

Romans: The Good News of God

Some Reasons for Unanswered Prayer

Romans 1:13

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Scripture

Some time ago I read a story about a young boy who was praying for a bicycle for Christmas. But his family was very poor, and when Christmas morning came there was no bicycle.

A family friend, who was not very sensitive, said to the boy, “Well, I see that God did not answer your prayer for a bicycle.”

“Oh yes, he did!” replied the boy, “He said *No*.”

Most of you are aware that *No* is an answer every bit as much as *Yes* is an answer. But I think that the story of the little boy’s prayer does not quite get to the heart of the prayer problem. To receive a bicycle might be nice, but it is clearly not essential. Nor is it spiritual. Most of us understand that when we pray for things like bicycles—such as a better job, more money, success in a business deal, or the resolution of certain personal problems—there is no real reason why we should expect *Yes* for an answer. God may give what we ask for, but then again he may not. And we accept that.

But what about prayers that really are spiritual? What about prayers that are (or at least seem to be) unselfish? What happens when these prayers are not answered? This is where the real problem with prayer lies and why people who have trouble with prayer are not usually novices in prayer, as we might expect—for novices usually do not expect much from prayer anyway. But rather it is the church’s mature believers who usually are the ones who struggle. Usually it is the mature saints who feel the burden of unanswered prayer. It is the godly who wrestle with it strenuously.

So what happens? Unfortunately, some Christians become somewhat fatalistic about prayer. J. Oswald Sanders pointed to this problem when he wrote, “It is easy to become a fatalist in reference to prayer. It is easier to regard unanswered prayer as the will

of God than to . . . reason out the causes of the defeat.”¹

In Romans 1:9-10 the apostle Paul indicates that he has been praying that he might be able to visit the Christians in Rome: “God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God’s will the way may be opened for me to come to you.”

However, he has been unable to do so, as our text for today says. Today, I want us to see some reasons for unanswered prayer. So, let’s read Romans 1:13:

¹³ I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles. (Romans 1:13)

Introduction

This section is an excellent example for helping us understand the problem of unanswered prayer. Why is it such a good example?

First, it is a prayer by an apostle. The fact that Paul was an apostle does not mean that he was without sin, of course. Nor does it mean that all of Paul’s prayers were spiritual prayers. Paul did not pray by inspiration, the way he wrote his letters. Yet he was an apostle, and that means something. It is significant that even an apostle did not have his prayers answered positively, at least, not initially.

Second, it is a proper prayer. Previously I said in Romans 1:9-12 that this section is not a treatise on prayer in the sense of providing a theological explanation of prayer. It is a model for prayer. It is an example for prayer. Still, it is a proper prayer. It is addressed to the Father on the basis of the atoning work of Jesus

¹ J. Oswald Sanders, *Effective Prayer* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1969), 19.

Christ.

Third, it is a prayer for right things. Paul might have prayed for something that would only have enhanced his prestige or personal comfort; that is, he might have prayed selfishly. But that was not the case here at all. Paul was praying to come to Rome in order that (1) he might “impart some spiritual gift” to the end that (2) the Christians in Rome might be made “strong” (1:11). In other words, Paul wanted to assist in the spiritual growth and fruitfulness of the Roman Christians.

Even though Romans 1:9-10 is a prayer by an apostle, is a proper prayer, and is a prayer for right things, Paul **was prevented** from going to Rome. His prayer was not answered positively.

Paul does not give us an explanation of why his proposed visit to Rome was hindered, at least not here. He simply acknowledges that he has been prevented from going to Rome, even though he had planned many times to go to Rome. I am sure that Paul could have suggested a number of reasons why his prayers were unanswered. But he does not, and the fact that he does not opens the door for us to reflect on why prayers like his—including the best of our own prayers—go unanswered.

Lesson

And so today I want to suggest some reasons why perfectly proper prayers may go unanswered, and what we may learn from this. So, here are some reasons for unanswered prayer.

I. We Are Not as Necessary as We Think We Are

First, we are not as necessary as we think we are.

Unanswered prayer may be God’s way of teaching us that we are not as necessary to the work we are praying for as we think we are.

This is the case with Paul, isn’t it? Paul had been praying that he might be permitted to travel to Rome to serve and strengthen the

Roman Christians. But as proper as this desire may have been, it is also clear that the Christians in Rome were doing quite well without him. In fact, they were doing quite well without any apostle or noteworthy pastor. Paul testifies to this when he affirms that their strong faith is being reported all over the world (1:8).

Now, I do not want to be misunderstood at this point. I have absolutely no doubt that if Paul had been permitted by God to go to Rome when he wanted to go, he would have been a real blessing to the Christians there. Moreover, they apparently did need his corrective teaching because it is clear from Paul's letter to them that they were starting to be infiltrated by divisive teachers (15:17-22).

The point is not that Paul could have been a blessing to the Christians in Rome, but only that he was not essential to their blessing. God was perfectly able to bless and prosper the church in Rome without Paul's personal ministry.

