"Unanswered Prayer"
2 Corinthians 12:1-10
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Text Comment

We considered this same text last Lord's Day morning in regard to the meaning and the application of Paul's "thorn in the flesh." I want to read it again, this morning, to deal with another aspect of its teaching, another aspect that I think is of great practical importance for the faith and life of Christians. This is the text, you know, perhaps of all texts in the Bible, to turn to in regard to the fact and the experience of unanswered prayer. We may say that 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 is the *locus classicus* of the Bible's doctrine of unanswered prayer; it is the chief text, the first text to consult on that doctrine. There are other texts, to be sure, that raise the issue and give us teaching about it and perspective on it, but here we have the Lord telling his great apostle not only that he has not answered his prayer, *but that he is not going to answer it, or, that the answer is always going to be "No!"*

Read

Now prayer is not a thing that only Christians do. Almost everyone prays in this world, at one time or another, in one way or another. The United States Congress begins its daily sessions with prayer, no matter the very different religious viewpoints represented in that body. No matter the U.S. Supreme Court, there will still be a prayer before a number of Texas high school football games. There were prayers offered by the clergy of various religions at memorial services following 9/11. Those are presumably prayers that football players offer in the endzone when they kneel in reverent acknowledgement of the divine favor following a touchdown. People of every stripe throw up an instantaneous prayer now and again when they are afraid, or when they have a great need, or when they come face to face with their own mortality. We even have a name for that kind of prayer: "the foxhole prayer," because it is the kind of prayer an otherwise irreligious and profane soldier might well pray when the bullets are flying, when his fellows are dying around him, and when he is overcome by the fear of death. Human beings were made for fellowship with God and it should not surprise us, therefore, that the world rings with prayer. I read an Oxford philosopher this past week who admitted that he has sometimes prayed, "O God, if you do not exist, help me to see that fact." But, of course, it should not surprise us either, in this fallen world, that most of mankind's prayers, are sinful prayers, are insincere prayers, are misshapen prayers. Most, if not virtually all of them, have this in common: once they are prayed they are quickly forgotten. They are not the expression of any real and settled understanding of the mind, any real and serious commitment of the will, any real and deeply felt emotion of the heart. Even the devout of various religions pray in a way that reduces prayer to a ritual, something far from being in any living sense an expression of trust and of confidence in God or fellowship with God or love for God.

There were many such prayers being offered in Paul's day as well. Prayer was a common feature of human life then as it is now. For those people, as for people today – for human beings are really the same in all ages of man – prayer was an attempt to coerce the gods and the forces

that controlled their lives. It was an offering of a kind, a sacrifice, meant to please and so appease the gods and win their favor. Prayers of this type in the ancient world were ordinarily offered according to a formula and there was great care taken to be sure that the formula was followed to the letter. The form of the prayer, not the spirit in which it was prayed was everything.

Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History* writes:

> "The text for invoking a happy omen is different from that for averting an ill or that for making a request. The highest officials pray in fixed forms of words, and to make sure that not a word is omitted or spoken in the wrong place, a prompter reads the text before them, another person is appointed to watch over it, yet another to command silence, and the flute-player to mask all other sounds." [In Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World,* 90]

Prayer was rote, repetitive, and formal. In that it was very like, for example, the prayers that Muslims pray and many Christians of a certain type who recite a formula, who take care to follow a set form of words, according to a strictly prescribed ritual. I checked a standard introduction to Islam written by a sympathetic scholar known for his knowledge of Islam in the Muslim world. The only reference to prayer in his book is to this five-times a day recital of a form of words. This is what prayer is always turning into in a fallen world. The faithful Muslim, when he prays his five times a day at the stated hours, is paying his due to God and hopes, merely hopes, for a good result in consequence. And, in emergencies, when people cried out to God in their need, then as now, the prayer was not the expression of the fundamental commitment and knowledge of their life, it was a momentary lapse from what was ordinarily the case.

