

**Christian Doubts No. 8**

**2 Cor. 12:7-10**

**“Unanswered Prayer, No. 2”**

**July 31, 2016**

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Last Lord’s Day evening we began considering unanswered prayer as a cause of Christian doubt by exploring the nature of biblical language. Much of our problem comes from our expectation, founded perhaps understandably enough, but mistakenly on what appears to us to be the unqualified promise of the Lord Jesus, that we would receive whatever we asked for. “Ask what you will,” he said, “and it shall be done for you.” But, of course, that is no one’s experience for years on end as the Bible itself plainly teaches. The Psalms are full of complaints that God has *not* heard the prayers of his people and has *not* given them what they asked him for.

We began by saying that 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans, whose pattern of thought and expression is quite different from that of those who wrote the Bible, need to gain more biblical intelligence, to acquire a greater sophistication in our reading of the Bible. We noted the Hebrew penchant for both parataxis – the lack of qualification – and hyperbole, what strikes us as obvious exaggeration. And we pointed out that these were not simply characteristics of Hebrew expression but were features of Hebrew thought or the cast of their minds.

Let me give three more examples of this phenomenon. Apropos of something else altogether, when Prof. Jack Collins was with us recently, talking about Genesis, he happened to mention the importance of this very point: appreciating how to read and understand Hebrew overstatement. If you were in that Sunday School class, you may remember him saying that a problem is created for readers of the Bible and an objection is handed to the enemies of Christianity by the repeated command the Lord gave the Israelites to wipe out every man, woman, and child in Canaan when they invaded the land to take possession of it. It sounds horribly blood-thirsty to our ears. But, said Prof. Collins, to understand what God actually intended by what he said one has to see what was actually eventually done, even by those faithful to the Lord and even in cases where God’s approval is either stated or may be assumed. Every man, woman, and child was not killed; indeed, in a great many cases Israel spared the lives of the Canaanites. It is clear in Joshua that cities and peoples who wished to make peace with Israel and accept their rule of the Promised Land could have that peace. Rahab and her family were spared, but others as well. The Gibeonites deceived the Israelites into making a covenant of peace with them, but others achieved the same result with Israel’s eyes open. Dr. Collins’ point was that the actual command to eliminate the population of Canaan must be interpreted in its larger context, with the other historical information supplied serving to clarify what was actually meant.

Or consider the command that no Moabite was to enter the people of Israel until the 10<sup>th</sup> generation. That stipulation seems pretty absolute and unqualified in the law, but, of course, the Bible itself goes on to celebrate Ruth’s becoming a part of the people of God, no matter that she was a Moabite, a fact that is repeatedly mentioned in the book of Ruth. Indeed, she is celebrated as a progenitor of King David and so of the Messiah himself. In other words, there were qualifications – unmentioned in the law – that provided for exceptions, even rather dramatic exceptions to the general requirement that no Moabite could enter the assembly of Israel. You

wouldn't know that reading the law; but as we read further it becomes clear that any Moabite *believer* would be immediately welcomed into the community of the Israelites.

Finally, consider the promise of God to be our God *and the God of our children*. When God makes that promise in Genesis 17:7-8, nothing whatever is said about the duty of parents to nurture their children in the faith. Someone reading that text for the first time might very well assume that God had promised them the salvation of their children without qualifications. But in the next chapter – Hebrew parataxis again – we learn that Abraham is duty bound by God's covenant “to command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice *so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him,*” In other words, the original promise *may seem* unqualified and absolute, but it is not. It is qualified by other information given elsewhere.

Well, very obviously, a similar thing is true of the promises that God has made and that the Lord Jesus reinforced in his teaching, concerning his answering our prayers. The promises themselves seem unqualified and absolute:

“Whatever you ask in my name, it shall be done for you.”

But any pious Jew would have known that such a statement was not, in fact, an unqualified guarantee that we would receive from God whatever we asked for. They would know that because they were used to such generalizing and absolute statements and realized that qualifications would be attached. The Lord's disciples never seemed to have been confused on this point.

