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Matthew 26:36-46
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Unanswered Prayer

For how many of us, if we were totally honest, would say that we find prayer a struggle? Would it help to know that God understands this? In Genesis, when Jacob wrestled with God and won, God renamed him Israel which means, “One who wrestles or struggles with God.”¹

Today we turn our attentions to one of the most mysterious and profound aspects of prayer. Unanswered prayer. When God seems to go silent on us. It can be so easy to think, “God why don’t you love me?” or “God, why don’t you care?”

Our scripture today highlights when Jesus also prayed for something and His Heavenly Father did not answer. It’s a very important story that shows the humanity of Jesus and his ultimate faith that even if God did not answer his prayer that God would come through in a different way.

This story is found in each of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. But we are focusing on the one in Matthew as it provides more detail than the others. Please turn with me to Matthew 26:36-46 where we find Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night that he was betrayed.

36 Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” **37** He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. **38** Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

40 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. **41** “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

42 He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

43 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. **44** So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

¹ Genesis 32:22-32

45 Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. **46** Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

I must confess that I was not very excited to dive into today’s topic of unanswered prayer. My fear was that I would just offer some Christian platitudes that would make us feel better but ultimately pour salt upon wounds. Still there are important things that we can take away from Jesus’ prayer in the garden. What does Jesus teach us about unanswered prayer? What other examples in scripture are there of unanswered prayer? How should we respond when God doesn’t answer prayer? How should we NOT respond when God doesn’t answer prayers? How might God meet us in the heartbreak of unanswered prayer today?

What does Jesus teach us on unanswered prayer?

Jesus took his three besties Peter, James and John with him into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray on the night that he was betrayed. Just like Jesus, this teaches us that when we are burdened and God seems to be silent to not keep it to ourself. Take others with us. Invite others into the unanswered prayer.

Pete Greig in *God on Mute, Engaging the Silence of Unanswered Prayer*, writes “All too often, it is the church that creates cultures in which people feel compelled to have it all together and, therefore, to pretend.”² But Jesus modeled for us how to be real and authentic, utterly honest before God with how he felt about the unanswered prayer. Jesus was sorrowful and troubled. He was overwhelmed to the point of death. Luke tells us that Jesus was in such anguish that his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.³

If Jesus was that real with God, so can we. It’s ok. God can handle our raw emotions!

Engage the Father with what you want or need. Three times, Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken away from me.” The Greek word for Father that Matthew and Luke use is “pater.” It is a formal parental term. But Mark states it much better. Here, Jesus calls out “Abba, Father” or Daddy. Daddy is a term that implies not just intimacy and affection, but trust and obedience.

Besides what Father’s heart and ear doesn’t bend toward his children when they call out “Daddy.”

² Pete Greig, *God on Mute, Engaging the Silence of Unanswered Prayer* (Colorado Springs, CO: David Cook Books, 2007), 89.

³ Luke 22:44

Jesus was persistent. Even though God did not answer his request the first time, he kept at it. Three times, he repeated his request. Though notice how each time, his request was less about what he wanted and more about what the Father wanted. “If it is possible, may this cup be take away from me” became “If it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it.” Finally, Jesus resigned himself into his Daddy’s hands and will.

Jesus prayed, “Not as I will, but your will be done.” We pray this each time we say the Lord’s prayer. “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” This is probably one of the hardest things to pray. “Thy will be done.” To resign oneself to the truth that what we pray for is not going to happen as we hoped. We let go of the control, and let God take over.

I remember when our children were small and we’d travel on airplanes. It took us just one miserable flight holding our child in our arms and laps for the duration of the flight when we realized the best place for them and us, was for them to be strapped into their carseats. Not just for safety sake, but so that if they didn’t want to be there, they could fight against the carseat restraints and not us. Eventually the carseat’s would win over their wills and they would...fall asleep.

I wonder if the same thing was happening here with Jesus in the Garden. As Jesus wrestled with his flesh, he said, “The Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” His flesh was wanting to escape the pain and suffering of crucifixion. But his Spirit, which was in tune with his Daddy’s heart, knew that there was no other way for the ultimate forgiveness of human sin.

Notice also while he remained persistent in prayer, that his disciples could not. Their spirits and flesh were weak. And they fell asleep. Not just once. But three times. Do you notice the pattern here? Peter betrayed Jesus three times. The disciples fell asleep three times. Jesus prayed three times. Three must have been significant for Matthew to mention it.

So what other examples in scripture do we hear of unanswered prayer?

In 2 Samuel King David’s son that he had with Bathsheba as a result of their adulterous affair became sick. David pleaded with God for the child to live. He fasted and went into this house and spent nights lying the ground. Eventually, the child died.⁴

David confessed his murderous and adulterous sin to Nathan. And while God certainly forgave him for it, the consequences of his actions affected others. This is a man who scripture notes as “A man after God’s own heart!”

Psalms 66 says, “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.”⁵

⁴ 2 Samuel 12:15-23

⁵ Psalm 66:18

The prophet Isaiah said, “Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear. For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue mutters wicked things.”⁶

Sometimes our sin can stand as a barrier between us and God, preventing Him from hearing our prayers.

