

Sermon Title: When Prayer Doesn't Seem To Work  
Scripture Text: Matt. 6:15 (Sermon on the Mount #23)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 1-31-21

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Come with me—we are continuing in our studies in the Sermon on the Mount. We've just finished what is usually referred to as "The Lord's Prayer"—the sample prayer that Jesus gave to the disciples. This morning, if you look at the outline, you'll see that it says our reference is Matthew Chapter 6, Verse 15; and I want to tell you that, that reference in the outline is a ruse, because when this recording is uploaded to the internet, I want it to appear on our website and in Sermon Audio in the midst of our study in the Sermon on the Mount; so it'll think that we talked about Matthew Chapter 6, Verse 15. So I just chose that reference to make it get placed in the right way, because what I want to do today is like the conclusion of the previous two sermons that we didn't have time for.

I've been doing extra reading about prayer during the weeks that we studied the so-called "Lord's Prayer." I even got a couple of bonus weeks to ruminate on the subject of prayer, thanks to Covid-19. And I want to take a little bit of time to encourage you with some added perspective on prayer.

We've learned that prayer is a great privilege (Ps. 8:4). I mean, *the God of the Universe*—Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and Earth—*will listen to me*, His adopted child? (Rom. 8:15; Eph. 1:5; 1 Jn. 3:1) What a privilege that is! We can call Him "Father" because we are now reconciled to Him (Rom. 5:10-11), and clothed in the righteousness of Jesus (Is. 61:10; 2 Cor. 5:21; Col. 1:22; Phil. 3:9).

Prayer certainly is a privilege. Consider this, for example: Psalm 34, Verse 17—"The righteous cry, and [Yahweh hears]—the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles." (NASB-1995; and throughout, unless otherwise noted) Or in the New Testament, you're familiar with First Peter Chapter 5, Verse 7—"...casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you" (cf. Ps. 55:22)—God *caring for you*, and *loving* to hear you speak to Him! (Prov. 15:8b)

Now, you know that's true. You're a believer. I trust you understand that you can cry out to God at any time (Ps. 46:1), and He knows what you need before you even ask (Matt. 6:8). You know that He cares for you.

But if you've been a Christian more than maybe since yesterday afternoon, you also know the experience of what we usually refer to as "unanswered prayer." One of the ones that I read in my little excursions recently put it this way: "And yet, what do we often experience in the Christian life? Unanswered prayer. We ask, and do not receive. We seek, and do not find. We knock, and the door is not opened. At times, heaven's doors seem barred to God's children. Every believer has experienced God saying 'No' to his or her most sincere requests."

But you know, it's not just *our* problem. It's not just even our era. It happened to Abraham; remember how he poured out his heart to God, and even *bargained* for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to be spared? (Gen. 18:20-33)—yet, they were destroyed (Gen. 19:24-25). It happened to King David when his son died (2 Sam. 12:16-23). It happened to him again when he wasn't allowed to build the Temple (1 Chr. 22:8-10). Or, to the Apostle Paul, when the "thorn" in his "flesh" wasn't removed (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

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In a sense, you could say it even happened to Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me"—but immediately, He said: "Yet not as I will, but as You will" (Matt. 26:39). But He knew (see Matt. 26:53-54).

The Psalms often mention unanswered prayer. Psalm 22:2—"O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer; and by night, but I have no rest." Psalm 42:3—"My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?' " In other words, people *seeing* that this guy's prayers aren't being answered; and that was yet another wound. Or, Psalm 88:1-2—"O Lord, the God of my salvation, I have cried out by day and in the night before You. Let my prayer come before You; incline Your ear to my cry!" And the implication is: "It doesn't feel like You're listening! Please, hear me!"

So today, I want to pause, if you will, from our forward progress in the Sermon on the Mount, and I want to encourage you on the theme: "When Prayer Doesn't Seem To Work." Sometimes, it's easy to think that. We're going to see four categories of thought; they aren't in a particularly logical order, or any such thing.

The first one is: When Prayer Doesn't Seem To Work—When God Says "No." Consider with me a familiar Bible scene. You that have been to Israel—you that maybe were with me a couple of years ago—you know where Bethany is: right around the backside of the Mount of Olives from Jerusalem; you maybe even stood there. That was where Mary, her sister Martha, and their brother Lazarus lived—very special friends of Jesus.

