

“WHERE IS GOD WHEN... PART #4:
WHEN PRAYER ‘DOESN’T WORK’”
(Psalm 22:1-2; 2 Corinthians 12:7b-9)
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[PROP NEEDED: Series Intro Video]

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-I-

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read Text: Psalm 22:1-2 and 2 Corinthians 12:7b-9 and Pray.
2. [WATCH SERIES VIDEO INTRO (Time: 0:20) – end on this week’s sermon background slide]
3. Have you ever prayed for something – I mean, *really* prayed hard – only to receive what seemed to be stone silence? e.g., you waited and waited and waited... and God didn’t seem to answer.

A–Or perhaps the specific thing that you prayed for *didn’t* come to pass: ...you *didn’t* get that job you were wanting; your relationship or marriage *didn’t* work out; or your loved one *wasn’t* healed (and in fact died).

B–So, where is God when prayer doesn’t work (or at least it *seems* not to)?

C–Well, that’s going to be our focus today as we continue our sermon series wrestling with the tough questions of why a loving and powerful God would allow things like tragedy, suffering and evil in our world. ¹

-II-

4. But to answer it, we first need to know something about **the purpose and role of PRAYER in our spiritual lives.**

A–For example, if it’s true (as I’ve mentioned over the last few weeks) that God is neither the *cause* of nor the one who *prevents* bad things from happening, then *why* practice intercessory prayer at all? I mean, why bother to pray if God is neither to blame nor one who intervenes to spare us of such things?

1–Well, I first need to remind us that though the Bible teaches that God doesn’t *ordinarily* step in to prevent tragedy, suffering, and evil, it also indicates that there *are times* in which He does *just that* – we call them “miracles.” ²

2–And as to details like “how” and what prompts them, we may never know.

3–But my point here is that one reason we pray is because we believe that God not only *can* but also sometimes *does* intervene in times & ways of His own choosing.

B–But beyond this simplistic answer, let’s tackle the more difficult one: *Is the purpose / role of prayer to somehow “move” God to act? ...*

1—...As if God is some cold, insensitive deity up in heaven who *needs* our coaxing and pleading to get Him to actually *do* something? Is *that* the purpose of prayer?

2—Not according to the scriptures.

C—No. There we find that prayer is as much about *US* as it is about *GOD* – that *our* prayers aren't prayed so much to cause *God* to act, but instead to enable *us* to develop a spiritual attitude whereby *we* can see and receive God's presence and action in our midst.

D—And that means that we Christians *can* and *should* pray, NOT primarily to change *God's* mind or move *God* to action, but primarily to prepare *our* heart, mind, and attitude to *perceive* God's presence and action among us as His “answers” to our prayers.³

–III–

5. So with that in mind, let's talk about **HOW it is that God actually “answers” prayer**. In what form do His “answers” come? And How does He use these to enable us to see and receive His presence and work in our midst?

A—Well first of all, we all like it when God answers our prayers with a “**YES**” that exactly matches our request – and many in this room could give testimony of this happening.

B—But since our hang-ups tend to be when we *don't* get a “Yes,” let's look at at least three other biblical “answers” that God gives in response to our prayers:

6. The first one is one we tend to forget: “**SILENCE**.” e.g., we don't seem to “hear” anything (or at least don't hear what we *want* to hear), and so we get mad at God for “not answering” or for “ignoring” us!

A—Now, we need to acknowledge that there *are* times in which the silence we experience is not *God-given* at all, but instead is a product of *our own SIN* – sin that (like static on TV) interferes with us *perceiving* God's “answers.”⁴

B—However, not all “silence” is caused by sin in the life of the pray-er, as today's first scripture (Psalm 22) illustrates:

[**Contemporary Service ONLY:** Read Psalm 22:1-2, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest*”]

1—Now, hopefully you recognize these as Jesus' own words while dying on the cross.

2—And in this instance, had God *actually* abandoned Jesus for something he'd done? No. But the suffering he was experiencing made it *feel* that way at the time.⁵

3–And so it is with us: sometimes in the midst of life’s sufferings, we focus so much on our own pain and hurt that we can no longer *perceive* God’s presence, and so we *say* either that “He’s abandoned us,” or was never with us to begin with.

4–Yet, remember the Old Testament story (1 Kings 19) of God speaking to Elijah *not* through the wind, or earthquake, or fire, but through “*the sound of sheer silence.*”⁶

C–You see, God can and often does “speak” and “answer” us through silence; but we have to first open our spiritual eyes and ears to see and hear it.⁷

7. Another “answer” that God sometimes gives in response to prayer is “**WAIT / NOT YET.**”

A–For example, in the New Testament think about Zechariah and Elizabeth, having to wait to reach old age before they could become the parents of John the Baptist,⁸ and even the disciples being told by a resurrected Jesus to “*stay in Jerusalem until you’ve been clothed with power from on high*” (i.e., wait for Pentecost before sharing the gospel).⁹

B–You see, I believe that God’s “Waits” are merely His way of protecting us from “Yes”-es that we would NOT yet be spiritually or emotionally prepared for, or mature enough to understand or handle.

