

THE ENIGMA OF UNANSWERED PRAYER

Text: Matthew 26:36-46

9/2/2012

INTRO: One of the things that often troubles us as believers, and discourages us from prayer is the matter of unanswered prayer. It is some years ago now I was talking to one of my sons-in-law and he asked about prayers that were not answered. I wanted to speak on that, but at that time I felt led to speak of another matter. Today I want to speak about that.

It was about at that time that I was deeply challenged when I read *The Voice of The Martyrs* newsletter. That newsletter carried an article from the writings of Richard Wurmbrand, with whom many of you will be familiar. He and his wife, Sabina, suffered much under communism in Romania. The title of this article is "The Enigma of Unanswered Prayer." An enigma is something obscure or puzzling. Something one cannot figure out. One of the things we cannot figure out is why some prayers go unanswered.

Let me quote from Wurmbrandt. He said, "While in prison in Romania, we heard from the cell nearby how the prison guards beat and tortured people. We heard, 'Ow, ow, ow' -the cries of those tortured during the night. Prisoners prayed for help, but still the beatings continued. Many died under these tortures, their prayers seemingly in vain.

"We had this enigma of unanswered prayers. Some of you have trouble in your family and you pray much about it, but somehow your prayers remain unanswered.

"This erodes the faith of many and they break down. They lose God. Why? It is because their God has been an idol. They believed in God as an errand boy. Many of us believe the same. Every morning we tell Him: 'Dear God, good morning. Please do this and this, and see about my health and the health of my family.'

Those who believed in God as an errand boy had an idol. This idol did not remain; it did not fulfill their errands.

When Jesus was on earth, He prayed with tears, 'Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me.' But it was not taken away from Him. Jesus said in the end, 'Not My will be done but Yours, be done' (Luke 22:42). If there

could be a difference between the will of the Father and of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, how much more so there can be a difference between the will of the Father and the will of Richard Wurmbbrand? His will should be fulfilled, nor ours."

And so, our subject is the enigma of unanswered prayers. Now let me just tell you what I am talking about when I speak of unanswered prayer. Someone has said God's answers may be either , "Yes, No" or "Wait". When I speak of unanswered prayers I am talking about things we ask for but do not receive. So, let us begin by considering a few unanswered prayers in the Bible.

I. SAMPLES OF UNANSWERED PRAYER

A. In Scripture

We do well to be reminded first of all that the prayers of some of God's elect were sometimes not answered. For example in 2 Corinthians 12:8, the great Apostle Paul besought the Lord three times regarding a certain thorn in the flesh, but his prayer went unanswered. Turn with me to 2 Corinthians 12 (read 8-10). Now let me remind us that it is not that God did not hear Paul's request. It was that God decided it was best all the way around to leave Paul with this thorn in the flesh, whatever it was. However, we are not left altogether in the dark regarding why God did not answer Paul's prayer the way Paul requested. First, God said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you." Whatever Paul's weakness was, God said His grace, His provision of strength for Paul was sufficient for Paul." It may be, we do not know, that God knew if Paul did not have that weakness, that horrendously destructive sin of pride might set in and ruin him entirely. It is possible. And God said to Himself, "It is better for his own sake and mine that I have him like this."

Second, God said, "My strength is made perfect in weakness." What Paul lacked by his weakness God's strength could provide, and in that provision, Paul remained a useful servant of God all his days. You see, we do not need everything we think we need. God is much wiser than we are. Some folk tell me it is praying in unbelief when we pray and ask God to

answer according to His will, but I think it is very wise. We are not God. We cannot see what God sees. And like Paul, we need to learn to respect God's answer of "No". God has His reasons and they are certainly better than our reasoning.

But let me remind you that God's "No" to one request is not a reason to stop praying. Paul was a praying man all the days of his Christian life even though this prayer was not answered.

Let me give you another example when God did not answer a prayer, and this, a prayer of His only Son. When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane He prayed for three solid hours for God to remove a certain dreadful cup from Him which He was to drink. It was the cup of our sins. And Jesus shrank back in horror. Certainly this was more offensive to His divine nature, than His human nature. And God said, "No." And He prayed again, and God said, "No." And through that divine 'no', came the greatest blessing on mankind that mankind has ever seen. I do not understand the intermingling of Jesus' human and divine natures. I do understand that God's wisdom is always best whether I can understand or not. It is not only God's "Yes" that is a blessing. His "No" may be among His greatest of blessings.

