fact that the Bible includes numerous prayers that went unanswered. For example...

[slide 9] Some prayers go unanswered because of dark powers contending against God's rule.

The prophet Daniel experienced this as he was praying to understand the purposes of God for his people.

In c.10 of his book, a messenger from heaven was sent to answer Daniel but was delayed 21 days by the angel prince of Persia.

And the conflict envisaged is not one with flesh and blood, but against principalities, powers, the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places,

which is what Paul the apostle points out in Eph. 6.12, and is a conflict we are engaged in too.

[slide 10] Some prayers go unanswered because we know little of the ways of God.

As the Lord says in Isa. 55, “My ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts are higher than your thoughts.”

We see a prime example of this in Lk. 9.54 when Jesus’ disciples wanted to rain down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village but Jesus had other plans at that moment.

[slide 11] Some prayers go unanswered because of unconfessed sin.

In Ps. 66.18 we read, “If I cherish sin in my heart,” in other words, if I’m leading a life of disobedience to God, “the Lord will not hear my prayer.”

And Isaiah tells us in 59.2, “Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.”

If those passages aren’t sobering enough, listen to this one from Peter the apostle in 1 Pt. 3.7,

“Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way... Show her honour... so that your prayers won’t be hindered.”

O.K.! That may explain a lot of things right there.

Often, the only obstacle standing in the way of us receiving an answer to our prayers is us. Unconfessed sin hinders answers to your prayers.

[slide 12] Some prayers go unanswered because of prayerlessness.

James writes in 4.2 of his letter to the church, “You do not have, because you do not ask God.”

You may think about praying, you may have good intentions about prayer, but you hardly ever pray.

[slide 13] Some prayers go unanswered because of selfishness.

Jms. 4.3 says, “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”

[slide 14] Some prayers go unanswered because of uncaring attitudes.

Prov. 21.13 says, “Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor, will also cry out and not be answered.”

And the Bible contains numerous other prayers made by people we consider spiritual giants that went unanswered.

[slide 15, blank] After leading the Israelites through the wilderness for 40 years, Moses pled with God to allow him to accompany them across the Jordan River into the Promised Land before he died.

But In Dt. 34 we read that God refused his request. In 2 Sam. 12 King David spent a week praying that his infant son not die. That prayer went unanswered.

Job, Jonah, and Elijah all prayed to die. Fortunately for them, God ignored their prayers. Habakkuk prayed for deliverance from the Babylonians. Jeremiah prayed that Jerusalem would not be destroyed. Both prayers went unanswered.

In his most famous unanswered prayer in 2 Cor. 12, Paul the apostle pleaded with the Lord 3 times to remove his ‘thorn in the flesh’ but to no avail.

[slide 16] In view of all this, C.S. Lewis’ offers this pertinent observation about prayer. He said, “The essence of request, as distinct from compulsion, is that it may or may not be granted. And if an infinitely wise Being listens to the requests of finite and foolish creatures, of course He will sometimes grant and sometimes refuse them.

Invariable (or consistent) “success” in prayer would not prove the Christian doctrine at all. It would prove something much more like magic.” [C.S. Lewis, *The Worlds’ Last Night*, pp.4-5]

While none of these reasons for unanswered prayer may satisfy us completely, there is one key insight we can take away with us as we come face to face with the mystery of unanswered prayer.

[slide 17] And that key insight is...**Wait for the Lord and trust in him.**

Hear well these words from the prophet Isaiah. “I will **wait** for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the descendants of Jacob. I will put my **trust** in him” 8.17.

Isaiah is saying to his people and to us, “Regardless of whether he answers your prayers or not, keep your focus on God and continue living for him. He is your Immanuel; God-with-you. He will be your sanctuary; your place of security and confidence. And know this: a day is coming when God’s face will no longer be hidden from us.

Though we live with the mystery of unanswered prayer, we can still be faithful to God, trusting that he will fulfill his promises in his own way and time. So wait for the Lord and trust in him. The very act of waiting can work to develop in us qualities of patience, persistence, endurance, submission, and trust.

[slide 18, blank] As Phil Yancey says, “It may take more faith to trust God when we do not get what we ask for than when we do.” As human beings we tend to be much more concerned about comfort and convenience than we are about building character through patiently waiting for and trusting in God.

I think God is a whole lot more concerned about character than he is about instant gratification and personal convenience. And sometimes the prayers that are most gratifying to have answered are the ones that you have entrusted to God for a long, long time.

Isn’t that what Hebrews 11 is all about? That long list of heroes “were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised” [11.39]. No matter how bleak circumstances may be for you, you can trust the fact that God is in control and he will fulfill his promises in his own way and time.

So wait for and trust in the Lord.

“Teach me, O God, to use all the circumstances of my life today that they may bring forth in me the fruits of holiness rather than the fruits of sin”

prayed Scottish theologian and minister John Baillie, in his classic devotional book my dad gave me many years ago.

Let me use disappointment as material for patience, success as material for thankfulness, trouble as material for perseverance, danger as material for courage, reproach as material for long suffering, praise as material for humility, pleasures as material for temperance, and pain as material for endurance.”

I know this message may not satisfy completely the anxiety you have over unanswered prayer.

But, as Richard Foster points out, it may encourage you to know that we have a God who, in the darkness of Gethsemane, bore the weight of unanswered prayer. And who, in his moment of greatest agony, shared our perplexing question as he cried out from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The final word this morning goes to Paul the apostle.

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” writes Paul in Rms.

11.

“How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

“Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?”

“Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.” (11.33-36)

Members of the band are going to come and sing a song written by Albert Orsborn in 1935 while he was Chief Secretary for TSA in New Zealand at a time of great stress and anxiety in his own life; a time when he cried out to God in prayer.

As the band members sing, allow the words and music to be the means of grace by which God ministers to you this morning as we live with the mystery of unanswered prayer.

[Song 767 / 383, Jesus, hear my humble pleading. 776 / 755, Meet my need, Lord, if needed].

Now I want to encourage all of us in our prayer lives with one final reference to prayer. It's the model prayer that Jesus gave us.

Let's pray it aloud together as we conclude this morning. "Our Father, who art in heaven..."