

The Challenge of Unanswered Prayer

August 2nd, 2015

I heard a story some time ago about a boy growing up in the Congo, one of the poorest nations in Africa.

- He was one of seven children living together with all his other relatives in one small home.
- As you can imagine, life was difficult for this boy... especially seeing so many around him dying from preventable diseases.
- But, even as a powerless, impoverished little boy, he offered this one big prayer up to God...

That one day he would be able to build a hospital in that little village. But how? He had no connections, no resources, no voice... nothing.

- But there was something different about this little boy. You see... this young kid knew how to pray bold prayers.
- "God, give me a way to bring this dream to pass!" And then something started happening... He started growing.
- 5 feet... 6 feet... 6'5" ... 6'10" ... 7' ... 7'2" ! And along the way, he started playing basketball on a dirt playground in that village.

After he graduated with straight A's from his local village school, he began applying for scholarships to study abroad.

- It was an impossible dream. So, he prayed really big prayers.
- And, amazingly, he got a scholarship to Georgetown University to **study medicine so he could go back and minister** in his village.
- While at Georgetown, the basketball coach noticed him and asked him to try out for the team.

He not only made the team, but he became a star player. He was so good that he was **drafted by the Denver Nuggets**...

- And would eventually play for the Nets, Knicks, and the Houston Rockets.
- In fact, **Dikembe Mutombo** became one of the best NBA players of our time and, in fact, **was inducted into the NBA Hall of Fame** just a few months ago.

But more amazing that that, **Dikembe donated 15 million** dollars to build that hospital.

- And, in **July of 2007**, he brought a number of other NBA players with him to **dedicate a brand new 29 million dollar hospital** in the Congo. **[show slide of Dikembe]**
- God is ready! If we would bring Him those big, hairy, audacious prayers... than **know that God has a way of making those prayers come to pass.** **[return back to title slide]**

You see, if you were to ask me, "*Craig, what is the single biggest motivator for your prayer life?*" **I could tell you in two words, "Answered prayer."**

- When I hear stories like that... I'm moved to pray! **When there is a need and God responds...**
- If I'm **feeling stressed and turn to God** in prayer... and, out of nowhere I'm filled with total peace...
- When you pray for **someone whose struggling with an illness** looks at you with that confused grin because they now feel completely better... it **just makes me want to pray more!**

And yet, if somebody were to ask me, "*What's the single biggest de-motivator for prayer?*" I could tell you that in two words as well!

- Anybody want to guess? Yes... **Unanswered prayer!**
- **Somebody looking for work** goes to God in prayer... but just can't seem to find the right job.
- Or **somebody wrestles with depression**, and they ask God for to lift it off of them, and yet it continues to weigh them down.

One way or another, every one of us has experienced this... where unanswered prayers have not only **impacted our prayer lives** but **challenged our faith** as well.

- When I think about unanswered prayer... **what really stands out in my prayer journey** took place during our fourth year living in Tajikistan.
- There was a girl living in a village next to ours... she was about 10 years old.

She had slipped on some ice and broken her leg. Her family was extremely poor... so poor that a trip to a doctor was out of the question.

- Well, her leg didn't heal properly... and eventually got infected.
- By the time the family had found me and asked me to come and pray for her, she already had advanced gangrene.
- Her leg was completely discolored and swollen 2-3x its size.

I tried to get them to the capital city where they could get some kind of attention... but her father wouldn't take her. He thought she'd be fine.

- I prayed every day for her. In fact, **most nights I climbed out onto the roof** of the apartment building where we lived...
- And just prayed and prayed that God would make her well until one day when her father came to tell me that she had just died.

Needless to say, it's always great to share stories about answered prayer... stories of God miraculously intervening in people's lives.

- And yet, there are other times, where our prayers seem to get lost and we begin to wonder: *"Is it worth it?... God, do You even hear me?... Do You even care?"*
- Truth is, the Bible is full of stories about people who ask for something and don't get it.

One day James and John, for example, decided they wanted to **upgrade their heavenly seating assignments**, so they had their mother come to Jesus.

- Now you imagine this. Their mom gets down on her knees before Jesus, and **He asks her, "What do you want?"**
- She said, *"Grant that one of these two sons of mine sit at Your right hand and one at Your left hand when You come into Your kingdom."*
- Jesus says, "No. That's not how it works in my Kingdom."

Now, of course, that **particular prayer for power & prestige** is an example of a prayer that should go unanswered!