In the OT, when various psalmists complain that they do not seem to be enjoying the favor and prosperity God promised them in his covenant with Israel, it is not because – *and they never say or imply that it is because* – they took him to mean that if they believed in him they would have an untroubled and rosy life uninterrupted by trial, sadness, or disappointment while the unfaithful would uniformly suffer all manner of troubles. They knew better because, familiar with that manner of absolute statement and familiar with the rest of the Bible, they fully understood that the application of the blessings and curses of the covenant, however unqualified and absolute in their statement in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, was always going to be more complicated than that. Their complaint was rather that they felt abandoned by the Lord, or that the evidence for his care of and provision for his people was invisible to them, and so on. *They would never have said that the Lord had promised them an easy life and had reneged on his word.* But this dark world presents a constant challenge to the faith of God's people, no matter how the promises of God are stated in his Word.

So where does that leave us? *The bottom line of all of this reflection on the language we find in Holy Scripture is that the promise of God to hear and answer our prayers is not and was never absolute and unqualified, no matter the way in which those promises are sometimes put in the Bible.* There are a set of conditions and qualifications attached to those promises, and the first readers of those promises would have understood that as a matter of course. Our problem with unanswered prayer rests to some significant degree on a misunderstanding: viz. that God has

promised to give us what we ask for. The misunderstandings now so common in the teaching of television preachers rest on this fundamental mistake.

Now when we stop of consider this and when we are forced by the total teaching of the Bible to admit this, most Christians will accept that it is true and must be true that we have no guarantee and were never given such a guarantee that whatever we asked God for would give us. Prayer, after all, *in the nature of the case*, at least petitionary prayer, is *request*. In our prayers, by a holy instinct, we never *tell God* what he must do for us; we *ask God* to do something for us, we plead with God for his help or provision.

“*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.” [C.S. Lewis, “The Efficacy of Prayer.”]

C.S. Lewis goes on to say:

“There are, no doubt, passages in the New Testament which may seem at first sight to promise an invariable granting of our prayers. But that cannot be what they really mean. For in the very heart of the story we meet a glaring instance to the contrary. In Gethsemane the holiest of all petitioners prayed three times that a certain cup might pass from Him. It did not. After that the idea that prayer is recommended to us as a sort of infallible gimmick may be dismissed.”

But it is hardly only Gethsemane that illustrates the inevitable uncertainty that the prayers of even the most devout Christians will be answered. Think of David who prayed for the life of his illegitimate son but whose prayers did not avail to save the baby’s life. Or think of Jeremiah who prayed for the repentance and the spiritual restoration of his contemporaries in Judah and who was told flatly by the Lord that “though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people.” We have hanging on our wall at home a print of Rembrandt’s famous painting, *Jeremiah weeping over the Destruction of Jerusalem*. Why was Jeremiah the “weeping prophet?” In some large part because God had not and would not answer his prayer.

But an even better illustration of the phenomenon is provided in the text we read this evening. It is, next to Gethsemane, the classic illustration of unanswered prayer in the New Testament. Paul had what he called a “thorn in the flesh.” It bedeviled him, whatever it was. Perhaps it is most likely a reference to some physical ailment that interfered with his ability to do his work and, in any case, was an emotional as well as physical burden to the apostle. Plausible suggestions – based on hints provided in Acts and Paul’s letters, are failing eyesight or recurring bouts of malaria. But the thorn could also have been spiritual, even a besetting sin. We simply cannot say. On three separate occasions Paul made a concerted effort to pray for deliverance. Surely if any man had a right to expect God to answer his prayer it was Paul!

1. Paul, remember, had himself healed many people from a variety of physical illnesses or disabilities by the power of God, but his own disability, if physical disability it was, remained stubbornly resistant to healing. Surely the healer would have been granted

healing himself! And wouldn't such a healing give him even greater appreciation of the Lord's power that he himself had wielded on behalf of others.

2. He was, after all, doing the most important work in the world in those days: establishing the Christian church in the Gentile world. Ought he not to have had the full use of all his capacities? Shouldn't that man be spared the distraction of a debilitating condition?