Consider the scene there in Bethany; and Lazarus is lying on his deathbed. Jesus *isn't around*; He's a couple of days' journey away. Lazarus's sisters, Mary and Martha—also very special friends of Jesus—they send word to Jesus: John 11:3—"So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, 'Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick.' "

Skip down a couple of verses to Verse 5—"Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was." And notice: "*So...He stayed*" there—He *loved* them, so He *didn't come* when they asked Him to come! Mary is going to say the same thing later to Jesus about their mutual love, and the sisters are going to cry out: "If only You had been here, our brother would have lived!" (see vs. 21, 32). They *knew* that Jesus could heal their brother. They even knew that He didn't have to come to heal him—He could have healed him from *far away*! He did that several times (e.g., Matt. 8:13; 15:28). They were crushed that He delayed.

Jesus *finally* shows up; by that time, Lazarus is in the tomb; he had been dead for *four days*. And you know what happened then. What Mary and Martha and Lazarus *did not know*, though, was what Jesus told the disciples when the message came about Lazarus's impending death. I skipped past Verse 4, but look at it: "But when Jesus heard this, He said, 'This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it.' " Now, even though Jesus said that then, the messengers probably sent that message back to the sisters; but those words didn't help—not the way they felt. Imagine the agony that they experienced!

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Now, understand: It wasn't an *evil* thing, that they wanted Lazarus to be healed immediately. It wasn't an evil thing that they wanted their precious Lord to come. But He didn't come *for four days*. They cried; they mourned; they threw themselves into the funeral preparations. And for those four days, the text doesn't *say it*, but I'm *sure* they were wrestling with the issue of, "Does He really love us? I mean, is our relationship what we *thought* it was?"

Don't look down our noses at them; you've had the questions: "Lord, why didn't You answer my prayer? Why are You not *easing this pain*? Why are You not taking away my sorrow? Haven't you seen my tears? I've asked with hope. I'm *asking in faith*, Lord! I *know* You have the *power* to take care of this thing! I know You love me! So why have You not moved in this situation, to grant some relief?" And maybe in your worst moments, you're thinking: "Does prayer actually *work*?"

Look, when you go through something hard, the pain is *real*. It's part of living in a fallen world! Go read Romans Chapter 8—"The whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit"—*even* the children of God, *even* those who are described at the beginning of that chapter as those for whom there is "no condemnation"—"even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body" (vss. 22-23).

But it may be, when you are groaning with the inevitable pain of the sorrows and the wounds, the bruises of this world—it's easy to forget: The answers to your questions have *already* been given; and I want us to massage them a little bit today.

The ultimate explanation for any prayer that is not answered is what Jesus said in John 11, Verse 4: It is "for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it." Understand what Mary and Martha couldn't possibly have understood: They didn't know it at the time, but that whole incident of Lazarus's death, and the *timing* of Lazarus's death, and the *location* of Lazarus's death, and Him *raising him* from the dead—that was all part of the unfolding plan that was going to take Jesus to the Cross! And it *had* to unfold that way so that He could go to the Cross and accomplish something *far more spectacular* than physical healing, *far more spectacular* than the fact that He *raised* Lazarus from the dead!

And do you know: Jesus arranged for Lazarus to die and be raised then, *specifically* to *again* stick the spiritual finger in the eye of the Pharisees? They hated Him so much, and so He sneaked right up to Jerusalem—where there was a "hit" out on Him—right into the backyard of Jerusalem, raises Lazarus, and leaves again. And remember, *they even wanted to murder Lazarus* then (Jn. 12:10)!

This was all part of a plan that those three couldn't possibly have known (Acts 2:23); but through what God was doing, their sins were going to be washed away because their beloved Jesus was going to take them on Himself (2 Cor. 5:21; cf. Is. 53:5-11; Matt. 20:28; Jn. 1:29; Heb. 10:10, 12, 14; 1 Pet. 3:18; 1 Jn. 3:5).

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Now, if you read carefully in John 11—I've already mentioned a couple of the places, but you'll see several references to the fact that Jesus *loved* Mary and Martha and Lazarus—and yet, He delayed. He loved them, so He stayed put for two days, and didn't show up until two days after that. He let Lazarus die; He let the sisters mourn. Draw the lesson from that, my friends: His love for us is *not negated* by us experiencing the universal effects of the Fall—including even death. His love for us is not negated by what we perceive as unanswered prayer.

