

“The Mystery of Unanswered Prayer”

John Ortberg

Well, I want to add a word of welcome. I'm so glad you're here to worship with us. We're going to talk about some very, very important parts of spiritual life today. Before we do that, I actually have three pieces of kind of family business that we have to walk through. They're all important, so I'm just going to ask you to be patient while I do that until we get to the message.

The first one is some of you know our church is affiliated with the Presbyterian Church of the USA, which has just finished its national level meeting. Over the years, people have asked questions about whether our church and the denomination are in sync on some core theological issues. So last year, our elders appointed the task force led by a couple of elders, Milo Medin and Larry Langdon to study and pray and make recommendations on actions.

Now any ultimate denominational decisions will be made by our elders and by you, by our congregation. But we just wanted you to know whatever action is taken by the denomination or anybody else, the leadership of our church firmly believes God knows what is best for human flourishing. That the Bible is our ultimate authority on the subject. That trusting in God's wisdom rather than the prevailing culture has always been central to following Jesus and will remain core to what we teach and how we seek to live as we serve the One who loved us so much that He gave His life on the Cross for our sins. So, we wanted you to know about that.

Second one is, after this weekend, Nancy and I begin a seven week sabbatical. I have never "sabbated" before, but we're enormously grateful to our elders for making this available, and I'm looking forward to it, but I'm aware of the fact that I'm going to really miss being here. We will pray for you, and as you think about it, pray for us.

Then finally, this is my last chance to give you kind of a financial update. Some of you know our fiscal year ends August 31, and we currently have a giving shortfall of nearly half-a-million dollars. In addition to that, on the challenge end, next year, as scheduled the monies we raised through the Open Doors campaign to help run our multi-sites will have been dispersed, so we have to run all of our ministries and programs through our regular giving.

We're praying God will enable us to make up this short fall by the end of this summer so we can go into next season with like full wind in our sails. We know God has not assembled our church or built this team or called us to this moment to just tread water when there are a world of people, our coworkers and neighbors, and sometimes sons and daughters who do not yet know Jesus. Our job is to help everybody we can, people inside our church, people outside our church enter into a life-changing, eternal destiny-shaping relationship with Christ.

With Blues coming, we have had the best process of strategic planning bathed in prayer that we have ever had. I think we have a clearer focus on how God is leading us than we have had, and Blues and I are going to lay that out in September when we kind of launch into the fall in ways I think are just going to thrill our church. I believe God is calling us to go into this fall with a tremendous sense of momentum and a deep conviction about our mission.

So for anybody where this is your church home, what I ask today is...*will you pray?* I am praying for a renewing, reviving work of God's Spirit that actually begins with us. As God prompts you, as you respond and as you give, just know this is a really strategic time.

I was thinking about this...we're so grateful for all the faithfulness and the generosity of so many in our church. If every single Christ follower at our church, no matter what their income level, was fully obedient in the matter of giving, just trusting God with finances, not only would we have everything we need for what God is calling us to do, but there would be a release of a spirit of joy and trust and generosity that would just be irresistible in a culture that is as materialistic as this one. So that's what I'm praying for, and if you would join with me then we'll just pray and see what God will do over these next several weeks.

Now I want to pray for the message right now, so would you join with me?

So Heavenly Father, we long to hear from You in this moment. We're so glad that You are God and You lead and guide us. We want to learn, and so we're listening and we pray with open minds and open hearts in Jesus' name, Amen.

Now we're talking these days about prayer. If you were to ask me, "What is the single biggest motivator for your prayer life?" I could tell you in one phrase, "It's answered prayer." When I pray and God answers, when there is a need, and God, in response to prayer, gives really clear direction, or there is somebody who has been away from God for 20 years and people pray for that person, and they come home, or I'm feeling anxious about something and for no earthly reason, I just get this sense of peace from God, it just makes me want to pray more. The biggest motivator to pray, in my life, is answered prayer.

