

Feb 28 – Unanswered Prayers

Matthew 26: 36-39

When we start talking about trying to make sense of God's will we always end up talking about prayer. Our ideas and assumptions about prayer lead to questions, to frustration and sometimes confusion. I hope you read this chapter in Hamilton's book even if you read no other. It is excellent in talking about the meaning of prayer in general and why some prayers go unanswered. I am not going to be able to touch on all that he shared, but today I want to lift up a few things, things that I have had to deal with in my own prayer life, and questions I have dealt with as I help others with their own prayer journey.

First of all we need to remember that prayer is not some kind of cosmic vending machine where we slip in a prayer and out pops a miracle. We back up this notion with words from Jesus such as: "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt...even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith you will receive." (Matthew 21:21-22) This statement of Jesus seems to imply that all you have to do is put your prayer into the cosmic vending machine. If you have enough faith your prayer is answered and Jesus words are confirmed. The problem comes when there is no miracle. It is then that people come up with all sorts of reasons why this occurred. Hamilton lists some he has seen: You lack faith; you pray with improper motives, or you have unconfessed sins. This list and ones like it make God into some kind of monster. God says, "I won't heal your loved one, help with this problem....because." Get it right and then the miracle will happen.

This is certainly not Biblical. Jesus healed many people without them having to undergo a rigorous theological examination. In one case, the man who was paralyzed was healed by the actions of his friends! To hold on to the cosmic vending machine idea brings with it all sorts of guilt. God didn't help because of what I did. Then you become part of the problem. Or it brings anger. God didn't help because God set the bar too high. Or it brings confusion. Why did God help that individual and not me? What was so much better about their prayers, their actions, than mine? I hope we can lay aside the cosmic vending machine notion of prayer.

Another thing we need to realize is that prayer is not our instructing God as to what should be done. We are to ask, this is the basis of intercessory prayer, but not to instruct. Yet you see this idea played out subtly in so many ways. I have seen on social media campaigns to get a million people to pray about a situation. It is implied that if we get that many praying then God will have to answer that prayer. Now I am not saying that it isn't good to have as many people praying about things as possible. There are many benefits to having hearts turn as one to God. But to think we can force God by weight of numbers to do our bidding, do we really want this? Or we get upset because we have told God what we want and then it doesn't happen and so we feel rejected. Ultimately, I think we are glad that God does not always listen to our instructions.

We need to realize that the Bible is pretty clear, sometimes prayers go unanswered. Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, facing arrest and death prayed that this cup be removed from him. But he goes on to say, "Not my will but yours." This was an acknowledgement that his prayers for rescue might go unheeded. Or, we have Paul praying that his thorn in the flesh, whatever that was, be removed. He says that three different times he prayed specifically about it, and each time he heard a no and a reminder that God's grace was sufficient.

So when prayers are not answered we need to remember several things. First it is not our fault. If Jesus realized that his prayer might not be answered that should make this abundantly clear and yet we blame ourselves or allow others to heap blame upon us because of mistaken interpretations of scripture when prayers go unanswered.

Sometime when our prayers are not answered we have to acknowledge that they were perhaps not the best of prayers, more selfish than faithful. Adam Hamilton talked about a teenage prayer for God to make a girl in his class like him or for him to pass an algebra test. There was nothing in these prayers about the girl's desires or his studying. He just wanted something and expected God to provide. The infatuation with the girl faded and he learned the hard lesson that studying is beneficial.

Some of our prayers seem to be unanswered because our timeline is different than God's, or what we perceive as the correct outcome is different. Paul wanted this

thorn removed and was told no, learn from it instead. Ultimately Paul came to realize that not having the thorn in his flesh removed made him trust God more and this was his ultimate prayer so he could accept that this intermediate prayer was not acted upon.

Finally we have to acknowledge that there is some mystery to this. Why is one person saved in a car wreck and not another? Why does the treatment lead to healing for one person and for another have no effect? Why do two couples struggling to have a child end up with different outcomes? It is a mystery. As hard as it is to handle we need to hold on to this idea that we can't figure everything out. We cannot allow ourselves to fall back to some of those simple answers that we heard about last week. That lead us nowhere, like it is a part of Gods plan. Instead we have to hold the tension of mystery.

We also need to address what happens when prayers are answered. We need to remember that it's not because of us and what we did or didn't do. We are to be grateful for God's activity in our lives but hold onto the mystery. I do believe God answers prayers. I believe God intervenes in miraculous ways. I have seen too much evidence in people's lives to not believe this but I know not the whys of those actions. I might wish to know more but I am willing to hold it in the category of mystery as I am reminded God is with me.

Prayer is ultimately a journey –Admiral Chester Nimitz described his own experience of prayer.

“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 greater 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 men. 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 hoped for. Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am among all men, most richly blessed.”

To be able to hear and feel God in the midst of unanswered prayers is difficult. Sometimes what we want and need is so important that we don't even want to entertain

the possibility of a no. We have to recall that God is with us, God loves us and no matter what the response to our prayers we are held in the palm of God's hand. The reasons for things happening the way they do may never become apparent. We must learn to love lady mystery as we celebrate God's love for us.