Now, this is a lesson that we need to learn. We so often think that we are necessary to the work we are praying for. We assume that if God is going to answer our prayers, then he must work through us as his agents. One thing unanswered prayer may do for us is teach us to pray for blessing on God's work through *other* people.

One of the great missionaries in the 19th century was Hudson Taylor. He went to China because he had a great burden to see the gospel preached to the Chinese people. He learned early in his ministry that he was not necessary to the work he was praying for. Not long after Taylor arrived in China he was moved to pray for two missionaries for each of China's eleven provinces plus Mongolia, twenty-four missionaries in all. He had no means of supporting them, so he prayed that God would also supply the funds. At that time there was no missions agency to send out missionaries.

But Taylor prayed that God would raise up others to do the work of preaching the gospel to the Chinese, and God answered. First with the original twenty-four missionaries, and then with literally thousands who later went to China under the auspices of the China Inland Mission. The growth of the China Inland Mission

(known today as the Overseas Missionary Fellowship) is a great story of God's marvelous provision.

Was Hudson Taylor necessary to the work he was praying for? In a way, *Yes*. His prayers were necessary. But he himself was not the means of conveying the blessing of God to those many provinces of China and Mongolia personally.

II. God May Have Other Work for Us to Do

Second, God may have other work for us to do.

This may have been the chief reason why God did not send Paul to Rome earlier. God had other work for Paul to do. There are two other possible tasks God had for Paul.

First, God wanted Paul to write this letter. Because Paul was prevented from going to Rome, he wrote this great and influential letter. Now, God is sovereign, and I am sure that we would have still received the teaching of this letter, perhaps as Paul wrote to another church. Nevertheless, God did not want Paul to go to Rome; he wanted him to write this letter so that not only the Christians in Rome but in fact all Christians throughout the centuries would benefit from his letter.

And second, God wanted Paul to preach the gospel to other Gentiles. Toward the end of his letter (in Romans 15:21), Paul speaks of his ministry among the remote cities of the Gentiles as a fulfillment of Isaiah 52:15b: "Those who were not told about him [that is, Jesus] will see, and those who have not heard will understand." Then Paul adds, somewhat unexpectedly, "This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you" (15:22). It was Paul's ministry among the Gentiles of Asia and Greece that had kept him from going to Rome. And that is why Paul did not chafe under the hindrances that God sent. He recognized that delay in reaching Rome was for the sake of the Christian mission elsewhere.

We need to learn this, too, and be content through learning it. Let me give you some examples.

Take a man who is in an unrewarding job and who would very much like another line of work. He tells the Lord that he is not being fulfilled in his present employment, that he is not using the gifts he believes God has given him, that he is not getting ahead, and that he is accomplishing little. Each of these points may be true. The work may be unusually frustrating. But God does not give him a new job. Why? We cannot say why for certain, but it may be that God still has work for this man in the job he has, even though he cannot see it at the time. There may be another coworker to help. There may be a moral issue to be faced. There may be a person who needs to hear the gospel and be introduced to Jesus.

Or take another example of a woman who is not married, but who wants to be married. She tells God that she would be much happier being married, that she is not really interested in pursuing a career, and that she does not want to grow old alone. Those are perfectly valid desires. Still, God does not answer her prayers positively. Why? Again, we cannot say why for certain, but it may be that God simply has work for her to do as a single person. He may need her as a single nurse, executive, teacher, lawyer, secretary, or whatever.

If you are praying for something and God is not answering your request with a *Yes*, ask what you can accomplish in the meantime and give yourself to that. It does not mean that God may not give you what you are asking for eventually, but in the meantime you will be doing a good work.

III. There May Be Spiritual Warfare of Which We Are Unaware

Third, there may be spiritual warfare of which we are unaware.

This does not appear to be the case with Paul here. However, in his second letter to the Corinthians Paul spoke of “a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me” (2 Corinthians 12:7). He said that he prayed three times for it to be removed, but God

replied by saying, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9).

This reason that prayer may be unanswered due to spiritual warfare of which we are unaware is vividly illustrated in the life of Daniel. Daniel prayed about a vision that he had seen. But he did not receive an answer to his prayer for three weeks. When at last he did receive an answer, the angel who brought it explained that when Daniel had begun to pray the angel had started out with God’s answer but that he had been resisted by a spiritual being called the “prince of the Persian kingdom.” He was eventually able to come through only because the archangel Michael helped him (Daniel 10:1-14).

Spiritual battles are mysteries to us, because we cannot see the warfare. But there *are* spiritual battles, and we need to be aware of them. They are an important reason why some of our prayers may go unanswered.

IV. We May Have Unconfessed Sin

Fourth, we may have unconfessed sin.

The prophet Isaiah wrote, “Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear” (59:1-2).

If God is not answering your prayers—particularly if he is not answering any of them—one thing you should do is ask yourself is whether you are cherishing some sin in your life. If so, you need to confess it for full forgiveness and cleansing.