If somebody were to ask me, "What's the single biggest de-motivator for prayer?" I could tell you that one in two words. Anybody want to guess? Unanswered prayer. Somebody would love to be married, and they pray for years to meet the right person, but they never do. Or somebody wrestles with depression, and they ask God for it to lift, and it doesn't lift. Or somebody gets seriously cheated or wronged in work, and they ask God for justice to prevail, and justice does not prevail.

Everybody in this room has been here. Having deep prayers go unanswered cannot just cripple your prayer life; it can cripple your faith. So, today, we're going to talk about the ache and sometimes it's the agony of...*Unanswered Prayer*. I want to modify a framework from a really good book on prayer. It's called *Too Busy Not to Pray*, written by a guy named Bill Hybels, if you're interested in a good book on prayer.

I want to kind of modify looking at what sometimes goes wrong as we're praying, on the one hand, and then where is God in that? What happens? The first category I would say something like this. Sometimes I'm praying, but the request may be off, and in those times, God may be saying, "No." Now actually, the Bible has quite a lot to say about this subject. The writers of the Bible are not naïve about prayer. It is full of stories about people who ask for something and don't get it. In fact, the Bible might have as many

stories about unanswered prayer as it does about answered prayer.

One day Peter, James, and John are on a mountain with Jesus, and they see Him get radiantly transformed. He is walking around with Moses and Elijah, and Peter says, "**Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah,**" as if they're all three on a par with each other. Peter did not know what to say they were so frightened. Now here is an idea, when you don't know what to say, what option is always available to you? Don't say anything at all. One possibility apparently didn't occur to Peter. He could have just said to Jesus, "I don't know what to say." But instead, he makes this request and it's a bad idea, and Jesus says, "No. We have more work to do. That's the wrong request."

Another time, James and John decided they wanted to upgrade their heavenly seating assignments, so they had their mother kneel before Jesus. Some of you know this story. Now you imagine this. Their mom gets down on her knees before Jesus, and He asks her, "What do you want?" She said, "**Grant that one of these two sons of mine sit at Your right hand and one at Your left hand when You come into Your kingdom.**" Jesus says, "No. The kingdom does not really work by getting your mommy to do self-promotion for you. That's a no."

Another time, they went into a Samaritan village that didn't welcome them. No surprise there. Israel and Samaria had a lot of hostility, but because they didn't welcome them, James and John go to Jesus again, "**Lord, do You want us at this time to call down fire from heaven to destroy them?**" Like, you know, they could just do that. Jesus says, "Appreciate the offer, but no, not now, thanks."

All through the Bible you see this. In fact, on four separate occasions, four different people, Moses, Jeremiah, Elijah, and Jonah all get discouraged and ask God to take their lives. In every case God says, "No, no, no, no." Don't you think when their dark mood was past, they were glad God had said no? Thank God, God sometimes says no. There is actually a country-western song about this. Any country-western music fans in this room?

There is a song by Garth Brooks that hit number one on the charts some time ago called *Unanswered Prayer*. Any of you know that song? It came from a true-life experience. He was actually, one time, at a football game at his old high school, and he saw this girl who he hadn't seen for a long time. She was a girl he just thought was beautiful, and was nuts about her when he was in high school. He used to pray God would make that girl his wife. It didn't happen, and now all these years later, he sees her again and he wonders, *What was I thinking?*

Under his breath, he whispers, "Thank God! Thank God!" Actually, the main line of this song, some of you know this, is, "Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers." Does that ever happen to you? I was at my high school reunion some time ago, and I saw a girl I had been nuts about in high school, just beautiful girl over whom I had hoisted up not a few prayers, and now it was 20 years later, and I looked at her, and saw her whisper under her breath, "Thank God!" Turn to the person next to you and say to them, "You're somebody's unanswered prayer." No, you don't actually have to do that one.