Christian prayer, of course, is, or it ought to be, utterly different. It is nothing more nor less, as John Knox put it, than "earnest and familiar talking with God." By faith in Christ God becomes our father and we his children. The prayer taught in the Bible is like no other prayer, not at all like the prayer of Islam. The Christian life is experienced as a relationship with God and, as a relationship, as a conversation with him. It is a relationship of submission, to be sure, but just as much a relationship of trust, confidence, and affection. From the beginning of the Bible to the end, we find God's people talking to him about every conceivable manner of thing and talking to him earnestly, affectionately, confidently, constantly. They can even be found arguing with him, as we know from watching Abraham do it over Sodom, or as we encounter that bold kind of talking to God in the Psalms. When we hear David pray to God:

> "All my longings lie open before you, O Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you… I wait for you, O Lord… O Lord do not forsake me; be not far from me, O my God." [Ps. 38]

We hear something like what Paul must have prayed when he sought relief from his thorn in the flesh, when he argued God's goodness and faithfulness and his own faith and hope in the Lord

his God. And not only do believers pray in such a way in the Bible, their prayers are heard and answered, every kind of prayer for every kind of thing.

But, of course, if prayer is the exercise of true faith, if it is just faith in God in action; and if it is the conversation of a true and authentic relationship between persons, even persons such as God and man, then such prayer will not, cannot always result in obtaining what has been sought from God. As C.S. Lewis put it,

> "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." [*The World's Last Night and Other Essays*, 4-5]

For many people, in Paul's day and in ours, prayer is very much like putting money in a soft drink machine. You expect a bottle at the bottom for your money at the top. And, of course, when prayer becomes that, its own nature must change. Prayer must become much more like dropping money in a machine and much less like a child talking to her father. Dropping money into a machine is not the way a child thinks about asking his father for something, and certainly it is not the way he thinks about it if he loves his father and trust his judgment. We know good and well that our parents refused us things we wanted at the time *and were wise to have done so!* We were better off for not being given what we had asked for.

So, it comes as no surprise that there are many instances of unanswered prayer in the Bible and there are many reasons given why God would not answer a prayer, by which I mean, why he would not give what was sought from him.

1. For example, we read in Psalm 66:18, "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer." James says something similar when he writes in his letter to a congregation of Christians: "When you ask you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives…" Sin can be an impediment to God's hearing our prayers. No wise father will reward his child's sinful spirit. And, there is more. Remember Israel's rebellion against the Lord at Kadesh Barnea, when she refused to enter the Promised Land because of the strength of the peoples who lived in it. Then, when condemned for her faithlessness, she tried to enter but without God's favor and was defeated and humiliated in battle. Moses' comment on that episode was "You came back and wept before the Lord, but he paid no attention to your weeping and turned a deaf ear to you." [Deut. 1:45] If God will sometimes not hear his own children on account of their sin, he surely makes no promise to hear the wicked and the unbelieving who pray without faith or repentance. As Isaiah says,

> "When Moab appears at her high place, she only wears herself out; when she goes to her shrine to pray, it is to no avail." [16:12]

But there are other reasons.

2. God is at work in the world. He is accomplishing his plan and working out his will. We cannot possibly know, in advance, what that plan contains and what his will requires to occur. So, often enough, we ask what cannot be given because it would not fulfill the divine purpose, in our lives or in the life of the world. Obviously the Lord Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is the most profound illustration of such a refusal on God's part. He could not give to his much tempted and tried Son what he sought so urgently from his beloved Father's hand without surrendering the entire plan for the salvation of his people. When we pray, with faith, but also say, as Jesus did, "Not my will, but your will be done, O Father," we are not simply hedging our bets, not simply helping ourselves to feel better when the answer is not given. We are acknowledging both the fact that God did not hand over to us the running of the universe when he made promises to hear our prayers and the fact and that we are glad that he did not!

3. What is more, God's interests in our own lives, in their growth in grace, in their holiness and fruitfulness, also require his refusal at times. This was the case here with Paul. Paul needed that thorn to keep him the faithful man he was, to keep his heart humble in the face of his extraordinary powers, privileges, and authority as Christ's apostle; to keep him looking to Christ and not to himself, as we pointed out last week. And so often with us. What God is after in our lives is often not served by what we are asking for from him. And what God is after in us is far more important than that we should get our way! A wise poet gave expression to this reality, often enough taught in the Bible.

> He asked for strength that he might achieve;
> He was made weak that he might obey.
> He asked for health that he might do greater 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.