So Richard Wurmbrandt, speaking of this passage said, "If there could be a difference between the will of the Father and of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, how much more so there can be a difference between the will of the Father and the will of Richard Wurmbrandt?" And you and I could add our names there as well.

B. In Life

Well, God did not always answer the prayers of those we read of in the Bible and it should not surprise us then that not all our prayers are answered either. I have read of some incredible answers to prayer, but I have never read or seen a book on prayers that were not answered. You see, in life there are many prayers not answered. Yet, we do not often hear of these. And for many of those prayers that are not answered, we do not know the reason. But, sometimes when we think

back, we might well say, "Lord, thank You that You did not answer that prayer."

Wurmbrandt, in the article I mentioned said this:
"While in prison in Romania, we heard from the cell nearby how the prison guards beat and tortured people. We heard, 'Ow, ow, ow' -the cries of those tortured during the night. Prisoners prayed for help, but still the beatings continued. Many died under these tortures, their prayers seemingly in vain.

"We had this enigma of unanswered prayers. Some of you have trouble in your family and you pray much about it, but somehow your prayers remain unanswered.

"This erodes the faith of many and they break down. They lose God. Why? It is because their God has been an idol. They believed in God as an errand boy. Many of us believe the same. Every morning we tell Him: 'Dear God, good morning. Please do this and this, and see about my health and the health of my family.'"

How many a martyr has gone all the way to death? And yet, he or she was praying for deliverance. Their family and friends were praying for deliverance. The church was praying for deliverance. Yet the persecutors came, and on the given day, death also came. Hundreds, yes thousands have not had their prayers for deliverance answered. I do not know of any book of unanswered prayers. Yet it is a fact we must learn to live with.

Some, of the charismatic persuasion, say that we do not have money, or a Cadillac or rain, or large houses because we do not pray in faith. Name it and claim it they say. But I do not find that in the Word of God, nor in life. I know there are passages, if used without the rest of Scripture would lead us to think we can name it and claim it. But always we must interpret any given passage consistently with the rest of Scripture.

And so, though we will never know while we are here below, why some of our prayers are not answered, let me give some reasons that are helpful to know why some prayers may not be answered.

II. REASONS FOR UNANSWERED PRAYER

A. Sin

One of the most obvious reasons why some of our prayers may not be answered is allowing un-confessed sin to remain in our lives. Psalm 66:18 says that if we regard sin in our hearts, the Lord will not hear us. We must not think we can live like we want and yet run to God for answers to prayer at the same time. When we have sin, the prayer He will answer immediately is the request for forgiveness when we repent.

B. Selfishness

Another reason for unanswered prayer may be selfishness. James 4:3 says, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures." When once we begin to seek God for who He is, and not for what we want, and our concerns become what His concerns are, we see through how shallow and selfish much of our praying is. It is amazing just how subtly we can make our will sound like God's will for us. Our hearts are very deceitful. It is a most difficult thing for us to even begin to learn how deceptive our own heart is ourselves. We can pray the most pious prayer, and underneath are selfish desires. One of the greatest deliverances we can experience is a deliverance from ourselves.

C. We did not persevere

Another reason our prayers may not be answered is because we did not persevere. There are some things we must keep on praying about. Some prayers may not be answered because we prayed briefly and then stopped. Go with me to Luke 18 (read 1-8). Remember Abraham. How long did he wait for a Son? Andrew Murray has written, "Of all the mysteries of the prayer world, the need for persevering prayer is one of the greatest" (118). Then he says, "Faith alone can overcome difficulty. Once faith has taken its stand on God's Word and the Name of Jesus, and has yielded itself to the leading of the Spirit to seek only God's will and honor in its prayer, it need not be

discouraged by delay. It knows from Scripture that the power of believing prayer is considerable; real faith can never be disappointed. It knows that to exercise its power it must be gathered up, just like water, until the stream can come down in full force. Prayer must often be 'heaped up' until God sees that its measure is full. Then the answer comes" (119).

Let me give you a story I would not dare give if the author was not a trusted Christian writer. It comes from the book we went through at prayer meeting. He tells of an account repeated by Charles Blanchard who was the president of Wheaton College for 43 years. Blanchard heard this story from the man in the story. This man was an engineer on the Pennsylvania Lines. He was not a believer but he had a praying wife. He became very sick and eventually weighed less than 100 pounds. Finally the doctors pronounced him dead. And the wife said, "No, he is not dead. He cannot be dead. I have prayed for him for 27 years and the Lord promised me he would be saved and so he cannot be dead." "Well", the doctors said, "we do not know about that but we know he is dead." And the screen was drawn around his bed.