See here's the deal. It is fundamental to the kind of person God is and to the nature of prayer, that God always reserves the right to say no, otherwise, it would be a disaster. Think about this for a moment. Every kind of power human beings have access to, we find a way to use with great destructiveness. It's true for verbal power, financial power, political power, nuclear power. Imagine that in prayer, we had access to supernatural power that would always make things happen the way we wanted them to happen.

It would be a disaster. Anybody who thinks the existence of unanswered prayer disproves the efficacy of prayer just has not thought about prayer very deeply.

This is why it is always wrong (people in churches do this) to look for some magic formula that always makes prayer work. Sometimes people think it's a magic phrase, "If I just pray *in Jesus' name*," that's the magic. Or, "If I add on the phrase, *if it be Your will*," that's the magic. Or, "If I pray with enough boldness or if I conjure up enough certainty or if I just say *I claim this* instead of requesting it." Prayer is not a magic formula.

There is an old Charlie Brown cartoon strip where Linus says, "I have made an interesting theological discovery, if you pray with your hands folded upside down, you'll get the opposite of what you prayed for." Prayer is not an incantation. It is a talk with a Person...a very, very wise Person. So sometimes our requests will be wrong, and God will say no, and thank God He does. I'll tell you, the single most common wrong request, "Lord, change her. Change him. Make him be like I want him to be. Make him do what I want him to do." Some of you have been praying for that a long time.

Now, it's good to ask God to shape the people in our lives, but on that request, a lot of times, if we're honest, what I'm really praying is, "God, I don't want to face the reality of my own immaturity, so would You reshape this other person into someone who will accommodate my dysfunction and feed my ego?" Now, if I pray that, there is a really good chance God is going to say no because it's just a wrong request.

As a matter of fact, relational brokenness is one of the primary blockers to prayer. Jesus is talking one time about prayer in very inspiring ways, but one of the caveats He adds is, "***When you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them so that your Father in heaven may forgive your sins.***" Because if I'm clinging onto unforgiveness, it's going to lead to all kinds of wrong prayers.

It's not a magic incantation. It's part of life in a kingdom of persons and asking. So it may be if you're experiencing no, maybe there is a request that is off and God is going to say no. Sometimes the request may not be a bad one in itself, but it may be a timing deal. Sometimes the timing is wrong, and then God may say, "Slow." This is not no; it's not yet.

Again, a whole other category in the Bible. It's full of this where God's response to people is, "Not yet." Abraham had to wait years, decades until he was 99 years old before he finally receives a son from God, an answered prayer. Israel had to wait 40 years in the wilderness before it got to the Promised Land...not yet, not yet, not yet. Joseph had to wait two years in prison after he had interpreted the cupbearer's dream before he was released.

David had to wait a whole lifetime for his prayer for the building of a temple to be answered, and he never got to be the one who to build it. Israel had to wait century after century for the Messiah to come. Sometimes the request may be right, but not the timing. So you see this great statement from the prophet Isaiah, let's read these words together out loud. "***They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.***" And what's the word up there nobody likes? *Wait*.

There a study from a guy at Stanford, Philip Zimbardo. He writes that people are becoming emotionally upset at how long it takes their computer to turn on. Anybody here ever experience anything like this? You think about it. What does it say about human nature? We have access to more information than anybody in human history. We live in an unbelievable world. We can communicate instantly with anybody on the globe. We have all the learning of human history at our fingertips, and we get foot-

stomping mad when it takes the terminal 30 seconds to light up.

Parents, one of the main character qualities you want to pass on to your children is patience, the ability to tolerate delayed gratification with grace and honor. Do you build patience into a child by making sure they get every whim and desire gratified immediately? Not a good idea. God knows all about this.

Peter put it like this, ***"But do not forget this, dear friends, with the Lord, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promises, as some understand slowness. He is patient. He doesn't want anyone to perish. He wants everybody to repent."*** So sometimes it's a timing deal, and there is going to be this period in here of waiting. Something that is really important to know is a lot of times what God is doing in you while you are waiting may end up to be more important than what it is you think you're waiting for.

