

Christian Doubts No. 7**Psalm 42:1-11; Psalm 43:1-5****“Unanswered Prayer”****July 24, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We are considering these Lord’s Day evenings the various reasons Christians struggle with doubts about their faith. Perhaps all along the way, perhaps at a particular point in time, perhaps because others whose opinion matters to them – university professors, college friends, a favorite author, perhaps the culture in general – have cast doubt about one aspect or another of the Christian faith, perhaps because doubts have risen unbidden in the mind, a Christian man or woman struggles to believe that *what the Bible says is true*. This part or piece of the faith or all of it is brought into question. Can I still believe this; *should* I still believe it?

So far we have taken some time to consider one of the doctrines that more than many others causes doubts to rise in the minds of even usually sturdy Christians, viz. the teaching that the unsaved are condemned to eternal punishment. “I can’t believe in a God who would send people to hell,” is a statement that has been made by a great many people who never professed the Christian faith, but as well by too many people who *once* professed the Christian faith but gave it up, ostensibly because the very idea of eternal punishment offended them. But the biblical teaching about hell has also troubled a great many Christians who nevertheless remained Christians, sometimes almost against their will. Hell was a problem for them, but they found, at last, that they couldn’t abandon the Lord Jesus, or his Word, or his cross, or the life that would have to be given up if they were no longer to confess him their Savior and Lord. Perhaps they simply stopped thinking about hell, perhaps they imagined they could deny this while at the same time affirming everything else. Whatever the case, hell was a problem for them and it weakened their confidence in the truth of the Word of God which, of course, speaks very clearly about hell.

We said in considering the Bible’s teaching about eternal punishment that much of the problem that people have with hell is rooted in a serious misunderstanding of the Bible’s teaching about it. What troubles people is more often than not a caricature of the biblical doctrine rather than the real thing. We pointed out that when the Bible is warning us about the real danger of punishment in the world to come it uses fearful imagery – it wants us to fear a future apart from God, to fear the judgments of the Lord –; but when it speaks to the question of the justice of divine punishment, it is considerably more circumspect, measured, and detailed. We noted, among other things, that the Scripture is careful to teach that everyone will get *exactly what he or she deserves* in hell, nothing more, nothing less. It was Jesus himself, who employed more often than any other biblical writer the fearsome, even revolting imagery of torment to describe hell, who, nevertheless taught us that in the world to come some will be beaten with many stripes, some with a few. We do not and cannot say precisely what life in hell will be like – we can’t, for that matter, really say what life in heaven will be like – but we know that there will be perfect and discriminating justice; the punishment will fit the crime. That, of course, is a much harder view of hell to find objectionable! Very few people reject the very idea of hell who have a clear view of its varying measures of punishment and of the proper way to read the imagery employed to describe hell.

The last time we considered another fact of life that has often troubled believers: the fact that so many people in human history never heard the gospel – lived and died without ever hearing of life in Jesus Christ – and, in that sense, it seems never had a chance to be saved. How can that be just or fair, we think, for people to be condemned who were never even told what God expected of them or how they might be saved? Again we argued that such a way of thinking about things fundamentally misconstrues the problem. No one, not a single human being, has ever failed to find salvation because he or she never heard. *Hearing is never the ultimate issue!* Multitudes hear and do not believe. In fact, the whole world could hear and still no one believe. The ears of all human beings are stopped by sin and by their heart of rebellion against God. God must give grace, he must open the ears, he must send his Spirit into the heart, he must grant the new birth, he must create faith in Christ in a sinner’s soul, and he does so for all he intends to save. Indeed, those who never heard were, in the nature of the case, those who *would never have believed*. It was God’s kindness to them to keep them in the dark, because now they will have less to answer for on the Day of Judgment. God was not going to save them – he was going to leave them in the sins they had chosen for themselves, leave them to their proud, selfish, and disobedient life – but he made sure that their punishment would be less severe by not allowing them to reject his gospel, *as they certainly would have done*. You may be detecting a theme. So much of our doubts are the result of a failure to appreciate what the Bible actually teaches. *Bad theology is the soil in which doubt flourishes in a Christian’s life!* How many are there who will charge God with a fault for saving multitudes of those who would not believe in him anyway from a more severe judgment?

