

# Chapter 20

## February 16, 1997

In one of our earliest studies in the Bible's doctrine and practice of prayer, we considered whether prayer actually effected things in the real world; whether prayer changed things. And we considered how it does in fact change things, bringing the sovereign God, who works out all things according to the counsel of his will, to do what otherwise he would not. At that time, in connection with that question, we briefly discussed the fact that our prayers are not always answered, at least we do not always get what we ask God for.

And, from time to time throughout this series of studies, we have had cause to notice that the Bible qualifies God's promise to hear and answer our prayers in various ways. Certain prayers will not be heard, in other words, because of one thing or another, one defect or another: the prayer is not made with right motives or it is not offered in accordance with God's will. And we have had reason to look at certain prominent examples of prayers that were prayed but were certainly properly prayed that did not produce the result the one praying had hoped for. A chief among all of those examples is, of course, our Lord's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Tonight I want to consider separately *the question of unanswered prayer*. Now, as we said several months ago, in considering the requirement of importunate or persevering prayer, many times God makes us wait to see the issue or answer of our prayers and he has his holy reasons for making us wait. But, tonight I want to consider unanswered prayer in the more ex-

treme case, that prayer that God does not answer at all, at least not in our lifetime. What are we to think when God never does what we ask of him and, particularly, in those cases where we have every reason to believe that we are asking according to his will. I don't mean that we are asking what we know he has decreed to do — of course not — but that we are asking what we know we ought to ask and that is according to his revealed will.

*Read: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10*

We begin by noting the obvious tension created in our thinking about prayer, in our faith in the power of prayer, by the admission, based on this text and many others, that God may not, in fact, give us what we ask for. For the Scripture *does say* “ask and it shall be given you” and “whatever you ask in my Name, it shall be given you.”

There are many Christian preachers, they tend to be the kind that dominate Christian television and radio, who seem to want nothing to do with a text like this. They speak endlessly about “agreeing with their listeners” in some prayer or another and do not hesitate to assure them that such a prayer of “agreement” will be heard (the unspoken, but barely unspoken, implication is often that it will even more certainly be heard if some money is sent along with the prayer request — which, as we learned from ABC news a few years back, may be taken out of the envelope by the bank with the prayer request forwarded directly to the dumpster out back). They seem to think that even to admit that God's Word indicates that He will not hear all the requests of his people and will not give them all they ask for is to play the unbeliever and to threaten the whole system of faith in God.

But the Bible is simply too candid to be mistaken on this point. Some prayers, even some prayers rightly offered in the right spirit by a godly man or woman, will not bring that man or woman what was prayed for.

I want this evening to set out two reasons, surely the most important two reasons why this is so, and in this way, to harmonize this fact of unanswered prayer with all else that we have learned of the life of prayer in our studies so far.

For, fact is, as C.S. Lewis put it so plainly, “Prayer is request. 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.”

What the television preachers lack, in all of their talk about agreeing with their listeners in this prayer or that and in all of their assuring of them that they will have what they have together asked for, is a true Christian modesty that respects the vast difference between God's wisdom and ours, between his purposes and ours, between his concerns and ours, between the perfection of his motives and ours.

**I. The first reason why God sometimes does not give what we ask him for — he very often does, but not always — is so that his interests in our lives might be served.**

This is the burden of the text we have read. Paul's longing to be rid of his thorn in the flesh (what? physical (returning malarial fever; poor eyesight; spiritual?) was entirely natural and appropriate. The Lord certainly does not condemn the request.

But, God had purposes in that affliction that could not be served, or could not be adequately served by its removal. In fact, as the text indicates, it was supremely necessary for Paul to suffer this affliction and not to be relieved of it.

First, he needed the thorn to humble him. He was a man to whom God had given great gifts — a towering intellect; perhaps the most influential mind that has ever put thoughts on paper in the history of the world. God had also given Paul great and unique privileges, especially this vision of heaven itself, which Paul has referred to earlier in the chapter (v. 2). He was given to see things that no one else has ever seen while in this world and that sight was so enthralling that God knew it would be simply impossible for Paul to maintain his spiritual balance, to remain humble before God and man — having been given such a vision, if that privilege was not counter-balanced by something designed to lower him, to bring him back down to earth, to put him, in relation to other men, in a position of inferiority and disadvantage. And so God appointed this thorn, whatever it was, and no doubt it was exactly suited to produce the spiritual results in Paul that God intended. It is hard to think too highly of yourself, no matter what your visions may have been, your privileges, your gifts, your great influence and reputation, if you had the thorn that Paul had!

Second, he needed this thorn if he was to demonstrate in his life the principle of grace, of dependence upon God, that God wanted him both fully to understand and persuasively to proclaim to the church of all the ages. He

had to be weak himself, if he were to demonstrate God's power being made perfect in his own weakness. If he were to teach Christians to delight in their weakness so that Christ's power might rest on them, he had to be weak himself.

And, of course, we know, from our own experience, how necessary this was for Paul and how necessary it will be for us to be taught this lesson the hard way.

Fact is, Paul's mentality is rare. One meets many more professing and practicing Christians who glory in their strength than who glory in their weaknesses, even though it should be in their weaknesses that Christ's power is most gloriously revealed in their lives. This strange paradox of the Christian mentality — preferring to admit weaknesses rather than to call attention to strengths — so as to leave maximum room for the demonstration of divine power in one's life, is a mark of real Christian maturity. And it is rare. You rarely see it, even though it is clearly the consistently biblical and Christian mentality, because it is based upon the theological principles of our absolute dependence upon the grace of God and upon his faithfulness to his promises to meet us in our needs.