3. Paul actually describes his affliction as a "messenger from Satan." If that were the case, surely God would not want his ambassador to be beset and discouraged in this way by Satan, helpless before the Devil.

4. Finally, Paul was for a great many *the representative Christian*. "Follow me as I follow Christ," he had told his converts. Surely it would have been an immense vindication not only of his own faith and calling as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, but of the Christian faith itself for a great many people if Paul were healed or delivered through the power of prayer to God in Jesus' name.

But his prayer remained unanswered. In fact, the Lord told him – as, alas, he does not tell us – both that he was not going to answer Paul's prayer and why he would not answer it. For Paul to live *with* the affliction was more important to him and more valuable to others than for him to be delivered from it. He was a man to whom had been given terrific gifts – a towering intellect, world-changing influence as the founder of Gentile churches, and, most recently, a vision of heaven itself, perhaps the only man in history to have been given that gift – and the Lord knew how difficult it would be for a man so favored to keep his spiritual balance. And so to keep these great gifts and privileges from going to his head Paul was to be saddled with this thorn in the flesh, Pride is deadly to Christian fruitfulness and God was in this way dealing with Paul's pride. Paul's living with this affliction would also prove that the Lord's power is made perfect in our weakness, a lesson every Christian must struggle mightily to learn, counter-intuitive as it is, and unwelcome a lesson as we all find it to be, which is why every one of us in this room has struggled to learn it. We want to be strong, not weak. But when we live a life of faithfulness to God *in weakness*, we prove God's presence, power, and grace much more than we ever would riding on the heights of the land in what would seem to be our own strength.

So, unqualified and absolute as are some of the Bible's promises that the prayers of Christians will be answered, let us take seriously the candor of the Bible in describing the reality and the frequency of unanswered prayer. Holy Scripture is not ashamed to say that the prayers of even the most devout of men and women are often not answered, or, as in the case of the widow in the Lord's parable in Luke 18, are not answered until much time has passed. And, second, let's take note of the Bible's own explanation of this fact, troublesome as it has been to Christian faith, the cause it has been for Christian doubt so often through the ages. Remember, as we proceed, the Christian life is a life *of faith*. If God were to give us whatever we asked for, it would cease to be a life of faith; it would have become a life of sight. To trust God when we are disappointed with him, when our prayers to him have not been answered is what the Bible means by faith: to believe without the confirmation of sight and sense.

*I. That explanation comes in at least two parts. The first is the fact that God's interests in our lives and our own interests often do not coincide.*

It is obvious enough to us why God ought to hear and answer our prayers. We are bearing a burden we want him to remove. So it was with Paul. We have great concern for others that we feel God should honor. So it was with Jeremiah. And so on. But as we have been reminded in considering Paul's case, God's interests in our lives may be other than we imagine them to be. After all, how rare is the mind, even among Christians, that the Lord preserved in Paul by means of this thorn, a thorn he refused to remove even though Paul prayed for its removal earnestly and repeatedly!

Of course we must all admit that one meets many more Christians, even serious and practicing Christians, who glory in their strengths rather than in their weaknesses, even though it is in their weakness, not their strength that Christ's power is most gloriously and happily revealed in their lives. We meet such a Christian, alas, whenever we look in the mirror! This strange paradox of the truly Christian mind – preferring to admit weakness than to call attention to strength, so as to leave maximum room for the demonstration of divine power and action in one's life – is a mark of real Christian maturity. It is, as we all know, far too rare! Paul, of course, had a great advantage over us. God explained to him why he had refused to answer his prayers. We are not given such explanations, and that makes it harder. But we are given Paul's history to teach us why we are refused from time to time and what sort of purposes God may have in refusing us.

Once Paul knew that his life could not be all God wanted it to be and the church needed it to be unless he lived *with* his thorn, he accepted his lot, difficult as no doubt it remained. Too many Christians – and you and I too often – imagine that the only glory God gets is in relieving our distresses and fulfilling our wants. But we learn here that he is more glorified, much more, in the faith and loyalty of his children who trust him even when he slays them or, at least, when he refuses to give them what they most desire.