Tonight I want to take up another common objection and so a cause of doubt for many Christians and, alas, a reason that more than a few professing Christians have given up their faith. Indeed, I think this one even more common than the first two. I want to speak to you tonight, and, Lord willing, next Lord’s Day evening as well, about the challenge to faith posed by *unanswered prayer*. More than a few people have been to see me as their pastor struggling with just this problem: “God promised to hear my prayers and he has not done so!” And very often, the prayers God has not answered inevitably concern matters of the deepest personal importance. No wonder then God’s failure to answer provokes an existential crisis of faith. Many Christians will say, many have said to me, that they sought for months if not for years to offer God a prayer he would be pleased to grant, and still the heavens remained as brass above them.

I’ve confessed my sins because the Bible says that if I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear me.

I have sought to purify my motives because James warns me that my prayers will not be heard if I pray with the unworthy motives.

I have tried very much to pray for what would be pleasing to God, because the Lord teaches himself that we must ask *according to his will*.

But, fact is, I’m sure I’m right to ask the Lord for what I have been praying for; it is the sort of thing he has even taught me to desire in his Word; I’m sure that giving it to me would reflect well on the Lord and give him glory, *but still the windows of heaven remain firmly shut*.

I've prayed for a husband or a wife and, though God has told me it is not good for a man (or woman) to be alone, he has not answered my prayer. I've prayed for a happy marriage, one that fulfills God's plan and purpose for marriage – surely *that* is his will – but my marriage still leaves as much to be desired as it did years ago. I've prayed for a sick child and he or she remains sick. I've prayed to have a child, for a family, and though he has commanded me to be fruitful and multiply I cannot conceive a child. I have prayed for a better job or a different job or a certain job and though any person's work is such a large part of his or her life and though God wants me to work, the Lord has not answered my prayer. I prayed for deliverance from a sin that has bedeviled me, a sin over which I have wept many times, a sin that has darkened my relationship with God, a sin that has covered me with shame – and surely the Lord wants me to conquer that sin – but still he has not heard my prayer. I've prayed for the salvation of a loved one or a friend – what gives God more glory than the salvation of a sinner? – and he or she is as uninterested in the gospel as ever. And so it goes.

An unbeliever listens to us and very naturally thinks: what is wrong with these people? Are they morons? They are talking to the ceiling expecting someone to answer. You perhaps remember Neil Diamond's hit song, "I am, I said." Diamond wrote most of his own songs, both words and music, and that was unfortunate because a poet he was not. At one point in the song, meant to express his loneliness as he, a New Yorker, lives and works in Los Angeles far from home, he sings,

"I am, I said, to no one there, and no one heard at all, not even the chair."

The humorist, Dave Barry, once sponsored in his syndicated column a contest to choose the worst popular songs of all time. This Neil Diamond song made it to the finals. Dave Barry wondered if Neil Diamond regularly spoke to his furniture and, more important, whether he expected the furniture to reply! Was he surprised that his chair hadn't heard him? Well, the unbeliever thinks the Christian is doing something equally foolish. We talk to God, but he never replies, or rarely replies, perhaps, it might seem, no more than mere coincidence could account for. Who is to say that God is listening at all?

And, what makes that question more urgent still is that virtually every Christian asks it at one time or another. It is a universal experience of the Christian life, this sense Christians get sooner or later that, as C.S. Lewis put it, they are posting letters to a non-existent address. I'm sure those of you who have been Christians for any length of time have wondered, in various degrees of anxiety or frustration, *why God has not heard and answered my prayers!* I certainly have!

One reason I know that is true – that you all have struggled with this question yourselves – is because it is so regularly a phenomenon of believing life *in the Bible*. Everywhere we turn there are people, even heroes of the life of faith, who are wondering this very same thing: why has God not heard and answered my prayers?

Sometimes Christians attempt to solve the problem by saying, "Well, God did hear my prayers, and he answered my prayers, but he said, 'No.'" But that won't work. What we mean by

“answer” and what the Bible means by “answer” is God giving us what we ask for. Think of such promises as these:

1. “If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my father in heaven.” Matt. 18:19
2. “Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it.” John 14:13

This is the situation the author of Psalm 42 and 43, originally a single psalm as the repeated refrain makes clear and as the absence of a title for Psalm 43 confirms, finds himself in. He is in trouble, a trouble he only generally describes. But that is not his first and foremost problem. The real problem is that he has cried out to God and nothing has happened. He has appealed to God for help and his situation has remained unchanged. He knows God is in control of his situation, even that his problems are God’s will for his life at this particular moment – “all *your* breakers and your waves have gone over me” – but it seems to this man that God has completely forgotten him and has paid no attention to his prayer. In fact, he is conscious of the fact that his faith in God is now mocked by his enemies precisely because it, so obviously, isn’t doing him any good. “...my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, ‘Where is your God? (He’s supposed to answer your prayers. Where is he)?’” He wishes he could answer their taunt, but he is wondering the same thing himself: “Where are you God?” He tells himself not to be cast down, but the silence of heaven means that he has to continue to say the same thing to himself, over and over again, because it doesn’t seem that God is taking any interest in his situation.

