

What About Unanswered Prayers?

The most frustrating thing about prayer is how so many prayers seem to go unanswered. Yet many common Christian responses to unanswered prayer are less than helpful. When prayers go unanswered, it is never wise to quote Bible verses about needing more faith or that we should view our trials as an opportunity to prepare for even greater trials in the future. It is also unhelpful to spout the old Christian cliché that there is no such thing as unanswered prayer. We all know that sometimes God says “No” or “Wait” to our prayers, especially when we pray for things out of ignorance that might actually damage ourselves or others.

These sorts of responses to unanswered prayer are cruel and insensitive when said to the barren mother who prays for God to open her womb, the parents who pray fervently for God to heal a child with terminal cancer, the single person who is lonely and wants a spouse, or to the father who needs work so that he can feed and clothe his family. Are not all such requests within God’s will? Of course they are! Are many of them impossible prayers? Yes! Then why does God seem to do nothing in response to such prayers?

The truth is that I don’t really know. And neither does anyone else. So don’t believe any pastor or theologian who says they do have the answer. Nevertheless, there are several things we do know about how God works through prayer and in our lives, and once we come to understand these truths, we begin to understand why there are so many unanswered prayers.

It is Not a Lack of Faith

When we fail to see God respond to requests that we know are within His will, we must never think that the reason God did not respond positively is because we didn’t have enough faith. Tragically, this is often what some Christians say and teach to others. “If you just had more faith,” they tell the parents at a child’s funeral, “God would have healed your child.” This may be the most damaging lie ever told about prayer.

The reason many people say such things is because there are numerous passages in the Bible which seem to indicate that we must have “enough faith” before God answers our prayers (cf. Matt 13:58; 21:22; Mark 11:24; Luke 7:9, 50; 18:42; Jas 5:15-16). Yet the reason that modern Christianity has a twisted understanding of these passages is because we fail to grasp the nature of faith.

I teach a lot more about faith in my “Gospel Dictionary” online course, but briefly, it is critical to understand that faith does not come in “quantities.” You cannot have 50% faith, or even 99% faith. Faith is more like a light switch that is either On or Off. Yet at the same time, faith is not an “all or nothing” proposition. That is, there are countless truths we can either believe or disbelieve, and they do not all stand or fall together. Some truths you will believe (the switch is On), and some truth you will not believe (the switch is Off). Some of these truths are hard to believe, while others are quite easy. Furthermore, you cannot choose to believe anything. You must be persuaded to believe, based on the evidence of facts which you already believe. Sometimes, when we come to believe something that we previously did not, this new belief has a cascading effect through numerous other beliefs—like a complex Excel spreadsheet. But they do not all stand or fall together like a house of cards.

When these truths about faith are taken into consideration, all of the passages from the New Testament about people’s “lack of faith” take on entirely new meanings. It is not that people didn’t quite have enough faith; it is that they simply didn’t believe certain things. But even this truth about faith could be abused when talking to mothers who pray for sick children or fathers who pray for a job. So it is best to never question anybody’s faith.

It is true that faith is a factor in our prayers. It is true that we must believe that God can do what we ask of Him. But faith as small as a mustard seed is able to move mountains (Matt 17:20). So the smallest amount of faith will do. Every person I have ever talked to or prayed with who has agonized in prayer over some desperate situation has more than enough faith for God.

Can we really believe that God is so petty that although He wants to heal a sick and dying child, He won’t do so until the “faith meter” of the parents rises to a certain level? Does God sit idly by, watching our faith like a thermostat until it rises to 80%, but if we only get to 79%, He says, “Oh! So close! I’m going to have to let your child suffer and die.” Is that what God is like? Of course not! This sort of god is a satanic lie.

So if the lack of “enough” faith is not the reason some prayers go unanswered by God, what is the reason? The answer is found in one of the things we humans value the most: our freedom.

It is a Love for Freedom

We humans love freedom. But we love freedom because God loves it more. Our love for freedom is a poor reflection of His love for freedom. And He doesn't just love His freedom, but ours. God wants us to have a relationship with Him, and created us for this very purpose. But in order for a true relationship to exist, there must be the freedom to reject that relationship. God desires that we love Him, but for love to be real, it must be free. And since He freely loves us, He gave us a degree of genuine freedom so that we might (or might not) love Him in return.¹

This means that God is not in absolute control of all things. I know that this is a shocking thought to some, but it is the requirement for love. If God was in absolute control of all things, there could be no such thing as love, for love, by definition, does not seek to control.² On the one hand, if humans have a degree of freedom, but God forced His will upon people because He is stronger and more powerful, then this would not be love, but spiritual and psychological rape. On the other hand, if God did not give us a degree of freedom, and simply programmed us to do what He wants, then we would not be human, but would instead be robots, which cannot show genuine love. For love to truly be love, the object of love must be free to not love in return.

Since God does not control all things, but gives humans a degree of genuine freedom, this means that humans can use this freedom to do things that are contrary to God's will. In other words, we can sin. This explains why this world is full of sin. Sin happens because humans use our God-given freedom in a way that God does not want. And because freedom is genuinely free, God cannot simply take it back or turn it off when we seek to use our freedom in ways that are damaging and hurtful to ourselves and others.³ Sinful human activity such as theft, rape, murder, and war are all contrary to God's will, but they happen because God provided freedom to humans, and some humans use this freedom in hurtful and harmful ways.