C–And so, in the same way that we’d say “Wait/Not Yet” to our own children if they asked for a car at age 4, so God does for us if He knows that what we’re asking for is not best for us at that point in our lives.

8. Finally, it bears pointing out that, like it or not, God *does* occasionally give “**NO**” as an answer to our prayers¹⁰ – which means that a *negative* response should not be confused for a *lack* of one.

A–And just like we do with our *own* children, sometimes for our *own* good (or that of others), “No” is the *only* appropriate answer that a loving God *can* give.¹¹

B–In fact, I believe that many (if not most) of God’s “No’s” are merely “Yes-es” appearing in a form/manner that we don’t always recognize or comprehend at first.¹²

1–For example, Harold Kushner once wrote that in response to prayer, “*Sometimes we don’t notice the miracle we actually get. We may ask God to take the tumor away but the miracle may be that we get the resources to live with that tumor.*”¹³

2–Now that was certainly the case with Paul in today’s other scripture from 2 Corinthians 12: ... [**Contemporary Service ONLY: Read 2 Corinthians 12:7b-9...** “*Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. 8Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, 9but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.*”]

e.g., God didn’t take Paul’s “thorn” away, but gave him the strength to endure it.

C–And so, I believe that quite often God’s “No” to what we *THINK* we need is actually His “Yes” to what we *REALLY* need – His “No” to our *WANTS* is a “Yes” to our *NEEDS*.¹⁴

9. Faith helps us see this, and faith also helps us see and perceive all the other “answers” to our prayers, as well – whether they’re in the form of *Silence*, or *Wait/Not Yet*, or even *No*.

–IV–

10. Now, these answers may *disappoint* us, but they need not *disillusion* us. Instead, **what do we do when we get one of these answers?** Let me close with a few ideas:¹⁵

A–First of all, when we don’t get the answer we want, we still need to affirm God’s **PRESENCE** – those answers *don’t* mean that no one’s home up there, but simply that for now, our immediate need is for God to be *with us* through whatever we’re facing.

B–Second, in the face of such answers we should also acknowledge God’s **POWER** – remember that just because God *will* not, doesn’t mean that He *cannot*.¹⁶

C–And finally, in the face of difficult answers, we must also trust God’s **PURPOSE**.

1–Over the last few weeks we’ve been reminded that though God can *fold* tragedy, suffering and evil into His purpose, those things *are not* and *never were* part of His design/purpose for anyone.

2–So though we don’t always know *WHAT* God’s purpose is, we *can* affirm that He *HAS* one, and can trust it to always be good and loving.¹⁷

11. So then, where is God when prayer doesn’t work? ...The same place He’s always been:... Answering *our* prayers with *His* presence in the “tunnel” of life’s tragedy, suffering, and evil.
12. [PRAY]
13. [HYMN: #397, “I Need Thee Every Hour”]

ENDNOTES:

1. In understanding this subject, I recommend two excellent resources: Disappointment with God, by Philip Yancey (Zondervan Publishing 1992); and The Will of God, by Leslie Weatherhead (Abingdon Press 1999).

2. As I’ve mentioned in previous weeks, these times when God intervenes and does miraculous and extraordinary things are the *exceptions* to the norm of Him working through ordinary, earthly means, and through each of us. Nevertheless, they *DO* sometimes occur.

3. For example, in the case of prayers for physical healing, I believe that God uses prayer first of all to help a person be better prepared emotionally, psychologically, and physiologically to receive God’s healing in their spirit (such as a calmness in their nervousness before, during, and/or after their surgery). Only in *extraordinary* cases does God choose to work supernaturally to bring about a divine cure. These happen on occasion, but are *rare* and not the norm.

4. For example, read James 4:3: and 1 Peter 3:7.

5. Notice even how the *rest* of Psalm 22 (Verses 3-5, 19-24) turns the author's original words of despair into an affirmation of hope, starting with the conjunction "yet": "...YET you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame..... But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid! Deliver my soul.... From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me. I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you: You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him."

6. This story is found in 1 Kings 19:4-12, and even though Verse 12 has been translated as "a still, small voice," the more accurate translation instead means "absolute, deaf silence."