So, let’s not make the mistake of supposing that this situation – the cause of so many Christian doubts – is unusual or uncommon or rare. It is the stuff of the Psalms because it is the stuff of believing life in this world. So where do we begin?

Well, let’s begin with a frank admission. It is the Bible itself that causes this problem. It is the way the Bible speaks. It is the promises that it contains that causes the problem. Had God said, “Every now and then I will answer your prayers, but often, for the most important things, I will not, or I will not answer them quickly,” at least we would know what to expect and the crisis of faith would probably never arise. But God’s promises to hear and answer our prayers are definite, comprehensive, and unqualified. What are we to do when the Jesus himself says:

“Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” [Matt. 18:19-20]

“Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith”? [Matt. 21:22]

As you can no doubt imagine, there is much to be said about all of this. But I want to begin with what I think is the hugely important foundation for all our thinking about questions such as these, viz. the nature of biblical language itself. We tend to read the Bible’s language *as if it were our language, as if it were written by people who expressed themselves the way we express ourselves*. This is a mistake that can get us into serious trouble. TV preachers get boatloads of cash sent to them because of the assurance they give their audience that all their prayers will be heard. Everything they ask for, God is going to give them.

Let's take a prominent example of this kind of biblical language: unqualified, absolute, and seemingly out of keeping with the actual experience of God's people. In the blessings and curses of the covenant, given at length in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, we are given a description of what will happen to those who are faithful to the Lord and what will become of those who are not. *The faithful* will enjoy a rich and prosperous life in every way: good health, happy families, productive farms, in general a life of peace, but, if war becomes necessary, victory in battle; indeed their life will be so obviously fruitful and satisfying that they will be the envy of all peoples. *On the other hand*, the unfaithful, those who break God's covenant and go the way of the world, will suffer defeat in battle, drought and famine, pestilence, wasting diseases, so much so that they will become either a horror or the laughingstock of the nations. Read over those passages again. The picture of prosperity for the faithful, on the one hand, and misery and misfortune for the unfaithful is very impressive.

But is it true? We read in Psalm 73 that a substantial believing man, the author of the psalm, almost lost his faith because it seemed to him, as he observed the world, that the wicked – even among his own people of Israel – were happier and better off than the righteous. And of how many genuinely righteous people do we read in the Bible that their lives were difficult, that they suffered greatly, that they were compelled to make great sacrifices, and were often disappointed in their hopes? This is so obvious a problem that it cries out for a solution, and Christian ministers and theologians have offered a variety of them.

Perhaps the most common one is to suppose that such language, such promises of reward for faithfulness and punishment for unfaithfulness, was peculiar to the Old Testament, supposedly a time of more primitive spiritual development, a religious climate in which people were simpler and God had to deal with them in more childlike ways. In other words, the blessings and curses are something like a children's story in which everything is simple and uncomplicated. The hero lives happily ever after and the villain gets his comeuppance! Nowadays, in the epoch of the New Testament, we know that God's blessings and curses are more spiritual than that and have to do with deeper things than bumper harvests and good health. The fatal problems with that explanation are two:

1. First, it ignores the fact that people in the Old Testament itself reflect with some confusion that the covenantal blessings and curses do not seem accurately to describe the actual experience of believers and unbelievers in Israel. The problem, if problem there be, is raised in the Old Testament frequently and directly. Those folk apparently weren't such bumpkins after all. They too struggled to know how God could make such promises to them when it wasn't obvious that they were being kept.
2. Second, the New Testament speaks in much the same way. Jesus, in a famous statement to his disciples in Mark 10, if you remember, said virtually the same thing to them that Moses said to Israel in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. He said that to his faithful disciples who make sacrifices for him, he would give them many times more what they had sacrificed in return: houses, fields, sons, daughters, and so on. One hundred times as much in fact. Or remember how Paul, in speaking to the children in Ephesian church,

reminded them that the commandment to honor their parents was the first of the Ten Commandments that had a promise attached, a promise of long life in the world.