- But it reflects a frustration a lot of us experience... I'm praying for this... but God's just not hearing me.
- **My boss isn't letting up on me; I'm still feeling so alone; my relationship is still hurting; my finances are still a wreck.**

- And, again, if what you're experiencing through the unanswered prayer isn't painful enough... the **confusion over why God seems so distant** only adds to the pain.

Of course, there have been **moments in my walk with God** that I've been down that same road...

- and, like you, have wrestled with the **question of or felt the weight of** unanswered prayer.
- So, what I'd like to do this morning is to walk you through some of the things Scripture says about this question of unanswered prayer. **[PRAYER]**

While sitting in Herod's prison, **we read in Matthew 11:3**, how John the Baptist asked his disciples to go to Jesus and ask him a question.

- *"Are you the One who was to come or should we expect someone else?"*
- It was a fair question. But what's interesting is that John had already been so certain of who Jesus was.

In **John 1:29-34** we're told that **as Jesus was walking toward him**, John says to his own followers, *"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*

- He then says, *"I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."*
- John had just heard the Father's voice... ***"This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased."*** (Matt 3:16-17).
- At least at that time, **there was no doubt in John's mind who Jesus was.**

So, why, after all that, would he send his disciples to ask Jesus whether he was in fact the Son of God??

- You see, **when this happened, time was running out for John.** It didn't look good... and he knew it.
- "I'm about to die here... why hasn't Jesus heard my cry? Maybe He isn't the Messiah... maybe I got it wrong."

It doesn't always seem fair... John no doubt heard about all the miracles Jesus' disciples were experiencing. But, where was his miracle?

- In **Acts 12:1-2**, we told that Herod had James, the brother of the Apostle John, killed with the sword.
- And yet, over the very next few verses, we **read about how Peter is miraculously delivered.**
- But why? Why does God say “yes” to some and “no” to others? **Why does He answer some of my prayers** but remain silent on others?

After all, **doesn't Jesus say in Mathew 7:7, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.”**

- Those aren't just empty promises to keep us busy in prayer.
- He's **not commanding us here to dig a ditch** and then fill it back again to keep us spiritually busy. **He means this!**
- He is 100% committed to releasing what we're praying for. But we can't ignore the condition that Jesus puts on this.

So, what was the context for this verse in Matthew 7:7? Well, if you go back a few verses, Jesus had just offered a prayer we call the Lord's prayer...

- **“Our Father in Heaven, Holy is Your name. Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”**
- You see, prayer isn't our opportunity to have our way with God. Instead, it's **His invitation to us... to partner with Him** in releasing His will and purposes in the world.
- Prayer is the process by which **we're able to join with God in releasing His Kingdom** here on earth as it is in heaven.

That's why, beyond worship to our Holy God, **the prayer Jesus models for us in the Lord's prayer** starts with that prayer to see everything “up there” come “down here.”

- Like it or not, we have to accept that **God is not a cosmic vending machine** where our **prayers are like coins** to get whatever we want.
- Now, that doesn't mean that He's not interested in our own person needs... He is completely.

- In fact, we see from this same prayer that **it's perfectly fine to pray for "our daily bread,"** or, for God's help to **"keep us from temptation."**

But, if we're honest, **we often get so lost in the immediate personal needs** in our own lives and those around us,

- That **we loose sight of the heart of prayer...** to join with God in seeing His Kingdom come.
- That's why **Jesus explains, in verses 33,** that we're to **"Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."**

You see, to **"Seek first His Kingdom"** is to **set our hearts to pursue His heart & will & purposes** first & foremost.

- And, to seek first **"His righteousness"** is to allow His character to be formed in us.
- That was Paul's heart in Galatians 4:19, that **Jesus character and will would shape each of their lives.**

In other words, **as our lives are becoming more & more shaped by His character & will,**

- the prayers that we pray will reflect His Kingdom purposes for our own lives and the lives of those around us.
- And it's those prayers that we can **clearly pray** with boldness & confidence.

In the same way, Jesus said in **John 15:7** that **"If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you."**

- Maybe because of unanswered prayer you think Jesus was **either exaggerating OR...**
- limiting this promise to those **super-Christians** who have a **kind of crazy-deep connection** with God that you just don't have.

But the promise Jesus is making is real... ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. **It's a check that He wants us to cash in!**

- And yet, He shares two conditions that need to be in place in order for the check to be valid.
- The first is that **we need to abide in Him...** and secondly, **His Word needs to abide in us.**
- If you read back through the previous 6 verses, He reminds us that a branch can't produce fruit if it's severed from the vine.