I alluded to it already, but there's another passage that teaches us that sometimes, God does not give us what we ask because, not just glorifying Himself, but more personally: Sometimes He does it because it is in *our* best interest, spiritually, that we not get what we ask for (see Rom. 8:26).

I'm thinking of Second Corinthians Chapter 12, Verses 8 and 9. That chapter begins with Paul recounting some spectacular visions that he has; and he said, "You know, in light of the abundance of what I have seen, God gave me something to keep me humble: it's called a 'thorn in the flesh' (vs. 7)." Now, there are approximately a bazillionteen views on what the "thorn in the flesh" might be, and if anybody tells you what it is, *they're lying*, because they don't know—unless they *happen* to be the one who made the *one* right guess! I have my view; you can get to heaven with *your* view. Look at this: The point is, as Paul says: "Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." If I get everything right, if I get all of my prayers answered, it might look like I'm in charge—and God knows better than to let me think that!

So, every trial you face, every pain you endure, every prayer that you moan to the Lord in your worst hours...*every one of those* is an opportunity for you to learn more about—look at the text—the "grace" of God, and His "power" to see you through, His "power" when you're exhausted. Along the way, you will continue to grow. But like we sang earlier in the service: when you "Turn your eyes upon Jesus," and "look full in His wonderful face," "the things of Earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace" ("Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus," by Helen H. Lemmel, 1922). Guess what passage that songwriter was probably thinking of when she wrote those words? "The things of Earth"—those things that *God doesn't seem to be answering*—Ah, but He has a plan, and it's about His glory and His grace! (cf. Deut. 8:16; Rom. 8:28)

So think about When Prayer Doesn't Seem To Work—sometimes, it's when God says, "No"—because He sees infinitely more than we do (Jn. 28:24), knows infinitely more than we know (Ps. 147:5), and has the power to work everything for His glory (Eph. 1:11).

But there is *another* reason that prayer might seem not to work, other than just getting all lofty about the sovereignty of God, and Him saying "No" for His glory and for your growth in His grace: Sometimes, *you* are part of the problem. Our motives can be off track, so that we pray—even earnestly, even passionately—but we don't *really* want what glorifies God.

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James, the half-brother of Jesus, explained why it's so easy for us to get testy with each other, even to get discouraged—even to pick fights, for that matter. An excellent passage to go to whenever you have a conflict—before you start working on *anything* to do with the relationship or with the other person—here's a great passage to go to: James Chapter 4, Verses 1 through 3—"What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?" Now, who is he writing to? Christians—people who "hold" their "faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ," as he puts it in Chapter 2, Verse 1—"Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust"—now, that doesn't have to be a *sexual* thing; it's just a strong desire; you *want* something—"You lust and do not have; so you commit murder." Now, that doesn't mean that you would kill somebody when you don't get what you want, but remember: Murder is the same sin as anger (Matt. 5:21-22)—that's the point of this! "You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask." Sometimes, you haven't even stopped to *call* upon the Lord! You think you've got this all figured out—you can handle it all on your own! "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures."

Look, if we have learned *anything* from the Lord's Prayer, our heart has to be crying out: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). My prayers are going to be *very limited* in their effect, if *I only want what I want!* I have to want something *far more glorious* than that: the glory of God!

If prayer is part of your relationship with God—and it is—listen, I promise, you're not going to find it unless you can truly say: "Your will be done"; you have to *want* what *He wants* (1 Jn. 5:14). If your goal is, like Francis Schaeffer coined the terms: personal peace and affluence—well, you're not going to be getting what you're asking for, most of the time. You can expect your loving Father to *chasten* you if your motives are wrong, rather than to reward you.

Now remember: as we worked through the sample prayer that we call the "Lord's Prayer"—and the postscript to it, in Verses 14 and 15—remember that repeated emphasis on forgiveness? That means that how we conduct ourselves in our relationships has a lot to do with godly praying.

Let me give you a really pungent example. Approximately half of the people in the room are going to say, "Whew! It doesn't apply to me! It only applies to the men!" No, wrong—it applies *both ways*; but it's addressed to men: First Peter Chapter 3, Verse 7. I've preached whole sermons on this verse many times, along with the companion verses to wives before this, and the parallel passages in Ephesians Chapter 5 and in Colossians Chapter 3; but listen to this—and remember: Jesus connecting forgiveness with praying: "You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life"—now, it would have been *just fine with me*, if he had put the period there; but it continues: "so that your prayers will not be hindered." Ouch! That's pretty strong! You can go study that until you're blue in the face to try to make it go away, but *it means what it says!*

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Something is more difficult about your prayers; and when you look at that word "hindered," it has the root of that Greek word from which we get "copious"—it's a word used for laboring; it's going to make it harder in your *praying*, if you don't have your relationships right—*especially*, let's start with the closest ones to you, like your spouse!