The simple truth – and who among us this evening can contradict this? – is that we never ask for thorns, but we need them; we need them very much. We imagine that we can become the same Christians by prosperity that we can become through suffering, adversity, and sorrow. But it is not so. The whole Bible teaches that it is not so. Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God and that is virtually the same thing as saying that we must face the reality and learn the graces of unanswered prayer. And so, the Bible reminds us frequently, God is always testing our faith by making matters difficult for us, by disappointing our hopes, by making us endure situations we find painful, sad, or fearful. And, taking the Bible together, there are a number of *other* reasons why our prayers may not be answered in any particular case.

1. Obviously, the Bible is blunt in saying that “if we regard iniquity in our hearts, the Lord will not hear us.” [Psalm 66:18] When Isaiah tells Israel in 59:2:

“...your iniquities have made a separation between you and God, and your sins have hidden his face from you *so that he does not hear*”

he was speaking to a recalcitrant and deeply disobedient people. But the principle must apply, necessary changes being made, to some degree to genuine Christians as well. Think of the Lord's warning to *his disciples* in the Sermon on the Mount that if we do not forgive others their sins against us he will not forgive our sins or that we should reconcile with a brother before offering our sacrifices to God, the clear implication being that God will not accept a sacrifice made by one of his children who is flaunting his will in regard to his relationships with others.

2. In other cases unanswered prayer is a testing of faith, as famously in the case of the poor widow in the Lord's parable who pestered the judge for so long that he finally relented and gave her what she asked for. That parable, by the way, was introduced with the words, "He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart..." If those words mean anything they mean that the Lord was anticipating that his disciples would be sorely tempted to lose heart precisely because their prayers had not been heard, no matter how often they had repeated them! The one who taught us that whatever we asked for he would do, is the same one who taught us always to pray and not to lose heart and illustrated what he meant with a story about a woman who had to pester a judge repeatedly before he gave her what she asked.

3. Then there is this. Unanswered prayer is the context and provides the occasion for the most serious and personal engagement of our souls with God. Whether we are thinking of Abraham haggling with God over Sodom, Jacob wrestling with God at Peniel, Moses asking God to blot out his name from his book rather than forsake Israel in the wilderness, Hannah pleading with the Lord year after year for a child, the Syrophenician woman refusing to take "no" from Jesus for an answer as she plead for her child, or Paul pleading with the Lord to remove his thorn, we have before us some of the most intensely personal encounters with God to be found in Holy Scripture. *This* is clearly what the Lord is after: this honest dealing, this directness in our conversation with him, this passion, this concern, this taking him so seriously. To take just one of these examples, we don't find a great deal of prayer in Jacob's life, even after his vision at Bethel. But the encounter with Esau upon his return struck fear into his heart and it was then that he wrestled with God and, in a way, became the man of God he should have always been." The rich, the healthy, and the happy seldom pray." [Huysman in Whyte, *Lord Teach us to Pray*, 44]

*One can live a Christian life, I know this now, one can live a Christian life in a somewhat detached way for years on end, without really depending upon the Lord, without an overpowering sense of existential reality to one's faith, but unanswered prayer brings all of that to a sudden stop. Now the Lord is there, you need him desperately, and are crying to your heavenly Father as never before. I'm very sure that is more than anything else the reason why God does not give us what we ask for or at least does not give it to us when we ask for it. He wants us to draw near to him in a serious, personal, authentic way; to plead with him really meaning what we say. Unanswered prayer is the graveyard of a Christian life that is merely a going through of motions!*

*II. The second part of the Bible's explanation is the prayers of God's people that are not answered at once, or even in a person's lifetime, become part of the accumulated prayers of God's people which will have their answer in due time.*

Jesus prayed for those who were murdering him and we read later in Acts that in the months and years that followed many Jewish priests became Christian believers. Many others, of course, were praying that the Jews might be saved. Stephen prayed for his persecutors and one result of that was the conversion of Paul, but, of course, Stephen did not live to see that on earth. The prayers of generations of early Christians offered for rulers and emperors were eventually answered in the days of Constantine and later. One sows in prayer, another reaps as the Bible teaches us.