He says, in **verse 5**, *“Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from Me you can do nothing.”*

- You see, the fruit that grows on a branch is a reflection of the vine on which those branches are connected.
- If we're abiding in Him... **if His Word, His heart, His passions are residing in us**, than those prayers that come from us will be shaped by Him.
- And it's those prayers that you can cash in with confidence.

John the Baptist was clearly an amazing man of God. But, in that moment, realizing that Herod would be taking His life, John was afraid...

- **and that fear caused Him to question what he already knew** deep in his heart.
- So, Jesus sends John's disciples back to him with this reply: **He tells John**, *“Yes, I am the One. But John, I won't be sparing your life... I won't be getting you out of prison... I won't be answering your prayer.”*
- He then says, *“But, Blessed are you, John, if this does not cause you to fall away.”*

Truth is, while anyone could relate to John's prayer for deliverance from Herod's sword, God's heart & will was different than John's.

- But, the deliverance John ultimately experienced was so much greater than He could have ever imagined.
- So, what does all this mean? It means that **if we want to see our prayer lives turned upside down** than we need to *“Seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness.”*
- It means that **we need to align ourselves around His purposes**, not our own.

As Kingdom people, we need to embrace God's word in Isaiah 55:8 that His ways are not our ways...

- that **He has a plan deeper & richer than any we could devise.**
- It means that we order our lives around the person of Jesus Christ who **has a divine assignment for our lives that runs so much deeper** than our desire for comfort & security.

You see, when our prayers center around meeting our immediate needs, we tend to look for things that keep us safe and comfortable.

- And yet, there are times when God allows us go through a challenging season in order to lead us to an even greater breakthrough.
- So, with all that in mind, how might you respond to unanswered prayer in your life?

1. When God Seems to be Saying, "No"

Well, we need to recognize that we **might not be praying in line with His will.** It's **certainly not the only reason God might say no** to our prayers, but it's one that we should consider.

- In **John 5:14**, we're told, **"This is the confidence we have in approaching God; that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us."**
- The Gospels are literally full of examples where the disciples are making requests of Jesus that are not exactly in line with His heart.

When the people in one Samaritan village told them that they wouldn't be rolling out the red carpet when Jesus & the disciples were passing thru...

- James & John asked Jesus if He would ***destroy the village with fire from heaven!***
- Jesus is like... ***"Let's see... you want to Nuke the Samaritans, huh? Well, I appreciate the prayer request... but no!"***
- How does line up with the Lord's prayer, ***"Your Kingdom come, Your will be done."*** You see, it's always about His will.

Now, I'm gonna assume that we're a little beyond the, "***Lord, would you rain down fire on my boss today,***" OR,

- "***Lord would you smite my ex today***" type of prayers. And yet, there are times when our prayers get closer to this than we think.
- For example, one popular "wrong request" goes like this: "***God, please change that person.***"
- Wives pray this for their husbands; husbands for their wives; Workers for their bosses; Students for their Teachers; Parents for their kids.

Needless to say, there are a lot of legitimate reasons to pray for others... for them to **know Jesus**; be **set free from their addictions**; that they would **experience his love & healing**, and so on.

- So, here's the question... when you pray for them, **does your motivation come out of an authentic concern for that person?**
- You see, I might pray for someone to change... someone who is making my life difficult. But why? So *my* life can be easier!
- Truth is, the true intention of our prayers may really be: "*I don't want to face my own issues. I don't want to work on this relationship. I don't want to change at all! Instead, I want the other person to accommodate all my needs, so I'm asking you to change him or her.*"

So, while it's fine to pray for that **new, big account**; While, as a teacher, it's fine to pray that you have a class of perfectly behaved kids;

- While it is fine to pray that **God would cause His church to grow...**
- We always **need to be mindful of what motivations lay beneath the surface.**
 - Is it to show off all the other salesmen?
 - Is it to have an easy year at the expense of blessing a more difficult child who needs more of God's love in their life?
 - Is it to show off to other pastors how your church is growing while theirs isn't?
- James 4:3 says that "***When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.***"

I'm not trying to get you to spend hours looking at the motivation of every prayer you make.

- Just get in the habit of asking yourself, **would it bring Him or me glory?** Would it advance **His kingdom or my reputation?**
- Would it really help others? Would it **help me to grow spiritually** OR just make my life easier?
- Sometimes, like John the Baptist, our prayers are **rooted in fear or desperation** or a **loss of hope**.
- Sometimes we're **overwhelmed and need God or someone to just make things better**.

