

"WHERE IS GOD WHEN... PART #4: WHEN PRAYER 'DOESN'T WORK'"

(Psalm 22:1-2; 2 Corinthians 12:7b-9, NRSV)

© 2025 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

**[PROP NEEDED: Series Intro Video]**

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 2-9-2025]

--I--

1. Read NRSV Texts: Psalm 22:1-2 and 2 Corinthians 12:7b-9 and Pray.
2. **[WATCH SERIES VIDEO INTRO (Time: 0:35) -- ends on series theme slide]**
3. Have you ever prayed for something -- I mean, *really* prayed hard -- only to receive what seemed to be stone silence? e.g., you waited and waited and waited... and God didn't seem to answer?

A--Or perhaps the specific thing that you prayed for *didn't* come to pass: ...you *didn't* get that job you prayed for; your relationship or marriage *didn't* work out; or your loved one *wasn't* healed of their sickness (and in fact died)?

B--If so, a question you may have wrestled with is "where is God when prayer 'doesn't work'" (or at least it doesn't *seem* to work)?

C--Well, that's going to be our focus today as we continue our sermon series wrestling with the tough questions of why a loving and powerful God would allow things like tragedy, suffering and evil in our world. <sup>1</sup>

--II--

4. But to answer these questions, we first need to know something about **the purpose and role of PRAYER in our spiritual lives**.

A--To start, we have to ask: if it's true (as I've mentioned over the last few weeks) that God is neither the *cause of* nor the one who *prevents* bad things from happening, then *why* practice intercessory prayer at all? I mean, why bother to *pray* if God is neither to blame nor one who intervenes to spare us from bad things?

1--Well, I first need to remind us that though the Bible teaches that God doesn't *ordinarily* step in to prevent tragedy, suffering, and evil, it also indicates that there *are times* in which He does *just that* -- we call them "miracles." <sup>2</sup>

2--As to details like "how?" and "what prompts them?", we may never know.

3--But my point here is that one reason we pray is because we do believe that God not only *can* but also sometimes *does* intervene in times and ways of His own choosing.

B--Beyond this answer, though, let's tackle the more difficult one: *Is the purpose / role of prayer somehow to "move" God to act? ...*

1--...As if God is some cold, insensitive deity who *needs* our coaxing & pleading to get Him to actually *do* something? ...a divine vending machine where you put the proper prayer IN and get a desired result OUT?

2--Is *that* the purpose of prayer? ...NOT according to the scripture!

C--No. The Bible teaches that prayer is as much about *US* as it is about *GOD* -- that *our* prayers aren't prayed so much to cause *God* to act, but instead to foster within *us* a spiritual attitude whereby *we* can see and receive *God* at work in our midst.

D--And that means that we Christians *can* and *should* pray, NOT primarily to change *God's* mind or move *God* to action, but primarily to prepare *our* heart, mind, and attitude to *perceive and receive* God's presence and action -- His "answers" to our prayers. <sup>3</sup>

--III--

5. So with that in mind, let's talk about **HOW it is that God actually "answers" prayer.** In what form(s) do His "answers" come? And How does He use these to enable us to see and receive His presence and work in our midst?

A--Well first, we all like it when God answers our prayers with a "**YES**" -- an answer that *exactly* matches our request. And many of us worshipping today (including myself) can give great testimonies about this happening in our lives.

B--But since our hang-ups tend to be when we *don't* get the "Yes" that we're looking for, I want to focus on three other biblical ways that God "answers" our prayers.

6. The first is one we tend to forget is: "**SILENCE.**" e.g., we don't seem to "hear" anything (or at least don't hear what we *want* to hear), and so we get mad at God for "not answering" or for "ignoring" us!

