Unanswered Prayer

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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2 Kings 19:14-19

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I’m often asked, in my role as pastor, to pray for people. I take this responsibility seriously. I regularly pray for people who are ill, looking for employment and seeking guidance. Sometimes my prayers are answered in the manner I pray; sometimes not. As near as I can tell, my success as a pray-er is no better than that of anyone else.

Unanswered prayer is a vexing problem for people of faith. Why doesn’t God answer our prayers? This sermon is for those who struggle with unanswered prayer.

Some of you will identify with the cartoon on our screen. You offer a heartfelt prayer for help. You wait for an answer, as represented by the clock on the wall. When no answer seems forthcoming, you cease praying.

We find ourselves in chapter 16 of *The Story*. We’re devoting a year to reading this abridged, chronological version of the Bible. We’re currently in a portion of the Old Testament called Kings. The book is appropriately named, since it describes the reign of 39 kings who rule over divided Israel from the 10th to 6th centuries BC.

The vast majority of these kings are evil. Last Sunday, we looked at King Ahab who is an absolute bum. We read, “He did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any king before him” (1 Kings 16:30, 33).

Today’s featured king, Hezekiah, is a good king. We are told, “There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah either before or after him. He held fast to the Lord” (2 Kings 18:5-6).
Some may wonder why we even bother with this obscure portion of Scripture. I mean, who really cares about all those people with strange sounding names?

Evidently God cares. The Bible is a theologically-narrated story told at two levels. At its upper level, it’s a story about God. At its lower level, the Bible is a story about people, hundreds and hundreds of people. The reason why the Bible is so detailed about all these people is that God cares about every last one of them. Rest assured, when your name comes up for consideration, you’ll be glad God pays such close attention to people.

King Hezekiah rules the two southern tribes called Judah in the 7th century BC. In the 6th year of his 29 year reign, a superpower called Assyria defeats the ten northern tribes of Israel and transports them into exile.

King Sennacherib of Assyria is not yet satisfied. He wants the two southern tribes in his confederacy also. He sends his top military commanders to taunt Judah into surrender. “Don’t listen to Hezekiah. Don’t listen to his lies, telling you, ‘God will save us.’ Has there ever been a god anywhere who delivered anyone from the king of Assyria? Can you name a god who saved anyone from me, the king of Assyria?” (2 Kings 18:33-34 The Message). His taunts amount to Biblical trash-talking.

Sennacherib follows up his intimidations in writing. Hezekiah spreads out these threats before the Lord and prays, “You alone are God over the kingdoms of the earth. Open your ears and listen. Open your eyes and see. O Lord, deliver us” (19:14-19).

That night, an angel of the Lord takes out 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. Sennacherib can take a hint. He beats a hasty retreat and never bothers Judah again.

Shortly thereafter, Hezekiah becomes gravely ill. The prophet Isaiah tells Hezekiah to get his house in order. He is about to die (20:1).
Hezekiah pleads for mercy. Before Isaiah leaves the temple precincts, God summons him back to announce to Hezekiah that God has heard his prayer and will grant him 15 additional years.

We have two prayers recorded in Kings—a prayer for deliverance from enemies and healing from illness—that are both answered in the manner Hezekiah prays. Isn’t this the way prayer is supposed to work?

It’s dangerous to extrapolate any one, single story from the rest of Scripture. Not all Biblical people are granted answers to their prayers in the manner requested.

Jesus prays before his death, “Take this cup from me” (Luke 22:42). His prayer is not answered in the manner he prays. This cup of suffering and death isn’t taken from him. Sometimes prayers are answered in the manner we pray them and sometimes not.

J.I. Packer observes in his book on Praying, “Ultimately, there is no such thing as unanswered prayer….We might ask for something that is not good for us and God, being a good Father, tries to give us what we would have asked for if we knew everything he knew.” God always answers our prayers even if they do not correspond precisely with the way we pray. I ask God to change my circumstances. God uses my circumstances to change me.

I have said many times that there are three answers to prayer: yes, no and wait. Since the only answer that registers with us is yes, we don’t recognize God answering our prayers in ways different than how we prayed.