Our problem is we're in such a hurry, that even if it's patience we want, we just want God to zap patience into us asap. God uses this waiting period. There is an old saying about God, "God is never late, but He is rarely early." Time is so relative for us. We just have such different perspectives on it.

A guy I know runs national tennis tournaments for all different ages. He was doing one for like super, super seniors, people 90 and over one time. In the finals, there was a guy that was 92 years old playing against a guy who was 94 years old (playing tennis). At one point, the 92-year-old cracked a cross-court forehand and the 94-year-old could not chase it down and he just dropped his tennis racket, and stood up straight and said, "Oh to be 92 again!" Such a relative deal when it comes to time.

We're in such a hurry, and what God wants most in us is not stuff that, because of the nature of personhood, can be zapped into somebody in a hurry. I was talking to somebody recently who was frustrated, young guy, praying over God's will for his vocational life and he didn't seem to be getting an answer. I want to say something critical about how you know God's will for your life: *God's main will for your life is that you become the kind of person He can empower to do whatever you want to do.* Let me say that again. God's main will for your life is that you become the kind of person that God can empower to do whatever you want to do because God made you to have desires to want to do things, to want to do wonderful things for Him and the people He loves.

When I was finishing college, I spent long hours praying, sometimes to the point of tears because I was so frustrated, "God, what do You want me to do? I don't care what it is; I'll do anything...just tell me. Put it on a postcard, something." I never got an answer, and I finally just had to choose. What I didn't understand for a long time is that God's main goal for my life is not just the work I do, it's the person I become. The main thing God gets out of your life is you.

Now parents understand this. When you have kids, it's not a good idea to always tell them what to do because if you're always saying, "Wear these clothes. Take this job. Marry this person. Move to this area. Go to this school," they never learn to make choices, and they never develop judgment and wisdom and responsibility. They are stunted as persons. Sometimes a wise parent will make sure the child has to choose. There is no other way to grow character. God knows all about this.

It took me a long time to realize that what I had really wanted when I was praying was I wanted to avoid the responsibility and anxiety of having to make a difficult choice. I was really...I didn't know it, but I was kind of trying to use prayer as a crutch to not have to have the anxiety and responsibility to make a hard choice. God knew I would grow way more if I had to think and get wise counsel and choose and take

responsibility than if I just got a postcard from heaven.

Looking in the rearview mirror, I can see how God was at work in ways I could never see ahead of time. So I'm so glad God said not yet on that one. Sometimes the timing is off, and God says, "Slow." This one is kind of humbling. Sometimes there is something off in me and God will say, "I want you to grow." Sometimes there is a blockage in my life God needs to deal with. This is from Isaiah, ***"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."*** Those are sobering words.

It may work something like this. One of the first times I decided to go for an extended time to pray, I would start praying and my mind kept wandering. Has anybody here ever have your mind wander when you're praying? In my case, it kept going to this guy I was really mad at, and I would end up with just these weird anger fantasies about some guy I was mad at. I remembered there was this really strange prayer in the book of 2 Kings. Elisha has some young boys who are teasing him about being bald, and he actually prays for God to send a bear to chase those boys away from him. I thought, *I could pray that prayer for this guy.*

I realized my anger was like the elephant in the prayer room, and while I was holding onto that, I was not free to pray with open hands before God. It didn't mean I could make the relationship turn out the way I wanted it to, but there is a big difference between nursing a grudge and surrendering it. Is there any sin in your life that needs repenting of because it's the nature of being a whole person, I can't really open myself up to God when I'm trying to hold onto a sin I know displeases Him.

Another area, this is from Proverbs, chapter 21. Never thought about this until just getting ready for this message. Let's read this together out loud, ***"If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard."*** Doesn't work to come to God with a big request and clenched fists. Maybe God is saying, "Grow in generosity."