The fact is this sort of language – absolute, unqualified – appears frequently in the Bible in regard to the promises of God, not simply his promise to hear and answer our prayers, but to bless his people, to reward his people. And if we are to be wise readers of the Bible, we must learn how to read, understand, and appreciate that language. I have had occasion to speak about this to you before, but I do not hesitate to do so again, important as I think this insight into biblical communication actually is. If we do not understand this distinctive way of speaking that we find in the Bible one of two results will almost certainly ensue. We will either begin to doubt God's word because it does not seem to describe what we actually observe in life or we will simply stop thinking about these great promises, assuming that they really mean something else, whatever that something else may be.

We hear God say that he will answer our prayers and give us what we ask, but we won't actually expect him to do anything of the kind. There are, I fear, a great many Christians who have long since given up really believing that God is going to hear their prayers and answer them in obvious, tangible, and wonderful ways. Maybe they thought he would at one point, but the disappointment expressed by the author of Psalms 42 and 43 has been their experience as well and they've moved on. So we need to know how to understand those promises and what they mean. That language is there for a reason; the Bible reads as it does for a reason; God's promises to hear and answer our prayers are as absolute and unqualified as they are for a reason. What is that reason?

We begin, and this evening we can only begin, with the reminder that the ancient Semites, of which people the Israelites were a part, had a different manner of expressing themselves – they still do today – than we do.

These people thought, spoke, and acted *in extremes*. This explains, for example, why there is so much of what we call *hyperbole* in the Bible. It was not enough for the Hebrew to say that the Lord will save vast multitudes of people or that it was a large army or even a very large army that Israel faced in battle. No the Lord will save a multitude in number or the army the Israelites faced was in number the same as the grains of sand on the seashore and the stars in the heavens. Similarly, in matters of emotion middle easterners were – as they are today! – given to very strong displays of emotion. Few of us tear our clothes or walk about with ashes on our head or wail in public, but the ancients found it very natural to do all those things. And their language is the same. It is full of emotional extremes. We are likely to call this feature of Hebrew style (actually ANE style) *hyperbole*. But to refer to these extreme ways of saying things as simply a figure of speech does not do it justice. *Hyperbole is our perspective: they are exaggerating for effect*, we think. But what was *their* perspective, these men who wrote Holy Scripture? Here is one scholar commenting on this feature of Hebrew writing.

“Hyperbole or overstatement is a figure of speech common to all languages. But among the Semitic peoples its frequent use arises out of a habitual cast of mind, which I have called absoluteness – a tendency to think in extremes without qualification, in black and

white without intervening shades of gray.” [G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 110]

Elsewhere this same scholar says, “Hebrews inherited superlatives by choice.” [121] T.E. Lawrence, the famous Lawrence of Arabia, observed this as he lived among the Arab peoples of the Middle East.

“Semites had no half-tones in their register of vision. They were a people of primary colors, or rather of black and white, who saw the world always in contour.” [Cited by Caird from *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, ch. 3]

We aren’t like that, you and I. We often observe the gray, sometimes more than we see the black or white. If we are regular readers of the Bible we are already familiar with some classic illustrations of this way of thinking and writing. We have perhaps been troubled by them. For example, biblical writers use the terms “love” and “hate” to describe what we would more precisely describe as greater or lesser measures of affection. The Lord himself told us we would have to hate our parents and our own lives if we wanted to be his disciples – which strikes us as very jarring – and God speaks of loving Jacob and hating Esau, again, language that is hard for us to swallow. Expressions of sadness and of joy are typically cast in such extreme forms in the Bible, so extreme that they strike us as “over the top,” if not slightly ridiculous. It isn’t enough for the psalm writer to say in Psalm 42 that he was sad. Rather we have in v. 3 “My tears have been my food day and night.” In another psalm we read, “My eye wastes away because of grief.” [6:7] There are on virtually every page of the Bible examples of this extravagant form of Semitic thought and speech. David doesn’t simply have to deal with opposition from his enemies; “...men trample upon me...my enemies trample upon me all day long.” [56:1-2] It isn’t enough for the psalmist to say that laughter can be out of place in a world like ours. No, “it is *mad*” and “it is *useless*.” [56:2] But, of course, these men were in other contexts cheerful enough; they laughed at a good joke, they enjoyed a good meal, they had friends and loved ones.