When he first began to pray for the removal of his thorn, Paul, of course, did not know that his thorn had been given him for this purpose. He, to be sure, had a great advantage over us. God came to him and explained the refusal and the need for it. We are not given such explanations today. But we are given Paul's history to teach us why we are refused from time to time and what kind of purpose God has in that refusal.

Once Paul knew that his life could not be all that God wanted it to be and the church needed it to be unless he lived *with* his thorn, he accepted his lot, difficult as it no doubt proved to be. Too many Christians today imagine that the only glory God gets is in relieving us of our distresses and granting us our wants. But, he is still more glorified in the faith and the loyalty of his children who trust him even when he slays them or, at least, refuses to give them what they have wanted so desperately.

The simple truth is that we do not ask for thorns but we need them. We do ask for their removal, but we could never be what God intends us to be without them. We want primarily to be happy. God wants us to be holy and knows that in some cases our happiness must be sacrificed to our holiness. And so he refuses certain requests we make of him. To give what we ask

would be to surrender his aspirations for us. This he will not and cannot do — his love will not permit him. We imagine that we could become the same Christians by prosperity that we can become through adversity, but God, who alone knows what we can and cannot become, says “No.” You must suffer to be holy and I suit your sufferings to your own soul with an infinite knowledge of exactly what is required.

And wise Christians remember this in evaluating the return of their prayers. Here is Amy Carmichael:

From prayer that asks that I may be  
Sheltered from winds that beat on Thee,  
From fearing when I should aspire,  
From faltering when I should climb higher,  
From silken self, O Captain, free  
Thy soldier who would follow Thee.

From subtle love of softening things,  
From easy choices, weakenings,  
(Not thus are spirits fortified,  
Not this way went the Crucified),  
From all that dims Thy Calvary  
O Lamb of God, deliver me.

*She is as much asking God never to answer a one of her prayers that asks for what will make her less a Christian!*

And in retrospect, another poet expresses the same point:

He asked for strength that he might achieve,  
He was made weak that he might obey.  
He asked for health that he might do great things;  
He was given infirmity that he might do better things.

He asked for riches that he might be happy;  
He was given poverty that he might be wise.  
He asked for power that he might have the praise of men;  
He was given weakness that he might feel the power of God.

He asked for all things that he might enjoy life;

He was given life that he might enjoy all things.  
He received nothing that he asked, all that he hoped for:  
His prayer is answered.

In other words, faith is sure that God refuses with a smile; that He says “No” in the spirit of “Yes” and He gives or refuses always in Christ, our Great Amen. [Forsyth, The Soul of Prayer, p. 67]

**II. But there is a second reason why God does not answer some of the prayers that his children pray, faithful, earnest prayers they are right to pray.**

The refusal of those prayers is not only for our present good and the fulfillment of God’s purposes in our lives in this world. Those prayers are also added to the accumulated prayers of the church, which have their answer in due time, if not in your time or mine.

Stephen prayed for his persecutors and that prayer was answered in the conversion of Paul, but after Stephen was already in heaven. The prayers of the early church, for example, in obedience to Paul’s command in 1 Tim. 2:2 — prayers for rulers, that kings may come to the knowledge of the truth so that the church might live in peace, were finally answered in the days of Constantine and later. One sows, another reaps, as the Bible says.

There is, you see, as the Roman Catholics think, a common treasury of the church — not of merits, but of prayers. There are bottles of tears and of prayers with tears now being filled in heaven. What a collection of prayers through these ages are already now in those bottles. May that not be why God is going to do such great things at the end of the age — great things in the salvation of the church; great things in the judgment of the wicked — because there will be by then such a great stock of prayers offered through the centuries which are yet to be answered.

*We can see this easily enough if we are speaking of prayers for the Lord’s return; for the conversion of Israel; for the vindication of God’s people; for the return of Christ; etc.* But, may it not be just as true in the case of many prayers we pray of a more personal and individual sort in this world? Your life, your prayers, your struggles — are they not also part of the plan for this world, the unfolding of its history, a piece of this perfect puzzle of providence, a part of the weave of the fabric of history that is, in the infinite wisdom of God, connected with every other part. Your prayers that are answered and

your prayers that are refused all have their place not only in the outcome of the moment, but in leading all of human life and human history to its appointed end.

And then beyond!

When all is accomplished and all fulfilled and you are in heaven with the saints, your joy will be the greater for all the prayers you prayed — proper, faithful prayers — that were refused. When you trusted in God and loved Him despite his refusal, you were storing up treasure for yourself in heaven. And while, in the midst of some sorrow or disappointment or frustration, that may seem too small a reward, *when you are there*, you will not think so! As the Scripture says, the works of the righteous follow them to heaven (Rev. 14:13). And chief among those works are certainly their faithful prayers.

Jesus speaks of his disciples, (John 4:38): “I sent you to reap for what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.” Think of all the generations of the faithful remnant who believed and prayed through many centuries for the coming of the Messiah and the deliverance of his people and died in disappointment. But Jesus calls all of that praying they did “sowing and hard work.” Now those prayers are coming good. Now, we think at first that we would rather be among the reapers than the sowers. And that is natural enough and perfectly proper in one sense. But, then Jesus says that, at last the sower and the reaper will be glad together. And, do you doubt that in heaven, it will be the sower, not the reaper who is regarded to have done the better work, because the harder work, as Jesus himself says.

Our prayers must never be separated in our minds and hearts from God’s work and sovereign rule in the world. Christ’s desperate prayer for himself in the garden — absolutely right for him to pray — was refused for higher reasons and that refusal was the means to blessing for all generations of mankind.

We should be just as sure that our heavenly Father never refuses our requests except he has a higher purpose, a holier purpose, a great love to fulfill. And this must be enough for us; sufficient satisfaction until the Great Day dawns and all is made clear.