Another example of unanswered prayer in the Bible is found in 2 Corinthians when the Apostle Paul talked about having been giving a thorn in his flesh which he called a messenger of Satan, to torment him. We don’t know what that was. But whatever it was, it constantly humbled him and made him plainly aware of his insufficiency. On account of this thorn, he could no longer rely upon himself to make life happen with God. Instead, he said, three times...there is that number three again...he pleaded with the Lord to take it away. The word pleaded is from the Greek *parakalao* which means to call out to, beseech, or intreat. In other words, Paul really wanted it gone.

The Lord did not answer his prayer as such, but simply said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”⁷

Sometimes God does not answer our prayers because God is working in and through us in such a way that brings greater glory to himself through our weakness. And clearly Paul came to rest on God’s power and might, and less of his own ability.

This weakness would later lead Paul to encourage Roman Christian suffering persecution to “Rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”⁸

God was clearly producing hope in Paul, which gave him strength not only to endure so much hardship, but to shine through it all.

And then the third example is Jesus’ unanswered prayers in John 17 as he prayed for unity in the Church among believers...that we may be one as He and the Father are one. May we be brought to complete unity to let the world know that God sent Him and has loved us just as God loved Him.⁹ So here we see that God’s unanswered prayer is a work in progress. We are already One because Jesus is One

⁶ Isaiah 59:1-2

⁷ 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

⁸ Romans 5:2b-5

⁹ John 17:20-23

with the Father. And yet we are not One yet because we are so bitterly divided about unimportant things.

How should we respond when God doesn't answer prayer?

Know that it is quite natural to question whether God loves us or whether God even cares. Those are natural human emotions. But also know that God's love is greater and more perfect than we could ever imagine. God knows everything at once, we cannot.

Psalm 46 teaches us in the midst of life's upsets...that God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble...so we need to be still and know that God is God. God will be exalted through what we are experiencing.¹⁰

We may not understand why something is happening or not happening, but God does. Our response should be that of Jesus, "Abba, Father." Daddy, though I may not understand, I trust you and will obey."

Pete Greig says, that faith is God's gift to us. And faithfulness is our gift to God.

The Bible emphasizes the importance of listening more than speaking. James advises, "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger."¹¹ This verse highlights the value of being a good listener and being mindful of our words. Proverbs 18 states that "whoever gives an answer before he hears is foolish and shameful," emphasizing the need to listen before responding.¹²

The Apostle Paul encouraged the Romans, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn."¹³

How shouldn't we respond when God doesn't answer prayer?

Don't offer Christian platitudes which may seem helpful or comforting to us, but really minimize a person's pain and struggle. Such as...

"God's got a plan" Sounds good but in the moment it is also dismissive of a their legitimate concerns about what is going on in their lives.

"Just have faith" implies that if the person were spiritually stronger or had more faith then they wouldn't be experiencing the struggle they have.

"God never gives us more than we can handle." I don't know where this comes from, because it's not in the Bible. The truth is that God gave Job more than I certainly would have been ever able to handle.

What I hate most that one often hears in the wake of death... "God must have needed them more in heaven than on earth" or "God needed another angel."

¹⁰ Psalm 46

¹¹ James 1:16

¹² Proverbs 18:13

¹³ Romans 12:15

Nothing could be further from the truth. God doesn't create angels out of humans. Nor is God needy and not all sufficient.

Please never say these things. Just be still and trust that God is God. If you don't know what to say to someone's unanswered prayer...say nothing!!! We don't need further clutter a person's grief with our own spiritual garbage.

How might God meet us in the heartbreak of unanswered prayer today?

Let's be honest before God as we pray. Let's not sugar coat our feelings and pretend as if it isn't affecting us deeply. Even Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me!"¹⁴

Instead of asking why God allowed such and such to happen, consider asking "Where are you, God?" The former questions God's power. The latter calls for God's presence.

Pete Greig said, "God's silence is not the same thing as God's absence."¹⁵

God says, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."¹⁶ As he was ascending into heaven, Jesus said, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."¹⁷

Let's choose to be vulnerable.

Let's ask others to join us in our unanswered prayer. This is a time when we need their help more than ever.

Let's hold fast to the hope of the resurrection. God's ways are mysterious and so unlike ours. We may not understand what God is doing or saying, but we trust that in the end He will restore all things according to His awesome power and will...even bring the dead back to life.

And finally, let's remember the words of Psalm 30:5, "Weeping may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning."¹⁸

As I close in light of so much unanswered prayer today, let us hear Paul's words to the Ephesians read over us.

Paul prayed, "**14** For this reason I kneel before the Father, **15** from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. **16** I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, **17** so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, **18** may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of

¹⁴ Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:45, Mark 15:34

¹⁵ Pete Greig in the 24/7 Prayer Course on Unanswered Prayer at <https://prayercourse.org/session/unanswered-prayer/>

¹⁶ Hebrews 13:5

¹⁷ Matthew 28:20b

¹⁸ Psalm 30:5

Christ, **19** and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, **21** to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Ephesians 3:14-21