F. B. Meyer was pastor of Christ’s Church in London at the same time that G. Campbell Morgan was pastor of Westminster Chapel and Charles Haddon Spurgeon was pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Both Morgan and Spurgeon often had much larger audiences than did Meyer. This caused Meyer to be envious of the other two men. God did not answer Meyer’s prayers because of the unconfessed sin of envy in his heart. After some time, Meyer con-

fessed his sin of envy. He decided to pray for Morgan and Spurgeon. Meyer then discovered that not until he confessed his sin and began praying for his colleagues did he have peace of heart. And he also made this observation: “When I prayed for their success, the result was that God filled their churches so full that the overflow filled mine, and it has been full since.”

Sometimes our prayers are not answered because we may have unconfessed sin in our lives.

V. We May Be Praying with Wrong Motives

Fifth, we may be praying with wrong motives.

James spoke of this when he said, “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (4:3).

Can a person pray for spiritual things wrongly? Yes, of course. A woman may pray for the conversion of her husband, which is a good and spiritual thing to be praying for. But she may also be praying for his conversion with wrong motives. She may not be praying for *his* good—that he may come to know Christ whom to know is life eternal. Rather, she may be praying for *her* good—that it would simply be much more pleasant having a Christian husband around the house or that other Christians would think better of her.

A pastor may pray with wrong motives—for revival, for instance. How? By praying not chiefly so that God may be glorified and people saved, but that his church might begin to grow and other pastors might look up to him as an effective evangelist. In *The Power of Prayer and the Prayer of Power*, R. A. Torrey tells of one minister who was praying for revival so he would not lose his church. He told of another minister was praying to be baptized with the Holy Spirit because he thought he would be paid more if he was.

If we are praying with wrong motives, we need to be changed by God through prayer so we might pray in accordance with his

will and with the right motives.

VI. We May Have Idols in Our Heart

And sixth, we may have idols in our heart.

Some of the elders of Israel once came to Ezekiel to pray with him. But the Lord said to Ezekiel, “Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all?” (14:3).

One Christmas Eve the telephone rang in the office of the pastor of a church in Washington, D.C. that President Franklin Roosevelt attended. “Tell me, Reverend,” the caller inquired, “are you holding a Christmas Eve service tonight?”

When advised that there would certainly be a service that evening, the caller asked, “And do you expect President Roosevelt to attend your church tonight?”

“That,” explained the Pastor patiently, “I cannot promise. I am not sure about the President’s plans for this evening. But I can say that we fully expect God to be present in our church tonight.”

That caller had a greater desire to see President Roosevelt than to worship Almighty God. An idol is anything that we put in the place of God.

Is an idol keeping you from having your prayers answered? Is that idol a person? A boyfriend? A girlfriend? A spouse? A child? Is it your job? Is it your lifestyle? Your social position? Your reputation? Is it your image of yourself? Are you determined above all else to be “successful”?

To place anything ahead of God is idolatry. And it is a categorical prayer hindrance.

Conclusion

Here, then, are six reasons for unanswered prayer. There may be other reasons for unanswered prayer, such as laziness, unbelief, busyness, even stinginess in giving. If you find that your prayers

are unanswered, I would urge you to consider these reasons as to why your prayers are not being answered. But even as you do, I want to urge you to keep praying.

I close with a hypothetical situation. Here you are, someone who has been praying earnestly for something for a long time and have not had an answer. As we have seen, there are numerous reasons why a positive answer may have been delayed. What are you to do? Should you keep on battering the doors of heaven with your petitions? Or should you accept God's apparent rejection? Should you just quit praying?

The answer is in Jesus' parable of the persistent widow, which, Luke tells us, teaches that we "should always pray and not give up" (18:1). Prayer may change our circumstances, as it did for the persistent widow. Or prayer may change us so that we begin to see things from God's perspective. Whatever the case, we must keep praying.

Paul kept praying, and he eventually did get to Rome. He did not get to Rome at the time *he* thought most opportune, but God took him there at *his* most opportune time.

George Mueller kept praying too. When George Mueller was a young convert he began praying daily for five friends to come to know Christ as Savior. Two friends became Christians within two years of his own conversion. But it seemed as if his prayers for the remaining three friends would never be answered. But they were. One of those men was converted about ten years after Mueller's conversion. The fourth apparently was converted shortly before Mueller's death, in response to what was probably Mueller's last sermon. And the fifth man was converted within a year of Mueller's funeral. George Mueller had been praying for him for more than sixty years!

Unanswered prayer? How do we ever know for sure it will remain unanswered? Since we do not, we should always pray and not give up. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the gift of prayer. Thank you that it is so easy to communicate with you.

When our prayers are unanswered, help us to consider some reasons for unanswered prayer. There are many reasons for unanswered prayer, and today we have considered some of them.

Our prayers may not be answered because we are not as necessary as we think we are. Or, you may have other work for us to do. Or, there may be spiritual of which we are unaware. Or, we may have unconfessed sin in our lives. Or, we may be praying with wrong motives. Or, we may have idols in our hearts. Whatever the reason, help us to reason out the causes for the unanswered prayer.

And help us then to conform our lives and wills to your own.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.