We need to be careful not to read this language without regard to Hebrew and Semitic style. As we noticed recently, it would be a mistake to read Jeremiah expressing his despair over the situation he found himself in as a prophet of judgment to an unwilling and spiritually disinterested people *as if he thought and spoke in the same way we do today*.

“Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought my father the news, who made him glad, saying, ‘A child is born to you – a son!’ May that man be like the towns the Lord overthrew without pity. May he hear wailing in the morning, a battle cry at noon. For he did not kill me in the womb, with my mother as my grave...” [20:14-17]

We thought the Bible was against abortion! Of course it is; but this is the way they expressed themselves because this is the way they thought. Jeremiah said he *hated* his life, but he certainly didn’t all the time. We know that. He knew of the Lord’s goodness to him and often speaks of it in his great book. Paul reminds us in his great 8th chapter of Romans that the whole creation *groans* waiting for the day of the Lord. But, of course, for both unbelievers and for the people of God there is much happiness along the way, as Paul himself often says. In Revelation 6:10 –

Revelation is a very distinctively Hebrew form of thought and expression – we read of saints in heaven crying out to the Lord, “How long, Sovereign Lord, until you judge the inhabitants of the world and avenge our blood?” It makes it sound as if they are still unhappy in heaven! You get the point. *We are not to press this language beyond its fair meaning.* It is typical Hebrew absoluteness or overstatement and when juxtaposed with much more positive statements we recognize that hatred and despair are hardly the whole picture. The Psalms, the prophets, books like Ecclesiastes or Revelation would sound very different than they do had they been written in the modern West instead of the ancient near east.

That is part of the picture. Also important is the Hebrew bent toward what experts in the nature of language, especially syntax and style, call *parataxis*. Parataxis is the setting side by side of different thoughts with no effort to harmonize them or relate the one to the other. Parataxis is another typical feature of Hebrew thinking and writing. You have one thing said here, another thing that seems somewhat if not quite contrary to it said there. What is more, you rarely are ever taught precisely how to relate the one statement to the other, the one truth to the other. It is a grammatical feature of the Hebrew sentence, but it is also a particular cast of thought.

A good example of the larger phenomenon of parataxis is furnished by the many statements made in the books of Kings and Chronicles that this king or that was unfaithful to the Lord, unlike David who was faithful to the Lord in all things. “All things?” we say. What about Bathsheba? What about Uriah? What about the management of his home? What about Amnon and Absalom? What about his numbering of the people? Faithful in all things? You’ve got to be joking! Once, so far as I remember *only* once, do we have: “David did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn aside from anything that he commanded him all the days of his life, *except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite.*” [1 Kgs 15:5] So they knew David was a sinner, but, even then, Uriah was hardly David’s only stumble. The story of the second half of his reign is a depressing account of a man who knew better and should have been doing better. There is that Hebrew absoluteness again – David was a faithful king so he was *perfectly faithful*, completely faithful, faithful from beginning to end, faithful in everything – but there is also parataxis, because the reason the statement about David’s faithfulness all the days of his life bothers us so much is precisely because the Bible is so forthcoming in describing David’s faults and failures! Side by side, strong, absolute statements, apparently in conflict with one another, with little reflection anywhere on the relationship between them *is characteristic of the Bible.*

We need to appreciate this manner of thinking and speaking, and then we need to consider what its implications are for these absolute, unqualified promises God has made to hear and answer our prayers, when, as is also perfectly obvious in the Bible, many prayers of righteous people go unanswered. That is Semitic absoluteness. We are told in one place that our prayers will be heard, we are told in another that the prayers of this faithful man or that faithful woman were not heard. We are never told precisely how the one fact relates to the other or how to harmonize the two. That is Semitic parataxis. So we begin our consideration of this vexing question of unanswered prayer by seeking to build biblical intelligence, a more sophisticated appreciation of the way in which the Bible addresses us and a better informed reading of the text, including those texts that promise God’s answer to our prayers in such an absolute and unqualified way. The Bible obviously has put its promises in a certain way, but just as obviously it has given us solid

reasons to realize that we cannot take those promises to be a guarantee that everything we ask God for will be certainly given to us. That is where we begin; but only where *we begin*.

Jesus Christ himself, as we know, the most righteous man who ever lived, the most faithful man of prayer who ever lived, in a moment of crisis cried out to God and his prayer was refused. This is the man who told us, more so and more directly than any other, to pray in the confidence that our prayers would be heard and answered. The plot thickens. More on this next Lord's Day evening.