A--Now, I need to remind us that there *are* times in which the silence we experience is not *God-given* at all, but instead is a product of *our own SIN* -- sin that (like static on TV or radio) interferes with us *perceiving* God's "answers." <sup>4</sup>

B--Yet, not all "silence" is caused by sin in the life of the pray-er, as Verses 1-2 of today's Psalm 22 text illustrates: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.*"

1--Now, hopefully you recognize these as Jesus' *own* words while dying on the cross. But in this instance, had God *actually* abandoned Jesus for something He'd *done*? No. But the suffering he was experiencing made it *feel* that way at the time. <sup>5</sup>

2--And so it is with us: sometimes in the midst of life's sufferings, we focus so much on our *own pain and hurt* that we can no longer *perceive God's* presence, and so we think (and perhaps even say) either that "God's abandoned us," or think that maybe He was never with us to begin with!

4--Yet, remember the Old Testament story (from 1 Kings 19) of God speaking to Elijah *not* through the wind, or earthquake, or fire, but through "*the sound of sheer silence*"? <sup>6</sup>

C--Obviously, then, God can and often *does* "speak" and "answer" through silence; but we first have to open our spiritual eyes and ears to see and hear it. <sup>7</sup>

7. Another "answer" God sometimes gives in response to prayer is "**WAIT / NOT YET.**"

A--For example, in the N.T., think about... Zechariah & Elizabeth having to wait to reach old age before they could become the parents of John the Baptist, <sup>8</sup> and even the disciples being told by a resurrected Jesus to "*stay in Jerusalem until you've been clothed with power from on high*" (i.e., wait for Pentecost before sharing the gospel). <sup>9</sup>

B--In college, I dated several girls, each time thinking they were "the one", only to have my hopes dashed for various reasons.

1--And each time when that relationship didn't work out, I remember crying out to God in frustration, only to sense Him reply "*Wait; this is not the one!*"

2--And looking back on things, I realize now how those relationships would not in the end have been good for me, and how God instead used those experiences to prepare me to receive the one who was His choice for me: my future wife Trish.

C--You see, I think sometimes God's "Waits" are merely His way of *protecting* us from "Yes-es" that we are NOT yet spiritually or emotionally prepared for, or mature enough to understand or handle.

D--So, in the same way that we'd say "Wait/Not Yet" to our own children if they asked for a car at age 4, so God does for us if He knows that what we're asking for is not best for us at that point in our lives.

8. Finally, it bears pointing out that, like it or not, God *does* occasionally give "**NO**" as an answer to our prayers <sup>10</sup> -- which means that a *negative* response should not be confused with a *lack* of one.

A--And just like we do with our *own* children, sometimes for our *own* good (or that of others), "No" is the *only* appropriate answer that a loving God *can* give. <sup>11</sup>

B--I believe, in fact, that many (if not most) of God's "No's" are merely "Yes-es" appearing in a form/manner that we don't always recognize or comprehend at first. <sup>12</sup>

1--Author Harold Kushner once wrote that in response to prayer, "*Sometimes we don't notice the miracle we actually get. We may ask God to take the tumor away but the miracle may be that we get the resources to live with that tumor*"<sup>13</sup>

2--That was certainly the case with Paul in today's second scripture from 2 Corinthians 12:9, where he talks about his "thorn in the flesh" that he prayed God would take away, but God instead told Paul, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness*" -- in other words, God didn't take Paul's "thorn" away, but gave him the strength to *endure* it.

3--When Trish & I were married, we both thought we'd have at least 2-3 children  
 (a) But when Trish experienced a serious medical condition after our daughter was born, we were discouraged from trying to have any more.  
 (b) I can't tell you how difficult that was at the time thinking we would only have one child. But in the years since, we both realize that God's "no" to us having more children was really a blessing to some truly wonderful experiences, where we were able to invest in *her* more fully.

C--So, I believe that quite often God's "No" to what we *THINK* we need are actually His "Yes" to what we *REALLY* need -- God's "No" to our *WANTS* may, in fact, merely be a "Yes" to our *NEEDS* <sup>14</sup>

9. Faith helps us see this, and faith also helps us see and perceive all the other "answers" to our prayers, as well -- whether they're in the form of *Silence*, or *Wait/Not Yet*, or even *No*.