Well, to satisfy the wife, seven other doctors came and verified he was dead. And so this woman began to pray. Eventually a nurse brought her a pillow for her knees. Finally people already just wanted her to go away but she said, "No, he has to be saved. God will bring him back if he is dead. He cannot die until he is saved." She prayed. Two hours. Three hours. Seven hours. 10 hours. And then, some time after 13 hours of praying the husband opened his eyes and the wife said, "What do you wish?" And he said, "I wish to go home." And she said, "You shall go home." But the doctors raised their hands in horror and said, "It will kill him. It will be suicide." And she said, "You have had your turn. You said he was dead already. I am going to take him home." And when this man told the story of his death and how he came back to life he said, "I weigh now 246 pounds. I still run a fast train on the Pennsylvania Lines. I have been out to Minneapolis on a little vacation, telling men what Jesus can do, and I am glad to tell you what Jesus can do."

You see, there are some testimonies of incredible answers to prayer. Yet we ask, why are some of our prayers not answered? Well, we do not know when we are reading God right. Maybe we do not know how to persevere. Persevering in prayer is costly. Duewel says that such prayer warriors as John Knox, Martin Luther, Adoniram Judso, Praying Hyde and John Knox testify that there is a physical toll from prevailing prayer. He says that Calvin said, "You will never aspire to pray until you urge and force yourselves." Another called prayer, "the gymnasium of the soul." An early church leader wrote, "Believe me, I think there is nothing which requires more effort than to pray to God...Prayer demands combat to the last breath." To quote Calvin again, he said, "Prayer is indeed a continuous violent action of the spirit as it is lifted up to God. This action is comparable to a ship going against the stream."

D. We Were Seeking Our Own Glory

Another reason our prayers are sometimes not answered is that we may be seeking our own glory. Oh what a monster pride is. In Isaiah 48:11, God says He will not give His glory to another. We may ask God for wonderful things but we are already anticipating what wonderful things others will think of us. And behind it all is our own deceitful heart. And when we seek our own glory in prayer, and when we find that prayer is almost 100 percent battle, and glory is very skimpy, many of us drop out. We are not interested in prayer if it is all give and the glory we expect is not forthcoming.

E. Little Understanding of Principles of Prayer

I would like to give as another reason for so many unanswered prayers, is that most of us spend very little time learning how to pray. We just pray. I would say that few areas of our practical daily Christian life needs greater study from Scripture than this one. Oh yes, we might readily pray and give thanks for our food each day, but do we know how to petition God for things? Do we know what His will is in our particular situation etc..

In our community a great tragedy occurred. A death had taken place and the police were called. And some ministers from the church were called. And the policeman recommended that someone should pray. And the prayer that was offered was "Unser Fater", the prayer, "Our Father which art in heaven." No one knew how to pray in that situation. Many religious people do not know how to pray.

At prayer meeting we went through a book on prayer by Wesley Duewel, and when we were done, I think we all felt like we were the very weakest of beginners. We simply do not have a great understanding of the principles God honors in prayer.

F. The free will of man

Then the free will of man may be another reason many prayers are not answered. When we are praying for people, now we enter prayer where another person with a free will is involved. A prayer for salvation of another, for example, requires that that person first become willing to get saved. God will not force someone to get saved because we prayed for them. Many things can come in the way, and such a person may reject salvation all through life. Other times God has to bring all kinds of different circumstances together in order for such a person to seriously consider salvation. Such continual praying can be very discouraging and sometimes we even give up before God can answer.

G. We Mix Up Our Will For God's Will

Another reason for unanswered prayers may be that we mix up our will for God's will. It is amazing what things we claim are God's will, when in fact they are our own will and we have hardly even sought God on the matter. Jesus, in His prayer in Gethsemane eventually said, "Nevertheless, not my will be done but thine." It can be very hard for us to come to the point where we honestly say those words.

H. God Is Not An Idol

Maybe another reason is the one Wurmbrandt gave in the article I mentioned. He said that one of the

reasons God does not answer certain prayers is because He is not an idol. In his article he went on like this after he mentioned how many had died even though they had prayed for deliverance. He said, "We had this enigma of unanswered prayers. Some of you have trouble in your family and you pray much about it, but somehow your prayers remain unanswered.

"This erodes the faith of many and they break down. They lose God. Why? It is because their God has been an idol. They believed in God as an errand boy. Many of us believe the same. Every morning we tell Him: 'Dear God, good morning. Please do this and this, and see about my health and the health of my family.'