But it is not just sin. There are also natural disasters. Could not God stop natural disasters without violating anyone's free will? Well, the truth of the matter is that there are a nearly infinite number of factors that go into any single natural disaster, and a

¹ For an excellent discussion and defense of this idea, see Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015).

² Ibid., 181.

³ Ibid., 168.

good many of these factors involve free human decisions.⁴ Hurricanes and floods don't just come out of nowhere. Weather patterns, rain clouds, and rising sea levels are all influenced in various ways by the behaviors and actions of human beings. In a world where sinful or selfish actions have far-reaching effects, natural disasters cannot be magically averted if the forces of cause-and-effect are to remain in place.⁵

Due to creaturely freedom, many aspects of the world are simply broken, and God cannot unilaterally fix everything that has gone wrong. While God does everything He can to protect us from the pain, there are some things God just cannot do without violating His gift of freedom, and therefore, violating love. As Greg Boyd writes:

God's ultimate goal is to have creatures eternally participate in his triune love. The integrity with which he gives the risky gift of freedom is what makes this love possible and renders this freedom irrevocable. But this freedom is also what makes nightmares possible. God cannot avoid the possibility of these nightmares without also canceling out the possibility of love.⁶

However, this does not mean God is powerless or without resources to fix what is wrong with the world. Quite to the contrary, God's loving grace and wisdom are taking effect every day in our lives, and especially through our lives. As indicated earlier in this course, often when we pray to God to fix something that is wrong with the world, He agrees with our prayer and then asks us to fix it with Him.

It is for good reason that the New Testament speaks of the church as the “body of Christ.” Just as Jesus was the incarnation of God on earth, the church is now the incarnation of God on earth. We are God's hands, feet, and mouth to a sick, lost, and hurting world, and there are many things that God wants to do in this world which He can only do in collaboration with us.

God desires and needs human collaboration to accomplish his will. How can a struggling friend pay rent unless someone gives them money? How can racism be rooted out of the crevices of human hearts and minds unless someone teaches love and peace? How can child trafficking come to an end unless people stand up and rescue children? How can

⁴ Cf. the discussion in Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 218, and Gregory A. Boyd, *Is God to Blame?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003).

⁵ Oord, *Uncontrolling Love*, 175.

⁶ Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 215.

environmental pollution be reduced unless individuals and corporations take practical steps? The answer to all of these questions is, “They can’t.”⁷

Since God often works to answer prayer in collaboration with human partners, this means that answers to prayer often take time to appear. This is especially true when the answers to prayer require advances in the scientific fields of medicine, psychology, and sociology. Though many in these occupations do not recognize it, they are being guided by God to help the world go in the direction God desires.

But again, since God does not override human free will, such changes take time. And tragically, many people live (or have lived) in times when medicine has not yet solved the problem of cancer or barren wombs, when sociology and government have not solved the problem of homelessness and poverty, and when psychology has not yet solved the problem of mental illness or psychotic breakdowns. But God is at work, and all who wish to work with God in these areas should do as much as they are able to coordinate their work with God’s work so that millions of prayers are answered.

So the reason many prayers do not get accomplished is not because they are outside of God’s will, or even because God says “No” to them. To the contrary, He may very well be saying “Yes,” but other factors and considerations are keeping His “Yes” from becoming a reality.

Sometimes these other factors include sin. Sometimes in order for God to say “Yes” to us, He would have to restrict or limit the freedom of someone else, which He is not always able to do. Sometimes God simply cannot do what we have asked, even though He would like to. Sometimes, God wants to do what we ask, but He wants to do it *with* us, and if we are unwilling to join Him in answering our own prayers, then God cannot do it on His own. Sometimes both we and God are doing everything possible to bring answers to our prayers to fruition, but a myriad of other factors keep it from occurring.

Nevertheless, when our prayers go unanswered, this is not the time to despair. We may not always know why certain prayers go unanswered, but we can know with certainty that unanswered prayers do not indicate a lack of care on the part of God. Even in unanswered prayer, God is there with us.

⁷ Karris, *Divine Echoes*, 147.

God Stays and Prays With Us

When a woman prays for God to give her a child, God is right there with her, hugging and holding her, and crying with her about her emptiness. When a mother prays for her dying child to get healed, God is right there with her, grieving over a broken world where such things happen to innocent children. When a father cries out to God for employment, God is there providing input and advice to lead the man to a job.

Due to the problems that arise in this world of sickness and death, wombs do not always function the way God intended, medicine does not always work, and economies do not always provide work for all who need it. God is not a magician who can wave His magic wand to make everything better, but He is a Friend and Father who walks with us through the pain, stays with us in the darkest night, and leads us in the direction He wants us to go, even when things do not go the way He wants.

When your prayers go unanswered, know that this is not because God does not hear or does not want you to receive what you have asked of Him. Quite the opposite is true. When your prayers go unanswered, know that God is there with you in your pain and suffering, praying along with you for wisdom, insight, and direction, so that together, you might face and overcome all that this world throws your way. God will never leave you, forsake you, or abandon you. He will not withdraw from you to face the troubles of this world alone. When your prayers go unanswered, these are the times to turn toward Him for His care and prayer for you.