7. One online article summarizes the role of silence this way: "What looks like silence and inactivity to us is God allowing us the opportunity to listen to 'the still small voice' and to see the provisions that He has made for us by faith. However, there are times when we have to walk in obedience to the light that God has given us before He sheds more light on our path, because in this age of grace God speaks to us through His Word.... So, when God seems silent to us as born-again believers, it may mean that we have stopped listening to His voice, we have allowed the cares of this world to plug our spiritual ears, or we have neglected His Word. God does not [usually] speak to us today in signs, wonders, fire or wind, His Spirit speaks to us through the Word, and in that Word we have the 'words of life'" [From the website www.gotquestions.org/God-silent-absent.html].

8. Read Luke 1:5-7. To be fair, at the time God's "wait/not yet" probably felt to Zechariah and Elizabeth suspiciously like "No." We sometimes do the same: presume that God's "No's" are just that, when in fact they are "Not Yet's", and we simply haven't given them the time to become "yes"-es.

9. Read Luke 24:49.

10. Author Lewis Carroll once wrote, "I have had prayers answered - most strangely so sometimes - but I think our heavenly Father's loving-kindness has been even more evident in what He has refused me."

11. In fact, we can probably all think of prayers in the past which, in hindsight, we're glad that God *didn't* grant! For example, the "No" for which we should probably be most grateful was given by God to his own son in response to a prayer Jesus made in a garden one night (Matthew 26:39). As a result of that "no", one man died so all could live. (Noted by Rev. Jamie Atchley in his sermon "When God Says 'No'", found online at www.heartlight.org/feature/feature_970625_sezno.html – 11/17/2004).

12. And so, for example, when we receive what we consider to be a "No" to our prayer, then we need to take a good hard look at what we're praying to ask if what we're praying is really what *God* wants or merely what *we* want. Most of the time, it's not that God is not answering, but merely that He's answering in a way that we cannot see because our minds and desires are blinding us to His response. For example, sometimes "No" (or even "Wait/Not Yet") is appropriate because what we're asking is not really good for us – though we may not understand that at the time.

13. Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People, cited in "Understanding the Healing Power of Prayer" by Anna Mitchell, a Prayer Notes pamphlet by Abbey Press (© 2004). Kushner says that when we pray during illness, we need to understand the distinction between "healing" and "being cured" – that God always "heals", but doesn't always "cure."

14. One unknown Confederate soldier during the Civil War once expressed it this way:

*“I asked God for strength that I might achieve,
 I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.
 I asked for health, that I might do great things,
 I was given infirmity that I might do better things.
 I asked for riches, that I might be happy,
 I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
 I asked for power, that I might have the praise of [people],
 I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
 I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life,
 I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
 I got nothing that I asked for – but everything I had hoped for.
 Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
 I am among all [people], most richly blessed.”*

[–Cited in Max Cleland, *Strong at the Broken Places*; Chosen Books, 1980]

This is also how I can make sense of why, when we fulfil the biblical mandate to pray for healing of ourselves or others (James 5:14-16), it doesn't always happen in the way/manner we desire. I think about this in relation to my own history and experience of intercessory prayer: In my twenty or so years of ministry, I'm guessing that I've prayed for about 5-10,000 people (5-10 prayer requests and specific pastoral prayers each week). Of those, I can think of about 2-3 prayers (that I know of) which were answered in a miraculous, extraordinary way of some sort (even if several of them were what I'd call “minor miracles,” like the dramatic healing of a flu. Those aren't very good odds, are they? So some of you may want to go find another church that has a preacher with better odds!) However, in the rest of those cases that I prayed, 95% of the time God answered my prayers the way I prayed them: “*God be with this person; God use the doctors and surgeons in this surgery; give them strength or wisdom through their divorce or unemployment; help them to trust you in all things; etc.*” So I ask: did God answer my prayers? Or were these things going to happen anyway? I don't know. All I know is that in 95% of my prayers, what I prayed for actually happened. And I'm guessing that those odds aren't that much different from the odds of any other serious Christian who has ever prayed for people and situations like these – most things we pray for come to pass just like we prayed, but not all. So, while God sometimes answers our prayers in amazing and miraculous ways, more often He answers them in regular, ordinary ways – often through the work and actions of other human beings!

15. These three were suggested by Rev. Jamie Atchley in his sermon “*When God Says ‘No’*” (preached 11/17/2004), found online at www.heartlight.org/feature/feature_970625_sezno.html .

16. To the contrary: God is able to do abundantly more than we can ask or even think (Ephesians 3:20-21).

17. Read Jeremiah 29:11. While there are times we are later able to discover the reason why God gave us an answer besides “Yes” to our initial request, there are other times in which we may never know God's actual purpose for His answer(s) as long as we live on this earth. That's why author C.S. Lewis says that its in those times when we're praying that we are taking the most profound leap of faith.