Do we or do we not believe that God knows best; that his will for us and our lives is by far the best possible path to the fulfillment of life? Surely no Christian will ask God for something even if God knows that giving such a thing to us would not advance his loving and holy interests in our lives. In the same way, we do not ask for thorns, yet they must be given to us. Our Father knows best.

4. But, there is more. Of course, many prayers remain unanswered simply because God wishes us to practice our faith and to trust him in defiance of appearances. He will answer the prayer, but not yet. Jesus told a parable about this, indicating how important a fact it was in the Christian life. He likened God to an unjust judge who would not give justice to a poor widow. Such a comparison would have been inappropriate on the lips of anyone else but the Son of God. But in the Lord's parable God was likened to an unjust judge who finally gave the widow the

justice she sought, but only because she pestered him until he couldn't stand it any longer. And what was the lesson of that little story? Jesus said that he told his disciples this parable "to show them that they should always pray and not give up." [Luke 18:1] He is as much as telling us that many things we ask for will not be given at once and we will be tempted to give up asking, tempted to think our prayers are pointless. No, don't give up. Sometimes God's method is to keep things from his children, good things, worthy things, until they have asked at length, until he has hardened their faith by making them look to him in defiance of appearances.

George Műller, the saintly 19th century preacher and founder of orphanages, a year before his death told a friend that he had prayed for the conversion, the salvation of two friends of his, each day for over sixty years, and that neither was yet a Christian. He was sure they would become so, and so he prayed on. He felt that God would not have kept him at prayer so long for those men if he had no intention to save them. We know for a fact that one of those men came to saving faith shortly after Műller's death. [A.T. Pierson, *George Műller of Bristol*, 302-303] Many things come through prayer only to those saints who pray on, who pray until they are heard. Such is prayer when it is the voice of a living relationship between a Christian man or woman and his or her God and Father. "Father, I have waited now a long time, can I now have what I have asked from you? You said I must wait. Is it time yet?" Is this not the way children speak to their parents? Is it not the right way for them to speak when the parents have said, "Not yet, my child"?

5. And, then, prayers are not answered for a long time because they are being added to the accumulated prayers of the faithful through the ages and made the reason for something that can come only at length or at last. So Stephen prayed for his persecutors, as did multitudes of early Christians, and that prayer was answered in the conversion of Paul, but only after Stephen was already in heaven. There is, you see, as the Roman Catholics think, a common treasury of the church, but it is filled not with merits but with prayers. There are bottles of tears and bottles of prayers now being filled in heaven. 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 piled up, mountains of prayers offered through the centuries that now must be given their due.

Jesus said to 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 the triumph of the kingdom of God and who died in disappointment. But Jesus calls all of that praying they did "sowing," and now others are privileged to reap what they sowed. Now, we think that we would rather be among the reapers than the sowers. That is natural enough and proper in one sense. But, 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 said?

6. And one last reason for unanswered prayer. There must be, there absolutely must be great differences between this world of sin and death and the world to come. Our Father has determined that there always shall be such differences. He does not want his children to feel too

much at home here; he wants them to continue longing for the sight of Jesus Christ and the world without sin or death. And he wants the unbelieving to come to faith and so makes this world a hard place to be in many ways so that people will think about how to be delivered from it and to find relief and hope in it.

Well, if we got all we asked for in prayer, prayer for ourselves, for others, and for the world, this world would have scarcely any thorns left in it and we would cease to look for heaven or long to be there or care to see the Lord. Like Paul without his thorn, we would cease to be faithful Christians. We really would and sooner than anyone thinks. The life of prayer, Christian prayer, hard as it is, frustrating as it often is, is one of the supreme differences between heaven and earth. Prayer in faith will end just as soon as we leave this world. We may continue to make requests of God in heaven, but we will make them face-to-face! Just imagine for a moment what life would be like for you if it were already so and you were always granted your wishes. What ease, what pleasure, what peace, what satisfaction would mark our days and nights. No, it cannot be. God could not allow it. The Christian life as God would have it be lived would not survive. We can only have all we want when we are sinless. Now, it would destroy us. Unanswered prayer is, for the Christian, what keeps him or her sure that our citizenship is and must be in heaven and what keeps us looking to Christ for what we need. You might not think so. You might think that if he often doesn't give us what we ask for, we would stop looking to him. But the fact is, as we pointed out last week, *precisely because we have nowhere else to turn*, precisely because there is so much we desperately need that the world cannot give us, we must look to him and continue to look to him. God would have us depend upon him and trust in his Son while we are in this world. There is the true meaning of life and unanswered prayer is the divine means to our recognizing that fact. A parent who gives his children everything they want soon discovers that he is no longer a parent, he is a soda machine, and that is all he is to his children. You know God will not permit that to happen in his own family!

