

Prayer: A Daring Dialogue
Unanswered Prayer or “No”
Matthew 26:36-46, Romans 8:18-30

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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.” ³⁷He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

³⁹Going 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.”

⁴⁰Then 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.”

⁴²He 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.”

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

⁴⁵Then 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. ⁴⁶Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

A journalist assigned to the Jerusalem bureau took an apartment overlooking the Wailing Wall. Every day from her window she observed the same old Jewish gentleman, take up his same spot by the wall where he prayed vigorously. After several weeks, she decided to go down, introduce herself.

"I see you come to the wall every day. How long have you done that, and what are you praying for?"

"I have come here to pray every day for 25 years. In the morning I pray for world peace and then for the brotherhood of humanity. I go home, have a cup of tea, and I come back and pray for the eradication of illness and disease," he replied.

Amazed, the journalist asked: "How does it make you feel to come here every day for 25 years and pray for these things?"

The old man looks at her sadly. "It feels like I'm talking to a wall." (*beliefnet.com* (4-25-03))

We may laugh, but sometimes we feel that way, don't we? We may indeed pray faithfully for God to intervene, to heal, to end suffering, to mend a relationship, to change a mind, to do what we cannot do for ourselves. But we see no apparent change.

At its worst, it feels like praying to a wall. At best, it feels as if God is taking God's own sweet time in responding to our prayers! Or maybe God needs a hearing aid? What's up with unanswered prayer, anyway? I am heartened that the Bible does not shy away from this reality. You and I are not alone, as numerous people in the Bible experienced this same dynamic, including Jesus as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The clock is ticking. The sand is running through the hourglass. The "hour" of which Jesus had spoken so often, is now! The cross looms ahead. Accompanied by the disciples, Jesus leaves the Upper Room and goes to the Garden of Gethsemane. Now is the time to pray!

Given the circumstances, Jesus deeply desires the companionship of his disciples. He needs the ***ministry of presence***. That is all he asks of them. "Just be here...be with me"...this is all Jesus asks.

The disciples for their part are satiated. They have eaten their fill of lamb, bitter herbs, unleavened bread, and four glasses of wine—the traditional Passover meal. Just as we are after eating our fill after a Thanksgiving dinner or holiday feast, the disciples are fully satisfied and sleepy. Is it any wonder they have difficulty staying awake?!

In the most decisive hour of Jesus' life, he craves human companionship as much as he depends upon his Heavenly Father. The disciples' loyalty and support--their simple presence--is essential. "We know what it means to experience Jesus "with-ness" with us; but we do not often think our presence helps him much." The crowning prayer text of the entire Gospel is this one on Gethsemane. (p. 977, D Bruner, Matthew vol.2)

Jesus took Peter, James and John ahead with him...they see, they share his grief...as he began to be—according to various translations—depressed and confused, sorrowful and troubled, anguished and dismayed. Dread, despair,

depression—all of these would be natural human emotions, given the circumstances. What is the source of this angst? Most certainly, his impending death. Even more than the contemplation of the cross, it is no doubt, anticipating the crushing weight of the sins of the world, yours and mine...

The gospel writers were never truer than when they avoid the temptation to paint Jesus as hero, immune to darker emotions, or as a martyr exempt from fear. The depth and range of emotion portrays Jesus' authentic humanity. He can redeem us, because he is indeed, one of us. Hebrews 2:17

The three—Peter, James, and John—are close, they observe these intimate moments...they stay close, but they too are unable to stay alert, and fail to pray with Jesus.

Going a little farther, Jesus 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." V. 39

The depth of emotion affects Jesus' body. In exhaustion he falls to the ground. Still he prays to his Heavenly Father. ***"If it is at all possible, please take this cup away from me."***

"IF at all possible"—Jesus well knows that ***"nothing is impossible for God"***. Jesus wrestles with the reality of what is ahead of him. He inquires about "an alternative route by which to fulfill the Father's redemptive purposes." (Carson, Matthew, p.545)

Is it possible that God has a "plan B"? Is there another way to accomplish God's purpose? The **"cup"** is biblical language is a reference to the wrath and judgement of God, in the OT. Does this 'cup' include crucifixion and "the cup" of suffering? We do not know, so we honor the mystery of the request.

As a faithful Son, Jesus does not shrink from making an honest request, expressing his heart's desire, to his Heavenly Father. Nor should we hesitate to express to God our deepest desires as well.