All through the Bible you see this. In fact, on four separate occasions, four different people,

- **Moses, Jeremiah, Elijah, and Jonah** each get so discouraged that they ask God to take their lives.
- But, in every case God says, "No!" Don't you think that, when their dark seasons had passed, they were glad God had said no?
- Thank God that God sometimes says no!

There is a song by Garth Brooks that hit number one on the charts some time ago called *Unanswered Prayer*. It came from a true-life experience.

- He was at a football game at his old high school, and he saw this girl who he hadn't seen for a long time.
- All through high school he had such a huge crush on her. In fact, he used to pray that they would get married one day.
- Well... it didn't happen, and now all these years later, he sees her again... and he wonders, "*What was I thinking?*"

Under his breath, so grateful for the amazing wife God did give him, he whispers, "*Thank you God for not answering that prayer.*"

- In fact, the main line of this song, is that "***Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.***"
- There's a **scene in Bruce Almighty** where Jim Carey was trying to figure out how to respond to the millions of prayer requests coming in.
- So he gets this brilliant idea. He just says "yes" to all of them. And, as a result, the world starts falling apart!

Suddenly, everyone asking for **financial power** are getting rich. Everyone asking to **marry their crush** are getting just what they've asked him for.

- Before they're ready for it, people are being given **financial power, political power, physical power, and supernatural power**.
- And, needless to say, it was a disaster. You see, the **good news is that God always reserves the right to say no.**

2. When God Says, "Not Yet"

You don't have to look too hard to find examples in Scripture where God's response to people is, "Not yet."

- **Abraham**, for example, had to wait years, till he was 99 years old, before God answered his prayer for a son.
- **Moses** and the people of Israel had to wait 40 years in the wilderness before they made it to the Promised Land.
- **Joseph** had to wait two years in prison after he had interpreted the cupbearer's dream before he was released.
- **David** had to wait a whole lifetime before he saw the beginnings of his prayers for a temple answered.

Of course the problem with that, is that we don't like to hear "*slow down*" or "*not yet*" much more than we like to hear "*no*".

- We like things fast... from supermarket lines to computers... to answered prayer!
- It's embarrassing to say, but I can be like the kid who asks his parents over and over again, "*Are we there yet?*" And God has to always say, "*not yet Craig!*"

I was flying to Pasadena a few months ago and was getting frustrated watching a TV show on Netflix. It was a little slow.

- Then it hit me... am I actually complaining that my internet connection up at 36,000 feet is a little slow? Am I insane?!
- We can kick or scream, but the truth is that **God isn't intimidated by our demands for instant gratification.**

He cares about how we are feeling... but **He will not cave in** and give us all the chocolate we want just to keep us from complaining.

- Though it can be hard, we need to trust God... embracing the reality that **He completely loves us...**
- and while He is both all-powerful and good... that He **knows better than we do...** that **His reasons are just and good.**
- That when He says “not yet” or “slow down”, **He is solely motivated by what is best for us...**
- Not in terms of our comfort or safety **but in terms of the life of significance** He’s called us to.

Its during these times where we simply need to surrender to God... to let go of the steering wheel of our lives and hand it over to a loving Father who “knows best.”

- Yes, you might be frustrated with God... or feel disappointed or even angry with God...
- But, in the end, you’re ready to surrender your will to His **knowing that it’s also during these seasons** where God seems to be silent that He’s doing some of His best work.

While **God didn’t immediately answer Dikembe Mutombo’s prayer** for a hospital in his village, for example,

- God was busy at work, growing him tall enough so he could earn the NBA salary that allowed him to give away millions!
- The truth is, more often than not, when we feel God is saying “No” to our prayers, He’s really saying, “Not Yet.”

When Jonah prayed that God would save him, he sure didn’t think that **being thrown overboard** on a ship,

- Or **getting swallowed up whole by a gigantic fish** was an answer to prayer.
- In fact, he just assumed God had totally abandoned him.
- But all that was exactly what God needed to do in order to prepare Jonah for what He’s ultimately called him to.

Truth is, if we were to stop long enough to **consider those prayers that seemingly went unanswered months or years ago,**

- you may see for yourself that **what you thought was a “no” from God was really a “not yet.”**
- And that what He was doing **during the “not yet” season was preparing you** for the very thing you were praying for.