The parable of the widow who pestered the judge until he relented and gave her what she asked was taught in connection with the Lord's teaching about his Second Coming. The parable has to do especially with the delay of the Lord's return and the importance of believers praying for his coming, *Maranatha*. You remember that word. It was one of the few Aramaic or Hebrew words that were carried over into Gentile Christian usage in the first century. You find it in the NT at 1 Cor. 16:22 in many English translations, but sadly not in the ESV. It is translated in the ESV and so the reader can't tell that "Our Lord come," which is what *Maranatha* means, is not a Greek word, but an Aramaic or Hebrew one, like "hallelujah," "hosanna," or "amen." According to the *Didache*, a very early manual of church teaching, typically dated in the late first or early second century, *Maranatha* was one of the prayers said at the end of the liturgy of the Lord's Supper. A single word, a whole prayer: "Come, our Lord." [*Didache* 10.6] *Mara* is Aramaic for "Lord," the *n* is the possessive pronoun "our," and *atha* is the verb "come" in the imperative. "Come, our Lord."

The Lord's point is a simple one. When his people cry out to him to bring his kingdom, to return to the earth, to vindicate those who have trusted in him, when they see no sign of the answer they have been longing for so long, they can grow discouraged and lose heart. In that discouragement, they cease to pray. We may pray "thy kingdom come" every time we recite together the Lord's Prayer, but as the true longing of our hearts, as the earnest petition of our prayers, the Second Coming has often slipped from our active expectation or hope. We know it is so. Few of our prayers include a passionate petition for the Lord's return!

There are two sorts of things we rarely pray for. The first is those things we always seem to have anyway. Again, we may pray for our daily bread in the Lord's Prayer, but if we have a good job and have never missed a paycheck for years on end, we come to feel or, at least we act as if we feel that there is no need to pray for the money we need to live. The second sort of prayer we find it difficult to pray is that for things that seem utterly unlikely: whether the salvation of a person so hostile to the Christian message, so sure of himself, and so content with his unbelief or the return of Christ after now two thousand years have passed. But the Lord's parable in Luke 18:1-8 is designed to disabuse us of that indifference and, in particular, this indifference to praying for the Lord's return. We are, as he says in v. 7, to pray that prayer to him "day and night." The final statement, the question with which the Lord ends his parable, "...when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth," in the context thus means, "Will the Lord, when he returns, find people who are actively waiting for and looking for and calling for his return, or will they have forgotten that he is coming?"

This is hugely important, brothers and sisters, more than we know. Our faith holds that Jesus is coming again. We must be, you and I, according to the universal teaching of the NT, Second

Coming people, people who are, as we read at the end of Hebrews 9, “eagerly waiting for him.” You can’t live the Christian life in its fullness and power and goodness and beauty if you are not eagerly waiting for the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, just as you can’t live the Christian life authentically if you’re not looking back to the Lord on his cross. Like many things in life that come to us in steps and stages, it is not until the last step has been taken or the last stage has been completed that we actually *have* what we have worked for and longed for. And that great consummation for us, salvation with a capital “S”, will come as the answer to the accumulated prayers of the Christian ages. *In other words, our prayers in certain cases are not answered because they can only be answered at once for all the saints together.*

Why then did the Savior say “whatever you ask in my name it will be done for you”? Why such an absolute statement. Surely he must have known that was going to cause confusion in the life of his followers, even if did not confuse those to whom he first made the statement. It is the Hebrew way of laying emphasis on a statement. The Lord wants you and me to be people of prayer. We are to be always at prayer. Paul puts it very simply in 1 Thess. 5:16 -- “Pray without ceasing” -- or in Col. 4:2 -- “Continue steadfastly in prayer” -- and at greater length in Ephesians 6:18:

“[Pray] at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.”