We're not going to turn there, but you might do well to also check out what James Chapter 1, Verses 6 through 8 says about being "double-minded" (vs. 8). What does it mean to be "double-minded"? Well, that's a person who has feet in two worlds—someone who belongs to Christ, but loves the world, who isn't willing to humble himself; and he says: "That man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord" (vs. 7).

So, when it feels like Prayer Doesn't Seem To Work, sometimes it's God saying "No" because He has a *far broader plan* than anything you are able to see (Is. 46:10). And sometimes, it's because maybe *you* don't have your motives in the right place.

There's a third consideration here—and as I said, these aren't logical points that build on each other, but this is part of my conclusion to the previous two sermons. Sometimes, it's when we *twist* the subject of forgiveness. Remember that great emphasis on forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer, and immediately afterward. If you ignore how much God has forgiven you (Matt. 18:24, 32), you won't be the kind of forgiving person that you need to be in order to accurately represent Jesus Christ to the world (vss. 29-30). Review those last two sermons if you need to nail down that emphasis; it's all there, and it's vital to the health of your prayer life.

But I want to mention two specific things that I have heard countless times which relate to the subject of forgiveness, but get it twisted and get it confused. First is a phrase I am sure you have heard—and likely, you've said it sometime: "I can't forgive myself." Now, I know what that means: It means that you did something that was *awful*; and when you think about your sin, when you remember it—even though you may *know* all the right theology about the Cross and propitiation and redemption and forgiveness and adoption and all of that—those feelings of guilt can just come *washing* over you every time you think of that thing; and if you only had one, boy, are you blessed. But you can get stuck in a frustrating loop of really bad doctrine going to seed.

The truth about this is very simple: You *don't need* to forgive yourself. The *very idea* of "forgiving yourself" is *absolutely foreign* to the Bible! I thought about putting up a blank slide on the screens, and saying, "Here's the list of the Bible verses that tell you that you need to forgive yourself. The Bible says *a lot* about guilt. The Bible says a lot about forgiveness. But it *never once* even mentions forgiving ourselves! We are called to forgive other people. We are called to *seek* forgiveness when we have done the wrong. We are called to cry out to God for forgiveness, for mercy, for salvation. But we are *never* told that we need to forgive ourselves—and for *very good reason*. Think about what it means if you even think you *can* forgive yourself! Self-forgiveness would be saying *you* have the authority to choose if your sins are forgivable or not! To say, "I can't forgive myself" is, in essence, to say: "I'm struggling with being God! I can't get there!" That's because *you're not God!* (see Ps. 51:4a)

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Jesus paid the *full price* for your sins when He died on the Cross and rose again (Rom. 4:25; Heb. 10:14; 1 Jn. 1:7; 2:2); He *did not* pay a *part* of the price, and then say, "Okay, now you see what I did—go finish the project! Now *you* 'top off' the forgiveness! *You forgive yourself!*" He doesn't say that! He *fully* atoned for *each* of your sins (Heb. 10:18; cf. Is. 53:11; 1 Pet. 2:24; 1 Jn. 2:12). He bore *all* of God's wrath that you and I deserve because of our sins (Is. 53:8b; Rom. 5:9). *It's all done!* There isn't any more forgiveness that I *could* give myself, even if I was able! (Jn. 19:30) If you really can free yourself from guilt by forgiving yourself, then you think that you can do a work that *you're not called to do* (Mk. 2:7b). You think you can add to what Jesus did for you (Heb. 7:27; 1 Pet. 1:19). No, *receive* the fullness of *His* forgiveness!