"...Yet not as I will, but as you will." (v39) "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." (v.42)

This is the turning point—not only of the text, but of salvation history! Jesus' entire life has been focused/centered on doing the will of the Father. During these moments of prayer, Jesus surrenders: **“The main thing I want, is *not* what I want, it is what You want.”**

In the Garden of Eden, humanity exerted our will as over against God's. Look where that got us! But in the Garden of Gethsemane, the faithful, obedient Son restores us to Eden, through his obedient surrender to the will of the Father. This grace-filled reversal in the garden is the hinge of history. (LMC)

The author of Hebrews writes:

⁷During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered ⁹and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him... Hebrews 5:7-9

In a sense, Jesus' initial prayer—***let this cup pass from me***—is not answered or is met with silence. It is in his wrestling and in his surrender to his Father's will, where he finds his “answer”. Jesus does not seek to escape, but to embrace and endure what lies ahead, because he can trust the Father's heart.

What are the takeaways for us? What might we learn from this prayer of Jesus' that can instruct us as we pray?

First, like Jesus, we too can address God as our Father and express honestly, our hearts' desires.

Second, whatever heights or depths of emotion or even depression we may experience, Jesus understands. He's been there. You/we are not alone.

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” (Hebrews 4:14-16)

Third, not even Jesus was exempt from unanswered prayer. He wrestled with God and ultimately surrendered to the will/heart of His Father.

Part of the tension we experience may lie in the fact that there are lavish promises about prayer in the Bible and in Jesus' own teachings.

Larry Crabb, a pastor and author tells a story from his own life: When I was 10, I first heard Matthew 21:22, where Jesus, who never lies, said, "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." It was the "whatever" model of prayer—believe, ask for whatever you want, and it's yours.

I remember running outside, standing on our driveway, closing my eyes real tight, and praying: *God, I want to fly like Superman. And I believe you can do it. So I'll jump, and you take it from there.*

I jumped four times—and each time landed half a second later and half a foot farther down the driveway. I had believed and I had asked, just like Jesus said. But I didn't receive. Thus began Larry's life-long journey of trying to understand how prayer "works". (Larry Crabb, "Great Expectations," *Pray! magazine* (Nov/Dec 2006), p. 34

John's Gospel records these promises from the lips of Jesus himself:

¹³And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. (14:13-14)

⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (15:7)

What are we to make of this? If we read the fine print we will note the qualifiers: IF you ask in my name...If you remain in me and my words remain in you. The promises are conditional: Am I abiding in Christ? Am I asking according to God's will, and in Jesus' name?

These questions underscore relationship. The better we know God, the more we will desire what God desires, the more our wills grow conformed to God's will. How do we know or understand God's will? (These are 'cliff notes', a summary.)

There are two aspects to God's will. The first is **God's revealed will**, which is to say that the pages of scripture clearly tell God's desires for how we can best conduct ourselves in this world. For instance, the Ten Commandments are clear and straightforward guidelines for how to live our lives in relationship with God

and with our fellow human beings. Jesus boils those down further, to one sentence: “Love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

The other aspect of God’s will is **God’s hidden or “inscrutable” will**, which is unknown to us. This is the mystery of an infinite God who possesses sovereign control over human history, who transcends time and space, who is the author of the epic story of redemption.

Last week we touched on the story of Joseph, betrayed and sold into slavery by his brothers. He was innocent, but spent years in prison, eventually rising to second in command in all of Egypt. What happened to Joseph seems contrary to God’s will, but it illustrates the difference between God’s revealed and hidden will.

Ultimately God was able to use even the horrible things that happened to him, to prevent mass starvation and to reunite Joseph and his brothers in a story of sacrifice and forgiveness. Perhaps God could have accomplished these same ends in another way. We will never know. What we do know is that God worked mysteriously to accomplish a plan that was humanly un-seeable and unknowable. It became known only in retrospect, looking back over the series of events, the hidden will of God which redeemed Joseph’s suffering.

The cross is the quintessential example of the difference between these two aspects of God’s will. Jesus was clearly innocent. Those who put him to death violated the revealed will of God, or so everyone thought at the time. But in retrospect, the disciples came to believe that God worked out our salvation through Jesus’ suffering.

It was only after the resurrection that they could look back and see God’s hand at work on the cross. Likewise, at the end of Joseph’s story he could say to his brothers: ***“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”*** (Genesis 50:20)

Friends, we live in the tension of prayerfully pouring out our longings to God and waiting for God’s response. Sometimes the “answers” are miraculous. Sometimes we are met with silence. But every time we can be assured that God hears. God cares. God listens to us and God loves us.

Suffering of many kinds is part and parcel of being human. We cannot escape it. But we can put it in context.

What is that context? It is two-fold.

First: In suffering, we can identify with Christ, as Christ has suffered for and with us. We do not worship One who is remote and unfeeling. No, Jesus is God “with skin on.” (the incarnation)

Second: From the perspective of eternity, all present suffering leads to future glory...because... “we know that **in all things** God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

Country singer (and theologian!) Garth Brooks wrote this lyric:

***Just because he does not answer doesn't mean he don't care.
Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayer.***

PRAY