The number of “all’s” in that statement serve to emphasize the importance of being always at prayer. Interestingly, this was not the way the Jews thought about prayer in the days the Lord Jesus was among them. They actually thought we could tire the Lord with our prayers, as the widow wore out the judge. Three times a day was regarded as the maximum. Not so in the Bible! We are to live at prayer: short prayers and longer prayers, arrow prayers and more comprehensive prayers, prayers of thanksgiving and prayers of petition, prayers by ourselves and prayers with others. And so the promise that our prayers will be powerful and effective and avail much is found everywhere in the Bible. We read the Lord’s promises to hear and answer our prayers and we know very well how important prayer must be and how much we must lose if we fail to pray. “You have not, because you ask not.”

I think, myself, the Bible is wonderfully stronger; its message carries a greater wallop because it is written as it is. You wouldn’t want a 21st century lawyer to write Holy Scripture would you? And it is our task to love the Bible’s way of putting things and to try to get to the bottom of it because this is the way God himself chose to write the book in which he would reveal himself to us. In any case, this is our Bible, this is the Word of God, and this is the way it reads. We need to learn to appreciate that.

True enough, we won’t get everything we ask for or, at least, not as soon as we might have wished. As C.S. Lewis admitted, “If God had granted all the silly prayers I’ve made in my life, where should I be now?” (*Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*) Clearly the unqualified nature of such promises as the Lord Jesus made regarding answering our prayers is meant to encourage us to believe in the power of prayer. But just as surely it must be obvious that God did not hand over to us the running of the universe in promising to hear and answer our prayers. Knowing as little as we know about what we need in order to get to heaven or what others need, having a

view of ourselves and our lives so often utterly inaccurate, having no idea as to what purposes God is pursuing in the circumstances of our lives, we can't even imagine how much harm we would do to ourselves and others if God were obliged to answer every prayer we prayed.

But earnest and familiar talking with God is fundamental to all that God wants in us and from us and for us and, along the way, he will answer a great many of our prayers, as those of us who have been Christians any length of time know full well. We forget how many he is answering all the time: for forgiveness, for our daily bread, and so on.

It is often helpful for us to use our imagination to visualize the situation described in the Word of God. Suppose you still wanted and hoped for the thing you had prayed for but not yet received from your heavenly Father. And suppose that one night the Lord Jesus himself, with his divine glory upon him, came and sat at your bedside, as he did Paul's, and said, "You have asked for this, but the Father cannot give it to you. The reason why I cannot tell you, but I can assure you that it is better for you and for your loved ones that you be refused than that you should receive what you have asked for." Would you complain? Would you doubt that the Lord was telling the truth? Would you demand a further explanation as your right? Of course not. You would say, "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you." And you would also say, "Shall we receive good from God, and shall not we receive evil?" and "Though the Lord slay me, I will hope in him." *Magnificent expressions of faith and love that would never have been uttered if the Lord always gave his children whatever they asked when they asked for it!* Our entire faith rests in the character of God as invariably, unchangeably wise and loving toward us. So our life of prayer must rest on that same confidence.

True enough, there is much to test and challenge our faith in life, including the prayers we pray so earnestly that are not answered by the Lord. The Bible admits that God's ways are a great mystery and often darken our sight. I am not denying the difficulty of faith; far from it. No wonder the Bible is tender toward the doubting believer. But let's not make the situation more difficult than it need be by allowing doubts based on a misunderstanding of what the Bible has actually said about God hearing our prayers.

So put your doubts fueled by God's unwillingness to answer your prayers to this test: do I have any reason, really, to believe that God *ever* taught me to expect that I would always get what I wanted when I asked for it in prayer. And am I unwilling, after all, to accept that his interests in my life are higher and purer and wiser than my own and that he always knows best. Taking the Bible together – and Christ on his cross supremely – do I not know two things beyond doubt?

1. It is a rule of the Christian life that the immediate satisfaction of desire does not produce a holy life. If the Lord Jesus was made perfect through suffering, there can be no doubt that we must be too. And suffering, pain, disappointment, fear, unfulfilled desires, and loss are invariably the reasons we pray when our prayers are not answered.

2. Second, "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" [P.T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer*, 67]

God's help is always sure  
His method seldom guessed;  
Delay will make our pleasure pure,  
Surprise will give it zest.

His wisdom is sublime  
His heart profoundly kind;  
God never is before his time,  
And never is behind.

[Thomas Lynch, 1855]