You say, "Yeah, okay, *that worked*—and then I remembered it again, and I feel just as terrible *now* as I did the *last* 79 times that I thought of this thing!" So, go again and review the forgiveness you have in Christ! (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Jn. 1:7b) If you find yourself stuck in that loop of "I cannot forgive myself," please, come and talk to one of our elders for help and for encouragement, so we can help you understand God's forgiveness, and the significance of this especially-significant statement in Romans 8:1—"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (cf. Jn. 3:18; 5:24; Acts 13:39; Rom. 8:33-34). So, when you're saying you can't forgive yourself, *you* are heaping condemnation on yourself that *God* doesn't put there! If you believe that something you've done is "unforgivable"—well, you're in direct disagreement with the Word of God (Rom. 4:7-8; 2 Cor. 5:19)—and Jesus died for that sin *centuries before you got around to committing it!* Done! Paid in full! "Once for all" (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 9:12; 1 Pet. 3:18).

There's a second way that I've heard forgiveness kind of twisted, and it hurts prayer life. I have often heard someone say: "I am angry with God." Now, I understand feeling like that; and it's always said from a position of being hurt, being wounded. Maybe you've been wounded by gossip. Maybe you've been bereaved of a loved one. I prayed for a friend of ours whose husband got up Tuesday, did his workout that he always did, and then died—sudden heart attack...dropped dead...with the Lord. What a horrible week! He didn't get up Tuesday morning and say, "I think I'll go be with Jesus later this morning!" You can be wounded. You can be bereaved. Maybe your pet project crashed. Maybe your expectations are disappointed. Maybe your earthly stuff is taken away from you. Maybe your good health is taken from you. And any number of other aspects of the constant groaning that we live with, until we're with the Lord. Those things are *real*.

I have read books; I've read articles; I've listened to people give instructions on how to counsel people who are angry with God. And I've heard how important it is for the counselor to be very patient. You have to encourage the people to express their feelings. They have to "get it all out." I've even heard that you have to let them know: part of this process is that they need to *rage* at God—tell Him why they are angry at Him (Prov. 19:3; cf. Job 38:1-42:6). So-called "Christian Counseling"—distinct from *Biblical* Counseling; "Christian Counseling" is the world of syncretism, where you take the world's view of man and you put some Bible verses on it and call it "Christian"—there's a whole bunch of advice in that world on the topic of being angry with God, and how to deal with being angry with God. And *all* of that advice is dead wrong—*absolutely* dead wrong!

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I have never heard anything more directly Biblical and to-the-point than this statement. Now, I do not intend to go down the slippery slide toward Liberalism by playing video clips for my sermons, okay? But I don't know any human who has said it more openly and directly; and besides, this is R.C. Sproul—he went to be with the Lord in the last year and a half, so if you don't like what he said, take it up with him when you see him.

But, listen to this, if you will: "You know, the New Testament has a lot to say about anger; and it says, 'Be angry' but 'do not let the sun go down on your wrath' (Eph. 4:26, NKJV). But there are also the warnings of our Lord against unjustifiable anger. And there is never *ever* a justification to be angry with God! *How dare you* be angry with the God of the Universe, who does everything well? (Gen. 1:31; Ps. 145:9; Mk. 7:37)

"Now, understandably: when things go wrong and people shake their fists in the face of God, we understand; and as our former president used to say, we feel their pain, and all of that. And there have been lots of people who *have been* angry at God. But when they *are* angry at God, they're revealing that they don't really understand a whole lot about who He is (Ps. 119:68; Zeph. 3:5), and how holy He is (Ps. 92:15; Is. 8:13; Heb. 7:26).

"There's a sign on I-4 that says, 'God is not angry'; and so, there are people who think that it's not right for God to be angry with us (cf. Ps. 7:11). But let me tell you something: He's angry about that sign on I-4! And He is angry about people who say He has no wrath, because the Biblical God reveals not only His 'tender mercy' (Lk. 1:78), but also He reveals His 'wrath' (Rom. 1:18).

"But again: We have *no* just cause *ever* to be angry with God. And if I find myself feeling angry with God, I should say to myself—not 'What's wrong with God?'—but, 'What's wrong with me?' (cf. Ezek. 18:25, 29; Rom. 9:20)."

I don't think you can say it much more clearly than that. There *is* no legitimate reason or justification to be angry with God. But don't misinterpret what Sproul said. That doesn't mean you can't "pour out your heart" to God (Ps. 62:8; cf. Ps. 55:2; 64:1; 102:1; 142:2). It doesn't mean you can't tell Him how much it hurts! We are under orders: "Casting all your care upon Him" (1 Pet. 5:7, NKJV; cf. Ps. 55:22); "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6). Just make sure that you don't end up acting as if *you* are the judge of God, and it's up to *you* to determine if He has performed in a manner worthy of your worship and your obedience and your love! Don't be angry at Him.

