

Paul: The Perplexity Of Prayer Series

September 22, 2021

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

WHAT IS THE ANSWER TO THE PERPLEXING QUESTION OF UNANSWERED PRAYER?

Is there really any such thing as unanswered prayer?

Is all prayer victorious?

I believe God answers all prayers it just may not be the way we want it answered and when He doesn't answer it the way we want it we consider that unanswered prayer.

However, I believe God answers prayer in 1 of 3 ways: Yes, No, Wait.

So, when we say unanswered prayer, we are saying that God has said no to our request, which in my opinion is the answer to our prayer.

“Prayers that have made a difference”.

So tonight we are going to look at the perplexity of prayer?

Let's face it Prayer can be perplexing.

**Someone prays for a spouse to be saved, but they remain unconverted.
Parents pray for their children's spiritual safety, but they go astray.**

Someone prays for a friend or family member with cancer to be healed, but God chooses to take them home. Example after example.

To add to the perplexity is compounded by the biblical fact that God has promised to answer prayer.

In Jeremiah 33:3 He says, “Call unto me and I will answer you.”

In Matthew 7:7 Jesus says; “Ask and it shall be given unto you.”

And in John 14:13 we read; “Whatsoever you shall ask in my name, that I will do.”

You may be asking, Pastor, are you saying that what the Bible teaches is contrary to our own personal experience?

Are you saying that God does not answer all prayers?

That is not what I am saying. So, what am I saying?

Well, let’s take a look tonight at the topic of what people call unanswered prayer.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

I. The Misconception of Prayer.

The Bible does not teach that every prayer request is fulfilled, especially to our requirements.

Moses prayed to enter the Promised Land, but died east of the Jordan. Jeremiah said in Lamentations; “You have covered yourself with a cloud that our prayer should not pass through.”

One of the best examples we are given of requests being turned down is in our text tonight.

We see God’s refusal to remove Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” after three requests.

Another misconception is of prayer itself. Too often our only concept of prayer is of asking for something.

However, there are other ways of praying.

1. Prayers of Adoration: Psalms 103:1

“Bless the Lord, O my soul and all that is within me, bless His holy name.”

2. Prayers of Thanksgiving: Psalms 119:62 “At midnight I will rise to give thanks to you.”

3. Prayers of confession: Psalms 51:3 “I acknowledge my transgression, and my sin is ever before me.”

So, there is much more to prayer than just asking or petitioning God.

Although asking or petitioning is important, we should neither maximize it nor minimize it.

Another reason for God saying no to our prayers is our misuse of prayer.

II. The Misuse of Prayer.

Many of our prayers are given the answer of NO because they come from our own selfish ambitions and desires for pleasure.

Some people pray like they are calling upon God as they would room service in some hotel or like they are making a wish list for Santa Claus?

Another misuse of prayer is to ask God for something while harboring sin in our lives.

Psalms 66: 18 tells us; “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.”

So many times we can look back in our life and see that the sign of God’s love for us was to say no to our request to show us that there was sin in our life that needed to be taken care of.

As Christians we need to come to the realization that no is an answer to prayer.

Sometimes God has to say no to our request in order to give us what we really need.

I believe the biggest misuse of prayer is to pray when we have already heard from God, and He has already told us what we should be doing and instead of sitting there continuing to pray about it, we should be working.

When the Israelites were trapped between the Egyptians & the Red Sea, Moses went to praying in Exodus 14:15

God tells Moses quit praying and get the people moving.

Prayer is important, but there comes a time when our focus on prayer must cease and the work must begin.

III. The Mistake of Prayer.

When God says no to our prayers, we tend to believe that God made a mistake.

Not all of us have come to the knowledge that God gave Paul when he requested his thorn to be removed. Paul realized that although his pain and suffering had not been taken away, God had answered his prayer with something much better, God's own grace and strength.

Someone once said that God's no is linked to an alternative which is greater than our greatest thoughts.

My point is that the Lord knows how to balance our lives.

If we have only blessings, we may become proud; so, He permits us to have burdens as well.

Paul's great experience or visions of heaven, which is spoken of in the beginning of chapter 12, could have ruined his ministry on earth; so God, in His goodness, permitted Satan to, as the KJV states, buffet Paul in order to keep him from becoming proud.

The mystery of human suffering will not be solved completely in this life. Sometimes we suffer simply because we are human.

Our bodies change as we grow older, and we are susceptible to the normal problems of life. The same body that can bring us pleasures can also bring us pains. The same family members and friends that delight us can also break our hearts. This is a part of the human life and the only way to escape it is to die.

Sometimes we suffer because we are foolish and disobedient to the Lord.

Our own rebellion may afflict us, or the Lord may see fit to chasten us in His love (Heb 12:3 ff).

King David suffered greatly because of his sin; the consequences were painful and so was the discipline of God (see 2 Sam 12:1-22; Ps 51:1).

In His grace, God forgives our sins; but in His government, He must permit us to reap what we sow.

Suffering also is a tool God uses for building godly character (Rom 5:1-5). Certainly, Paul was a man of rich Christian character because he permitted God to mold and make him in the painful experiences of his life.

When you walk along the shore of the ocean, you notice that the rocks are sharp in the quiet coves, but polished in those places where the waves beat against them. God can use the "waves and billows" of life to polish us, if we will let Him.

