

When Prayers Go Unanswered  
Psalm 22:1-11  
2 Corinthians 12:2-10  
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Last week we looked at praying through tough times. Like Daniel praying before the open window, prayer can be an act of defiance against all that is ugly, mean and cruel. This prayer keeps us rooted in our deepest values, our sense of who God made us to be.

Today our focus is unanswered prayer. Unanswered prayer is when we have an unfulfilled longing. There are things we struggle with and they don't appear to be change (at least not in the way we want). This prayer of unfulfilled longing can be painful. We offer our longings to God and wait for an answer. Sometimes there's no happy ending. But there is something more that God provides for us through unanswered prayer: a chance to experience God's grace. To show you how this works, I have three stories for you today which I hope will help you glimpse what lies on the other side of unanswered prayer.

If ever there was a prayer of unfulfilled longing it was Jesus praying on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1) In Matthew's gospel Jesus speaks these words at the moment of his greatest physical and emotional, existential pain. God does not answer (or so it seemed). But there was something on the other side of his unanswered prayer: redemption of the world. The salvation God offers us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as we admit our need of him. The cross is a symbol of all that. If you go into a Catholic Church the cross you'll see is a crucifix with the body of Christ on it, wounds clearly visible, a reminder of his suffering for us. In United Methodist sanctuaries you see an empty cross, reminding us Jesus overcame his suffering and death, and he is risen. The empty cross on our altar is a symbol of how God answered Jesus' prayer "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?" God's answer was salvation by grace through faith. God's answer was to give us hope through faith in him. This is what lay on the other side of Jesus' unanswered prayer.

Our second story of unanswered prayer is from 2 Corinthians 12. Paul has been hearing reports of some "super apostles" in Corinth, who preached the message of Christ in a way that distorted the gospel. These "super apostles" were bragging about their visions: "look how spiritual we are!" Aren't we great? Listen to us! We've seen what heaven is like! Be like us and you'll have visions too!" The Corinthians had already been fighting about which spiritual gift was best, so Paul knew this kind of talk would only lead to more conflict. So Paul writes in response how he knows someone who had one of those fantastic visions. "I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven, caught up into Paradise ....." Scholars agree Paul was writing about himself. He wanted to avoid the same kind

of bragging, so he told the story in the third person. Paul knew God didn't want him to get too proud, so to prevent him from getting too elated "a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger from Satan, to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this that it would leave me." What **was** Paul's 'thorn in the flesh'? Physical deformity? Blindness? Guilt over having persecuted the church? Chronic illness of some other kind? A hidden spiritual struggle? We don't know but we do know whatever it was Paul's prayer was not answered as he hoped. God said to Paul: "my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." The answer to Paul's prayer was a deeper sense of his own weakness and grace – grace sufficient for his every need. Paul was given what he needed to be an effective witness for Jesus Christ: weakness so that others would see that any good that Paul did was not because of his strength but God's strength working in him. On the other side of Paul's unanswered prayer was grace: and contentment with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities. Grace in the form of accepting his weakness for the sake of the gospel.

There will be times when our prayers go unanswered. There are longings which go unfulfilled. At times answer we seek won't be there. Grace will be there on the side of our unanswered prayer. Here's how that worked in Pastor Marv Arnpriester's life. Pastor Marv is from Council Bluff, Iowa. Here's his story from the July 2005 issue of *Alive Now* magazine. He longed for a resolution to the controversy over homosexuality in his church. It has been a tough day at United Methodist General Conference in Pittsburgh where Pastor Marv was a delegate. It had been a morning of difficult, painful debates. Hurt had been expressed. Accusatory statements made. Roberts Rules of Order was not the best way to deal with issues of this kind, yet this is the tool they had. Pastor Marv longed for a way for his church to get beyond winner/loser thinking. Here's what he writes:

"I declined an invitation to lunch, saying I was not in the from of mind to be good company. Instead, I went for a long walk and ended up at a fast food restaurant. I got a sandwich, a drink and the only thing I really like there, hot apple pies (two for a dollar). As I sat down at the only open table, a woman with a small child approached and asked if she and her son could sit at the same table. I was a bit embarrassed for not having noticed and invited them to sit with me. I saw that she had purchase one small sandwich, small fries and a small orange drink. As she broke the sandwich into pieces for her son and sat there watching him eat, I put two and two together. She had made a sacrifice to purchase this meal for her son and was going without food for herself. I engaged the boy in conversation, learning that he was three years old, loved the Steelers and this was only the second time he had ever been to McDonalds. I glimpsed his mother turning away and wiping a tear from her eye. I asked him if he like pie. He turned to his mother and said "Mamma, what's pie?" She told him it wa something good. I asked her if it was all right for me to give him one. She assured me it was. As I sat there and watched a little boy eat apple pie in the holy moment of a mother's sacrificial love, all the tension I had been carrying around with me drained away. I found myself in a holy moment, having been touched by God's incredible love. As I walked back to the Convention Center

for the afternoon session, the words of Isaiah 43:1-5 moved into my consciousness. I heard God say to me in a very personal way, “Now thus says the Lord....Do not fear for I have redeemed you; I have called you y name, you are mine..... Do not fear for I am with you.....” God’s love – for a mother and her son in McDonald’s for me, and for a broken, hurting world – is not dependent on what any of us do in the moment or have done in the past or will do in the future. God’s love for us is totally dependent on God, God’s promise, God’s constant care and God’s complete faithfulness.” On the other side of Pastor Arv’s unfulfilled longing for his church was pure grace: a glimpse of a mother’s love; a reminder of the love the divine parent has for us.

We began this morning thinking about how the empty cross is, in a way, a symbol of unanswered prayer. At the center of all we do is this empty cross: is a symbol of grace and the incredible love of God. Jesus’ death was a sign of God’s sacrificial love. The empty cross is a reminder of the power of God to defy death; and the power of human weakness to reveal the strength of God. The empty cross reminds us of the power of God to work through situations through which we are not delivered. Pastor Arv glimpsed that same sacrificial love of God, in a mother giving a McDonald’s sandwich to her child. This is the kind of love that answers all our longings, and can turn our anguish into joy.

Here’s what I hope you will take away from these stories of unanswered prayer. God can work through our unanswered prayer. Know that unanswered prayer is not your fault . Unanswered prayer. It is not a sign that you have failed or that your faith isn’t strong enough. It is a reminder that God can and will use every circumstance of our lives to challenge us, and shape us, transform us. We are free to respond

God always leaves us free to respond as we choose. Adam Hamilton makes that point in his book “Why? Making Sense of God’s Will.” In answering our prayer, God will never take away our free will nor does God take away the free will of others. Sometimes prayer goes unanswered because we ask something of God that would manipulate or coerce another. For instance “please make that cute girl notice me so I can ask her out” or “God please help me pass my Spanish test.” The first prayer violates the free will of the person you are praying for; the second violates our own free will. God does not take away the need for us to work, strive, put forth effort in responding the less than ideal situations we face in life. Sometimes God answers our prayers of longing, anguish and heartache by making it possible for us to develop Christ-like qualities, to become like Christ.

In fact, God is doing that right now in each of our lives. How do we know? Just look carefully at your life at this moment and you’ll see. James Finley tells of “a Russian Orthodox monk lived in the forests of Finland. One day a layperson approached and asked him what he had learned from his many years of solitary prayer. “The very circumstances of life will show the way. The circumstances of our lives – including unanswered prayer; these are the means through God often grace. Sufficient for our every need.

That's how it worked for Jesus, for Paul, for Pastor Marv. Paul's life was a sacrificial giving of himself through his weakness, so that the power of God could be seen in him.. Our Unanswered prayer could just be God's invitation to take our place beside Paul, beside Pastor Arv, and Jesus and see that God's amazing grace is sufficient for our every need. When we realize it, tears of joy may even spring up, knowing that grace has become the word, the answer we longed to hear.

Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.