Just one of the possible passages we could look at—I thought of many, but let's go to the end of Psalm 42; I read something to you from it earlier. Look at the advice that the sons of Korah give to the soul that is troubled and weary: Psalm 42:9-11—"I will say to God my rock, 'Why have You forgotten me?' " Now, that's an honest statement, right? I feel like You don't remember me! "Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me..." Have you ever broken a bone? It's a unique kind of pain! I've tried it in several different parts of my body; it's *no better* in one place than *any other place*! And he says, spiritually, it's like having my



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*bones shattered* to have my adversaries "say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?' Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me?" Then he writes: "Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God."

Put that together. What is it saying? "Lord, *this really hurts!* And I don't want anybody to think evil of You—*least of all, me*—but I will hope and I will praise, and I will eventually be helped!" That's a reaction of *faith*, in the midst of great pain—crying out to God.

So, let's talk about When Prayer Doesn't Seem To Work. Sometimes it's God saying "No" because "I'm God, and you're not. I see things you don't." Sometimes it *is* a problem with us, and we need to check our motives. Sometimes it is because we are playing fast and loose with that subject of forgiveness.

But if this whole sermon is a conclusion to the last two sermons, this is the conclusion of the conclusion: God hasn't forgotten you! If you plan to forget anything you're hearing this morning, *please* hang on to this! It's the essence of the answer in *every* situation in which you might be tempted to think: "Prayer doesn't work."

Now, please don't misunderstand the purpose of this message. It's *not* merely: "Quit whining and get your theology straight," okay? I do that 51 Sundays a year; this is the one where we'll be a little more gentle. *Of course*, it's *way* more than that! Your joy in Christ would never be—*will* never be—what it can be, if you ignore sound doctrine! So, yeah—*get your doctrine straight!* Get to know God! Like Sproul was saying: If you say, "I'm angry at God," it's revealing you really don't know very much about Him; so, learn about Him.

And of course, whining and complaining *is always sin* (Num. 11:1). Got any doubt? Philippians 2:14. But understand: When you go through hard things, and it might feel to you like prayer doesn't work, that feeling does not mean that God has forgotten you. When you feel like that, I highly recommend you go pore over the Psalms; you'll see over and over, how the writer of a psalm will start pouring out his heart to God in despair, exhausted—maybe even under physical attack, feeling alone, not having *any* idea how he's *possibly* going to get out of this situation. Pour out the heart to God; and then, the writer begins reciting what he knows is true of God; and you get to the end of the psalm, and the person is in despair, exhausted, under attack, feeling alone—*and praising God!* The difference is: Turn your eyes upon Jesus; look full into His wonderful face (Heb. 12:2-3; cf. 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:1-4).

Here's an honest cry of a hurting child of God; it's from Psalm 77, Verse 9. You can't get more poignant than this: "Has God forgotten to be gracious, or has He in anger withdrawn His compassion?" You can actually get to the point that you can say: "In the midst of this situation, God, *where is Your grace?* Are You so mad at me that You're slapping me around?" Well, when you get to a point like Psalm 77:9, the comfort and healing that you long to experience *may not come right away*; it rarely does. It *will* take time. You will need to accept that, and you need to be patient (Ps. 27:14; 40:1; 130:5).

Sermon Title: When Prayer Doesn't Seem To Work  
Scripture Text: Matt. 6:15 (Sermon on the Mount #23)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 1-31-21

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I don't have time to go do an exposition of Psalm 77, but if you go and you look at it, by the time the writer gets to Verse 9 and says, "Has God forgotten to be gracious?" he has already been earnestly crying out to Him; he has said he cries aloud to God; he says, "I sought the Lord...my soul refused to be comforted" (vs. 2). He speaks of even being sleepless. You've been there, right—something hurts *that bad*? He even talks about having trouble putting the words together, having trouble speaking. He moans—but he moans *in faith*. So understand: Even when it feels like prayer doesn't work, God has not forgotten you!

I'm going to read you some words from a fellow-pastor; a friend of mine whose name is Paul Tautges (rhymes with "couches"). I commend to you his online ministry; it's called "Counseling One Another." You can even subscribe to his e-mail list and get his pithy little articles; they're *always* practical. He is one of the most compassionate people that I have *ever* met. He was writing about this psalm, and specifically about this verse. And by the way—he published this in the context of the death of his own father, and how painful that was.