Blues talked about a grow response last week. Paul came to God and said, "God, just take away this thorn in the flesh. It's painful. I don't like it. Take it away." God says, "No Paul, you will be more humble, you'll be freed from arrogance that could just eat you up if you live with this painful reminder of your littleness and My bigness and My grace will be sufficient for you."

Sometimes what God says to people, people come to God with an anguished prayer for God to do something, "God, do something about poverty, or about folks who don't know You, or about hunger, or about AIDS." Sometimes people will come and ask God to do something in prayer, and then God will end up asking you, "Will you do something about that?" A lot of times prayer works that way. You come to God and what God is really saying is, "I want you to grow."

So sometimes the request is wrong; God says, "No." Sometimes the timing is off; God says, "Slow." Sometimes there is something wrong in me, and God is going to say, "Grow." One more category, this is the hard one. Sometimes people ask for really good things with really good hearts, and that prayer does not get answered, and I don't know why.

I got a letter this week from somebody who lives far away. He has an eight-year-old daughter who has been diagnosed with a disease that is life-threatening and debilitating. He wrote to me, "Every day, I pray for her healing. Every day I pray to understand. Every day I ask God, 'God, would you make me sick

instead of my little girl? Let me suffer.' I'm so mad at God. I'm trying to hang on, but I'm so mad. Why is heaven silent on the one prayer I most want answered?"

And everybody in this room has been there. Some are there right now. I cannot point you to an explanation that has all the answers because nobody does, any faith or position. I can only point you to a Person. I can only tell you that at the heart of the gospel is an unanswered prayer. Jesus, kneeling in the garden prayed, "Father, if it is possible, may this cup, this suffering, this death be taken from Me. Yet not My will, but Yours be done."

This is the most desperate prayer ever prayed from the most discerning spirit that ever lived, from the purest heart that ever beat, for deliverance from the most unjust suffering ever known, and all it got was silence. Heaven was not moved. The cup was not taken away. The request was denied.

From that unwanted, unmerited suffering came the hope of the world that remade history. Because the ultimate answer to every human anguish, including the anguish of unanswered prayer, is a sin-stained, blood-soaked Cross where God Himself suffered. Nobody has all the answers, but I was thinking this week, *What if all those hard prayers were answered yes?*

You know Israel was the people of God and they had a dream to be this great nation, and they lost that dream. They ended up losing it and having to go into exile. It was horrible. It was painful. It was suffering. They cried out, "God, don't make us go into exile." What if God had said yes? What if Israel had become this great world power with lots of money and big armies, never had to go into exile, kept her faith all to herself, never had prophets who dreamed of another kingdom, of a better kingdom, of a spiritual kingdom the whole human race could be invited into?

Paul prayed, "God, would You take away my thorn?" And Paul was obedient to Christ in unbelievable ways. What if God had said yes? What if Paul had been healed of his thorn of the flesh and had become even more impressive and traveled even more, and learned to boast in his great strength and his great giftedness, and turn the movement of that early church into a monument of human greatness? This is what usually happens.

Jesus asked in Gethsemane not to be crucified. What if God had said yes? What if Jesus had been spared that cup? What if there had been no Cross, no death, no tomb, no resurrection, no forgiveness of sins, no outpouring of the Holy Spirit, no birth of the Church?

I don't know why some prayers get yes's and some prayers get no's. I know the anguish of a no when you want a yes more than you want anything in the world. I don't know why. I only know that in the Cross God's no to His only Son was turned into God's yes to every human being who ever lived.

Would you pray with me? In this moment of praying to God, with God, which we're talking about in this series, God is right here now. I think He would invite you, whatever your ache is, wherever there is a no that you want so badly to be a yes, would you bring it to Him right now? A dream, a disappointment, a problem in your health or the health of somebody you love, a crushing burden in your finances or your work, somebody you have lost, somebody that is a long way away from God.

Heavenly Father, we kneel now at the foot of the Cross of Jesus. Would You speak to us in this moment? Would You bring healing through Him right now? We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.