--IV--

10. Now, some of these answers may *disappoint* us, but they need not *disillusion* us. So, **what do we do when we get one of these answers?** Let me close with a few ideas: <sup>15</sup>

A--First, when we don't get the answer we want, we still need to (#1) ***affirm God's PRESENCE*** -- those answers *don't* mean that "no one's home up there," but simply that God knows that, for now, our immediate need is for Him to be *with us* through whatever we're facing.

B--Second, in the face of such answers we should also (#2) ***acknowledge God's POWER*** -- remember that just because God *will* not, doesn't mean that He *cannot*. <sup>16</sup>

C--Finally, in the face of challenging answers, we must also (#3) **trust God's PURPOSE**.

1--Over the last few weeks we've been reminded that though God can *fold* tragedy, suffering and evil into His purpose, those things *are not* (and *never are*) part of His design/purpose for anyone.

2--So though we don't always know *WHAT* God's purpose is, we *can* affirm that He *HAS* one, and can trust it always to be good and loving <sup>17</sup> -- how do we sometimes say it?... "*God is good. All the time. And all the time, God is good.*"

11. So then, where is God when prayer "doesn't work"? ...Well, He's in the same place He's always been:... Answering *our* prayers with *His* presence in the "tunnel" of life's tragedy, suffering, and evil.
12. [PRAY]
13. [SUGGESTED CLOSING HYMN: UMH#397, "I Need Thee Every Hour"]

### ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> In understanding this subject, I recommend two excellent resources: Disappointment with God, by Philip Yancey (Zondervan Publishing 1992); and The Will of God, by Leslie Weatherhead (Abingdon Press 1999).

<sup>2</sup> As I've mentioned in previous weeks, these times when God intervenes and does miraculous and extraordinary things are the *exceptions* to the norm of Him working through ordinary, earthly means, and through each of us. Nevertheless, they DO sometimes occur.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in the case of prayers for physical healing, I believe that God uses prayer first of all to help a person be better prepared emotionally, psychologically, and physiologically to receive God's healing in their spirit (such as a calmness in their nervousness before, during, and/or after their surgery). Only in *extraordinary* cases does God choose to work supernaturally to bring about a divine cure. These happen on occasion, but are *rare* and not the norm.

<sup>4</sup> For example, read James 4:3; and 1 Peter 3:7.

<sup>5</sup> Notice even how the *rest* of Psalm 22 (Verses 3-5, 19-24) turns the author's original words of despair into an affirmation of hope, starting with the conjunction "yet": "...YET you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame..... But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid! Deliver my soul..... From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me. I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you: You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him."

<sup>6</sup> This story is found in 1 Kings 19:4-12, and even though Verse 12 has been translated as "*a still, small voice*," the more accurate translation instead means "*absolute, deaf silence*."

<sup>7</sup> One online article summarizes the role of silence this way: *"What looks like silence and inactivity to us is God allowing us the opportunity to listen to 'the still small voice' and to see the provisions that He has made for us by faith. .... However, there are times when we have to walk in obedience to the light that God has given us before He sheds more light on our path, because in this age of grace God speaks to us through His Word.... So, when God seems silent to us as born-again believers, it may mean that we have stopped listening to His voice, we have allowed the cares of this world to plug our spiritual ears, or we have neglected His Word. God does not [usually] speak to us today in signs, wonders, fire or wind, His Spirit speaks to us through the Word, and in that Word we have the 'words of life'"* [From the website <https://www.gotquestions.org/God-silent-absent.html>].

<sup>8</sup> Read Luke 1:5-7. To be fair, at the time God's "wait/not yet" probably felt to Zechariah and Elizabeth suspiciously like "No." We sometimes do the same: presume that God's "No's" are just that, when in fact they are "Not Yet's", and we simply haven't given them the time to become "yes"-es.

<sup>9</sup> Read Luke 24:49.