Paul's thorn in the flesh was given to him to keep him from sinning. Think about it, exciting spiritual experiences - like going to heaven and back - have a way of inflating the human ego; and pride leads to a multitude of temptations to sin. Had Paul's heart been filled with pride, those next fourteen years would have been filled with failure instead of success.

We do not know what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. The word translated thorn means "a sharp stake used for torturing or impaling someone, inflicting pain."

However, it is a good thing that we don't know, because no matter what our sufferings may be, we are able to apply the lessons Paul learned and get encouragement.

God permitted Satan to afflict Paul, just as He permitted Satan to afflict Job (see Job 1-2).

While we do not fully understand the origin of evil in this universe, or all the purposes God had in mind when He permitted evil to come, we do know that God controls evil and can use it even for His own glory.

Take the example of Judas betraying Jesus. Satan cannot work against a believer without the permission of God.

Take the example of Peter in Luke 22:31. Jesus said, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

Everything that the enemy did to Job, Peter, and Paul was permitted by the will of God.

Satan was permitted to buffet Paul. The word means "to beat to strike with the fist" The tense of the verb indicates that this pain was either constant or recurring.

When you stop to think that Paul had letters to write, trips to take, sermons to preach, churches to visit, and dangers to face as he ministered, you can understand that this was a serious matter. No wonder he prayed three times (as his Lord had done in the Garden [Mark 14:32-41]) that the affliction might be removed from him.

Was Paul sinning when he prayed to be delivered from Satan's buffeting?

I don't think so. It's a normal thing for a Christian to ask God for deliverance from sickness and pain. God has not obligated Himself to heal every believer whenever he prays; but He has encouraged us to bring our burdens and needs to Him. Paul did not know whether this "thorn in the flesh" was a temporary testing from God, or a permanent experience he would have to learn to live with, which is what it turned out to be.

There are those who want us to believe that an afflicted Christian is a disgrace to God. "If you are obeying the Lord and claiming all that you have in Christ" they say, "then you Will never be sick."

I have never found that teaching in the Bible. He never promised the New Testament believers' freedom from sickness or suffering. If Paul had access to "instant healing" because of his relationship to Christ, then why didn't he make use of it for himself and for others, such as Epaphroditus? (Phil 2:25)

The word mercy means compassionate, or pity and Paul was saying that God had compassion or pity on Epaphroditus and healed him. God also had compassion or pity on Paul in the case that he spared Epaphroditus so Paul, who was in jail at this time, didn't have to see this man die.

What a contrast between Paul's two experiences! Paul went from paradise to pain, from glory to suffering. He tasted the blessing of God in heaven and then felt the buffeting of Satan on earth. He went from ecstasy to agony, and yet the two experiences belong together. His one experience of glory prepared him for the constant experience of suffering, for he knew that God was able to meet his need. Paul had gone to heaven - but then he learned that heaven could come to him.

Two messages were involved in this painful experience. The thorn in the flesh was Satan's message to Paul, but God had another message for him, a message of grace. The tense of the verb in 2 Cor. 12:9 is important: "And He [God] has once-for-all said to me."

What Paul is saying, is that God gave him a message that stayed with him. It was a message of grace. What is grace? It is God's provision for our every need when we need it. It has well been said that God in His grace gives us what we do not deserve, and in His mercy He does not give us what we do deserve.

It was a message of sufficient grace. There is never a shortage of grace. God is sufficient for our spiritual ministries (2 Cor. 3:4-6) and our material needs (2 Cor. 9:8) as well as our physical needs (2 Cor. 12:9). If God's grace is sufficient to save us, surely it is sufficient to keep us and strengthen us in our times of suffering.

It was a message of strengthening grace. God permits us to become weak so that we might receive His strength. This is a continuous process: 'My power is [being] made perfect in [your] weakness' (2 Cor. 12:9, NIV). Strength that knows itself to be strength is actually weakness, but weakness that knows itself to be weakness is actually strength.

In the Christian life, we get many of our blessings through transformation, not substitution. When Paul prayed three times for the removal of his pain, he was asking God for a substitution: "Give me health instead of sickness, deliverance instead of pain and weakness." Sometimes God does meet the need by substitution; but other times He meets the need by transformation. He does not remove the affliction, but He gives us His grace so that the affliction works for us and not against us.

As Paul prayed about his problem, God gave him a deeper insight into what He was doing. Paul learned that his thorn in the flesh was a gift from God.

What a strange gift! There was only one thing for Paul to do: accept the gift from God and allow God to accomplish His purposes. God wanted to keep Paul from being "exalted above measure," and this was His way of accomplishing it.

When Paul accepted his affliction as the gift of God, this made it possible for God's grace to go to work in his life. It was then that God spoke to Paul and gave him the assurance of His grace. Whenever you are going through suffering, spend extra time in the Word of God; and you can be sure God will speak to you. He always has a special message for His children when they are afflicted.

Lastly, as Paul we sometimes pray for different circumstances but through reading God's Word, He never says that His purpose is to make life easy for us, but rather to make us strong in Him and to make us depend on Him more.

Paul as we see in this passage of scripture gave up on trying to understand God's no and he laid hold of God's yes. He found his answer not in God's healing but in God's grace and strength.

Maybe the greatest answer to understanding the question of unanswered prayer is that when God says no, then we really don't need what we are asking for, but more importantly we just need God Himself.