I think that’s **what Paul experienced in 2 Cor. 12:8** when he prayed three times for what he called a “thorn in his flesh.”

- But God was no doubt answering a deeper prayer of Paul’s in **Philippians 3:10** when He said, *“I want to know you, the power of your resurrection and the fellowship of Your sufferings.”*
- And so, in response to Paul’s pray that God take away this burden, God instead told him, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.”*

You see, God's main goal for my life isn’t necessarily **what I have or don’t have... or what I’m doing or not doing...**

- He’s not investing all of His time in heaven trying to keep me **safe, comfortable, and entertained.**
- Instead, He’s far more interested in the kind of **person I’m becoming.**

What if God answered all our prayers when we first asked Him? What if our **bank accounts were always bigger than the deposits** we’ve made?

- What if our **bosses were always fired** and we always **moved as quickly up the corporate ladder** as we’d like?
- Would that lead us to those deeper prayers we often pray under our breath... to know Him more?

We prayed for a long time as a church, for example, for God to provide us with our own place.

- And while we might never know this side of heaven exactly why we had to wait as long as we did,
- Through our time of waiting, God was no doubt building our character so that we can bear the additional weight that our answered prayers will one day put on our shoulders.

Perhaps another reason He may have us wait is so that we could come **to see that what you were praying for was just a crumb** compared to the feast He really wanted us to have.

- For that **ten year-old Tajik girl...** just the day before her death, a few of the women on our team went to visit her...
- to read Bible stories to her and to sing worship songs. Wouldn't you know, she gave her life to Jesus!
- I prayed that God would heal her... He did. **In that moment she was running around the streets of heaven.**
- God did more than heal her body... He saved her!

But, having said all that... the reality is that sometimes people ask for really good things with really good hearts with really good intentions...

- and yet, their prayers don't get answered. And the truth is, we may never know why?
- It just might never make sense this side of heaven.
- No matter how desperate and persistent we are in our prayer, sometimes heaven just remains silent and we don't know why.

But even though I might not be able to point you to an answer... **I can point you to a Person.**

- And, I can tell you that **at the heart of the Gospel** is an unanswered prayer.
- You see, Jesus, kneeling in the Garden, prayed, **"Father, if it is possible, may this cup of suffering be taken away from Me. Yet not My will, but Yours be done."**

This is the **most desperate prayer** ever prayed... **from the most discerning person** who ever lived... from the **purest heart that ever beat,**

- **For deliverance from the most unjust suffering ever known, and all it got was silence.**
- Heaven was not moved. The cup was not taken away. The request was denied.

But, from that **unwanted, unmerited suffering** came the **hope of the world** that reshaped history.

- Because the **ultimate answer to every human anguish,**

- including the anguish of unanswered prayer, is a **sin-stained, blood-soaked Cross** where God Himself suffered.
- In **Isaiah 53** we're told that the Suffering Servant would bare all of our sins. But it says more than that.
 - It says that **on that Cross He will bare our sorrows as well.**
 - Jesus not only bore the pain of His own unanswered prayer... but took on His own shoulders the pain of ours as well.

Jesus asked in Gethsemane not to be crucified. What if God had said yes? What if Jesus had been spared that cup?

- What if there had been **no Cross, no death**, no **tomb**, no **resurrection**, no **forgiveness of sins**, no **outpouring of the Holy Spirit**, no **birth of the Church**?

Although I've shared some truths and principles that I'd like you to consider when facing unanswered prayer,

- Truth is, I just don't know why some prayers ultimately get answered and some don't.
- I only know that in the Cross, *God's "no"* to His only Son was ultimately turned into *God's "yes"* to every human being who ever lived.

I'd like to close in prayer now. And as we do that, let's remember that **the very God we're praying to is here right now.**

- I think He would invite you... even though you may have suffered that disappointment and even pain of a silent heaven...
- whatever your ache is, wherever there is a *no* that you want so badly to be a *yes*, would you bring it to Him right now?

Would you bring that dream... that disappointment... that challenge or burden... Would you bring it to Him now?

- Would you ask Him to renew your faith and stir up expectancy again in your prayer?
- Because as much as He might say "No" or "Not Yet," you'll also experience those moments when God will simply say, ***"Yes! I'm opening the floodgates of heaven right now."***

Prophet Habakkuk 3:19...

“Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! The Sovereign LORD is my strength! He makes me as surefooted as a deer, able to tread upon the heights.”