<sup>10</sup> Author Lewis Carroll once wrote, *"I have had prayers answered - most strangely so sometimes - but I think our heavenly Father's loving-kindness has been even more evident in what He has refused me"* (cited from <https://prayersfromthecloud.com/lewis-carroll/>).

<sup>11</sup> In fact, we can probably all think of prayers in the past which, in hindsight, we're glad that God *didn't* grant! For example, the "No" for which we should probably be most grateful was given by God to his own son in response to a prayer Jesus made in a garden one night (Matthew 26:39). As a result of that "no", *one* man died so all could live. (Several of these points are noted by Rev. Jamie Atchley in his sermon *"When God Says 'No'"*, found online at [https://www.heartlight.org/feature/feature\\_970625\\_sezno.html](https://www.heartlight.org/feature/feature_970625_sezno.html) -- 11/17/2004).

<sup>12</sup> So, for example, when we receive what we consider to be a "No" to our prayer, then we need to take a good hard look at what we're praying to ask if what we're praying is really what *God* wants or merely what *we* want. Most of the time, it's not that God is not answering, but merely that He's answering in a way that we cannot see because our minds and desires are blinding us to His response. For example, sometimes "No" (or even "Wait/Not Yet") is appropriate because what we're asking is not really good for us -- though we may not understand that at the time.

<sup>13</sup> Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, cited in *"Understanding the Healing Power of Prayer"* by Anna Mitchell, a *Prayer Notes* pamphlet by Abbey Press (2004). Kushner says that when we pray during illness, we need to understand the distinction between "healing" and "being cured" -- that God always "heals", but doesn't always "cure."

<sup>14</sup> One unknown Confederate soldier during the Civil War once expressed it this way:

*"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 great 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 [people],  
 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 had hoped for.  
 Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.  
 I am among all [people], most richly blessed."*

[Cited in Max Cleland, Strong at the Broken Places; Chosen Books, 1980]

This is also how I can make sense of why, when we fulfill the biblical mandate to pray for healing of ourselves or others (James 5:14-16), it doesn't always happen in the way/manner we desire. I think about this in relation to my own history and experience of intercessory prayer: In my 35 or so years of ministry, I'm guessing that I've prayed for about 10-18,000 people (5-10 prayer requests and specific pastoral prayers each week). Of those, I can think of only a few (maybe 5-6 prayers - that I know of - which were answered in a miraculous, extraordinary way of some sort (even if several of them were what I'd call "minor miracles," like the dramatic healing of a flu. Those aren't very good odds, are they? So some of you may want to go find another church that has a preacher with better odds!) However, in the rest of those cases that I prayed, 95% of the time God answered my prayers the way I prayed them: *"God be with this person; God use the doctors and surgeons in this surgery; give them strength or wisdom through their divorce or unemployment; help them to trust you in all things; etc."* So I ask: did God answer my prayers? Or were these things going to happen anyway? I don't know. All I know is that in 95% of my prayers, what I prayed for actually happened. And I'm guessing that those odds aren't that much different from the odds of any other serious Christian who has ever prayed for people and situations like these -- most things we pray for come to pass just like we prayed, but not all. So, while God sometimes answers our prayers in amazing and miraculous ways, more often He answers them in regular, ordinary ways -- often through the work and actions of other human beings!

<sup>15</sup> These three were suggested by Rev. Jamie Atchley in his sermon *"When God Says 'No'"* (preached 11/17/2004), found online at [https://www.heartlight.org/feature/feature\\_970625\\_sezno.html](https://www.heartlight.org/feature/feature_970625_sezno.html).

<sup>16</sup> To the contrary: God is able to do abundantly more than we can ask or even think (Ephesians 3:20-21).

<sup>17</sup> Read Jeremiah 29:11. While there are times we are later able to discover the reason why God gave us an answer besides "Yes" to our initial request, there are other times in which we may never know God's actual purpose for His answer(s) as long as we live on this earth. That's why author C.S. Lewis says that it's in those times when we're praying that we are taking the most profound leap of faith.