In all these ways and others we learn in God's refusal of Paul's request, his telling the apostle that his prayer would not be heard, to think of prayer as the intensely personal thing that it is everywhere taught to be in the Bible, the real exercise of faith and trust in a God you know and love, the real conversation of a child with his father, a father who knows best and will do best.

The late Mortimer Adler was, in the opinion of many, the dean of American philosophers. He not only held prestigious professorships at Columbia and at the University of Chicago, he was chairman of the board of editors for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Adler was raised in a non-observant Jewish home and grew up an unbeliever. He was willing even to refer to himself as a pagan and wrote philosophy from the viewpoint of unbelief. From that viewpoint he had, to his own satisfaction, constructed an argument for belief in the existence of God, but that was all: a philosophical affirmation of God's existence. He did not believe *in* God; he only believed *that God exists*. The God of the philosophers, as he himself was fond of saying, is not a God to be loved, worshipped or prayed to.

After a trip to Mexico in 1984, on which apparently he caught some virus, Adler was seriously ill, hospitalized for some five weeks and then convalescing at home for several more months. Adler's wife was Episcopalian and they had attended, as a family, the local Episcopalian church. Shame on that church. Adler recollects that while attending Episcopalian churches as an

unbeliever, attending because his family attended, attending as the author of books of unbelief, no one, including the priests, tried to make him a Christian! But, while he was in the hospital, the rector of that church called on Adler and when he visited he prayed for his recovery. That is what parish ministers do. They visit people in the hospital and pray for their healing. But that simple act would prove to be, in the working of the Holy Spirit, a moment of profound discovery for Adler. As he would later explain, when his pastor was praying for him at his bedside, "I was saying, "Dear God, yes, I do believe, not just in the God my reason so stoutly affirms, but the God to whom Father Howell is now praying, and on whose grace and love I now joyfully rely."

He began to pray regularly himself after that, in his hospital bed, especially at night. The only prayer he knew was the Lord's Prayer and he repeated it, over and over again, he says, "meaning every word of it." "Quite suddenly, when I was awake one night, a light dawned on me, and I realized what had happened without my recognizing it clearly when first it happened." "Here after many years of affirming God's existence and trying to give adequate reasons for that affirmation, I found myself believing in God and praying to him."

Adler would later say, in reflecting on his conversion to Christianity, that for both Judaism and Islam the God believed in is entirely transcendent –outside the cosmos as its creator and governor. Only for Christianity is God both transcendent and immanent – at once the eternal Creator of the cosmos and the earthly redeemer of mankind…" [*Philosophers Who Believe,* 215-217]

What I find intensely interesting about that personal history as Mortimer Adler records it is that it was personal conversation with God, it was prayer, in other words, that was the index of his change of situation. He was praying to God as a person – a most exalted and glorious person, to be sure, but to a person whose love and goodness he now trusted in and trusted himself to. When he really began to pray, he realized that he was really a Christian. When he knew that God was there to hear him and that God was loving and merciful and would attend to his cry, he realized he had crossed over from the God of the philosophers, to the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. To the God who hears prayer.

That is Christian prayer and that is the Christian life, and that is what distinguishes a Christian from a Muslim on his knees, reciting his formulaic prayers or an unbelieving Corinthian in Paul's day, offering his prayer to the gods, hoping to get it just right so that the divine favors would be dispensed accordingly.

I am sure that, just as in the matter of having a thorn in the flesh, so in being refused his prayer Paul here also is every Christian man or woman. We will all pray for what will not be given to us or what will not be given to us except at great length. And the reason is that in prayer we are really talking to our heavenly Father! The reason prayers go unanswered is because prayer is really that remarkable and wonderful a thing!