Here's what he says about Psalm 77:9:

"His complaint does not flow from unbelief, but is evidence of an active faith—faith that longs for the completion of the incomplete, the resolution of the unresolved. When the aches of our heart thrust us toward the only One who can bring true, lasting comfort, then they serve a good purpose. Even if we can't see anything good in the tragic event that triggered our grief, turning to God means that we are headed in the right direction.

"Pain has the potential to stimulate growth in our relationship with God, since it often reawakens us to eternal realities. In this way, God can use our sorrow to draw us closer to him. God has not forgotten to be gracious. To the contrary, it is because of His grace that He remembers you. He is nurturing your faith, so that it will not wither or get stale. You are not forgotten!"

If you go on and read the rest of Psalm 77, you'll see that pattern that I mentioned: Out of his grief, the psalmist remembers God's great deeds; and he ends up praising Him, just a paragraph after he asked the question: "Have You forgotten to be gracious?"

So I say, let's talk about when prayer doesn't seem to work. But I want to suggest to you that when we ask the question: "Does prayer work?", I think we reveal an inadequate kind of thinking that comes naturally to our fallen minds. When we say something "works," we think it has to work in the sense that you click the button and the flashlight comes on. "See—it works!" Or, "We called the play in our huddle and it fooled the Defense and we got a touchdown. It worked!" We think of that as what we mean by: "It works." But understand: That isn't the definition of prayer. Prayer works perfectly, all the time, every time, for every child of God—as long as you understand that the purpose of prayer is to allow *you*, the creature—His child by faith—to speak to the God of the Universe; that the way the world that He created works, the goal that we seek *always* in our prayers is His glory (Jn. 14:13).

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In the end, that's going to be obvious—but maybe *not* until the end (1 Cor. 4:5; 13:12). There will come a day when His righteousness and His holiness prevails, His perfect justice is evident (Ecc. 12:14; Lk. 12:2). And there is *no promise* that between now and then, His plan is to make *you* comfortable and happy and wealthy and without trouble! That's the *lie* of the perverted "Health and Wealth Gospel," the "Word-Faith Movement." It's a boldfaced lie! You have to *rip Romans Chapter 8 out of your Bible* for that to be even *remotely*, possibly true! Really, in reality, we *groan* (Jb. 5:7; Ps. 34:19; Jn. 16:33; Acts 14:22). And dealing with prayer that doesn't feel answered, doesn't feel heard—that's part of the groaning.

So when you struggle with prayer, remember: Sometimes it's because God, in His wisdom, is saying: "No. I have a better idea. I see something you don't." Sometimes, in His wisdom, He needs *you* to understand that you're asking for the wrong things; or you're asking for the wrong motive, and He needs you to let His Spirit minister His Word to your heart. Sometimes we need to understand that our prayers are *hindered* because we're twisting the meaning of forgiveness, or we're simply refusing to be transformed by forgiveness. But remember always: God *hasn't* forgotten you—*whatever* your battle is! He hasn't forgotten you!

So, let's pray:

*Our Father, thank You that we can call You that. "Our Father who is in heaven"—You hear us, despite Your transcendence. "Hallowed be Your name"—Teach us to live in a way that it's obvious that we count Your name and Your truth and Your Word and Your character to be holy. "Your kingdom come"—Oh, we yearn for that! "Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus," as the Book of Revelation cries out. "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"—Oh, Father, part of that is under our control; we can obey Your will, Your moral will. Make it so, we pray. "Give us this day our daily bread"—Thank You for being so faithful to answer that, that You provide for us every day, as we need. "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors"—Thank You that Christ is the One who made that possible. "And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil"—Oh, Lord, it's as if we're swimming in a cesspool, in this world around us. Keep us from the Evil One, we pray. "For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever"—Father, make it so, that we say and we show that we belong to Your kingdom. And Father, we do yearn to forgive others for their transgressions, so that we can bask fully in the forgiveness that we have from You. And Father, teach us not to withhold forgiveness, so that we would in any way hinder our prayers and our walk with You.*

*So, Father, have Your way with each of us. Some of the hearts here are probably screaming out right now, how much this thing that they are facing hurts. Remind them, Father—they are not forgotten; that we have, in Christ, the One who is greater than the world; and that You can do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to Your power that works within us. Thank You, in Jesus' name. Amen.*