"Those who believed in God as an errand boy had an idol. This idol did not remain; it did not fulfill their errands." What he is saying is that if we have God only for what we can get out of Him, He has become like an idol. We ought to serve God for who He is and not for ourselves and what we can get out of Him.

I. The source of the prayer was Satan

How many times do you think we might be praying, but we do not know the voice that is speaking to us is actually the Devil? Do you think that does not happen? When we pray outside of the will of God, who may be influencing us to pray? When we pray for our own desires that are not related to the will of God, who may be influencing us to pray? When we pray to lift ourselves up before others, who may be influencing us to pray? Let us not think the devil does not enter our prayer lives if he can. And then when God cannot answer those prayers, now he uses discouragement and says, "There see! Hah, so much for praying. It is useless."

So, what would happen if God answered every prayer regardless of its content or regardless whether it was for man's glory? I suspect that if answers to prayer came easy, and God would answer every prayer that soon everybody would be praying. And the devil would enter the picture and soon have people ask for things that would ultimately destroy the kingdom of God.

J. We did not discern God's will

Another matter of great importance in prayer is discerning God's will. This is probably one of the biggest. Let me give you an example. Go to Mark 11 (read 23-24). I have told you about the man who prayed for the mountain behind his house to be moved. In the morning he looked out and he said, "Sure enough. Just what I thought. It's still there."

Now, in the context, this passage takes place just a very short time before Jesus is crucified. And as they were walking back to Bethany from the temple one day, they came to a fig tree. It was evening and Jesus was hungry and He went to the tree and it had no figs. And Jesus said, "Let no one eat fruit from you forever." Well, the next morning, as they walked by this same tree again, the disciples got excited and said, "Rabbi, look! The tree which You cursed has withered away." And it is in that context that Jesus gave the verses we just read.

Now here is my proposition for you. The cursing of the fig tree is a prophetic picture. It pictured fruitless Israel. And it will be fruitless until the fig tree once more begins to blossom. Now from that, I believe that this cursing of the fig tree was the will of God to teach a lesson. It was not just because of a personal irritation. And if we had a mountain to move, and knew it was the will of God, we could move it as well. An understanding of the will of God is key. So the man who prayed for the mountain behind his house to be moved was experimenting and God does not experiment well. Herod was interested in seeing Jesus because he wanted to see a miracle, and he found that Jesus is not for experimenting either.

Richard Wurmbrandt, after he mentioned Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, and that it was not answered, wrote, "If there could be a difference between the will of the Father and of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, how much more so there can be a difference between the will of the Father and the will of Richard Wurmbrandt?"

K. We Do Not See The Big Picture

Another reason many of our prayers are not answered is because we do not see the big picture. If we could, we might not pray some of the prayers we pray. And here is one of the reasons why we should conclude at least some of our prayers with these words, "...if it is Your will Lord."

L. We do not pray in faith

Let me mention just briefly, that we should pray in faith. James 1:5-6 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind." This point needs a whole message.

CONCL: And so, in conclusion, some prayers are not answered and we will not know this side of glory why not. God answer every prayer the Apostle Paul prayed. But God did say His strength was made perfect in human weakness. Some things man is best left to suffer with. God knows what is best for us. If He answered some of our prayers, we may be led to ruin. God knows best. There is one prayer Jesus prayed that God did not answer as Jesus desired. The will of Jesus in His humanity was in conflict with the will of God, and understandably so. That was some of the price our Lord paid when He took on a human body to save us. Does God answer all the prayers of all the great saints? No. Should it then not be understandable that He does not answer some of our either?

Now let me ask you a question. What would happen if God answered every prayer, even those that do not follow the biblical principles of prayer? It would be the most disastrous thing that could befall us. I read recently that a mission, the Salvation Army, received a huge donation. Maybe a billion and a half dollars. But the man from whom I read this felt it would not be good for this 150 year old mission.

Now some prayers are not answered because God knows so much better than we do what is good for us and what is not. We are not able to understand some of these deep reasons and do best to accept the will of God. But there are some reasons that we can learn from the Bible, and we do well to

learn the principles of prayers God will not answer. What are some reasons why some prayers are not answered?

Then there are a host of reasons why our prayers are not answered. Let me just list those we have looked at: Sin, selfishness, lack of perseverance, seeking Our Own Glory, little understanding of Principles of Prayer, Some prayers must be prayed a long time, Revelation, The free will of man is involved when we pray for others, we Mix Up Our Will For God's Will, God Is Not An Idol, We did not discern God's will, We Do Not See The Big Picture, We do not pray in faith, The source of the prayer was Satan.