Sometimes God says no to our prayers. We might have thought it was in our best interests to ask for something. Fortunately, God knows better than to grant us all the silly requests we have ever asked for in prayer.

Chris and I are caring for two of our grandsons while their parents, our son and daughter-in-law are moving to Boxford, MA. Wesley, the younger, at two years and nine months, is still attached to his pacifier. It was something of a crisis last Thursday when he awoke from his nap and...
he couldn’t find his green pacifier. We ransacked the house looking for it, to no avail. Fortunately, Chris remembered that she had a spare pacifier. Wesley was distraught about losing his favorite pacifier yet accepted the substitute. The next day Chris called me. “You’ll never guess what I found: the green pacifier.” She found it near a basket by Wesley’s bed. She asked Wesley if he had thrown it there. He answered in the affirmative. She presented his newly-found green pacifier to him. She expected him to favor it. He preferred the new one.

I was preparing this sermon during this pacifier drama. We fluctuate in prayer much about Wesley’s ambivalence for pacifiers. We want this; we want that. We don’t always know what is best for us.

Sometimes God says no and sometimes God says wait. God may not deny our request, yet delays for some unspecified reason. Be careful not to rush to premature conclusions. Let things unfold. Give it time. You may find the request is right, but the timing is off. God may yet answer our prayers in ways that could never have been previously imagined. The prophet Habakkuk warns his readers, “If the vision tarries, wait for it. It will surely come, it will not delay” (Habakkuk 2:3).

The Apostle Paul prays three times for a thorn in the flesh to be removed from his life. We’re uncertain of the nature of his affliction, although it seems to be a physical malady of some kind. God did not take this affliction from Paul. Instead, he learns, “My grace is sufficient for you; my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

I belong to a covenant group of 40 pastors and Christian educators who meet yearly to support and learn from each other. Steve Hayner, President of Columbia Seminary in Decatur, GA, is a valued member of our group. Steve is the real deal. He is one of the genuine Christians I have ever known. Steve has inoperable pancreatic cancer. His chemotherapy treatments are no longer working, so he’s under Hospice care, his life now measured in days and weeks. Steve addressed in a blog post the many people who have been praying for a miracle of healing in his life.
“Many are praying for one of God’s big miracles. We are as well. But it is not how God answers prayer that determines our response to God. God is committed to my ultimate healing. Being cured of my cancer may or may not be a part of that healing work….One person told me how disturbing it is to watch so many thousands of prayers on my behalf and yet see a minimal evidence of physical healing. Does God really heal? Does the amount of prayer have any special impact? While I understand the importance of such questions, they are not the ones important to me now. I truly don’t know what God has planned. I could receive healing or could continue to deteriorate. Life is about more than physical health. More important than God’s work in us is God’s presence within us, empowering and sustaining us for whatever might be God’s call on my life today….”

He closes with a quote from poet E.E. Cummings, “I thank you God most for this amazing day…."

A conversation from the movie Rudy comes to mind. Okay, I’m dating myself. The movie is now 20-years-old. It’s a true story of Daniel “Rudy” Ruettiger, whose childhood ambition was to attend Notre Dame and play football for the Fighting Irish. But Rudy had two strikes against him. He was small and dyslectic. His high school grades suffered accordingly.

Near the beginning of the movie, Rudy meets Father Cavanaugh, an administrator at Notre Dame. He advises Rudy to take additional classes at a junior college and reapply. Despite his improved grades, Rudy receives three more rejection letters. One more rejection and he can never reapply. Rudy meets Father Cavanaugh in the chapel and pours out his heart. “Maybe I haven’t prayed enough,” Rudy says.

Father Cavanaugh answers, “I’m sure that’s not the problem. Praying is something we do in our time. The answers come in God’s time.”

Rudy isn’t satisfied. “Have I done everything I possibly can? Can you help me?”
Father Cavanaugh answers, “Son, in my 35 years of religious studies, I’ve come up with only two hard, incontrovertible facts: There is a God, and I’m not him.”

Isaiah writes that God’s ways are not my ways (Isaiah 55:8-9). There’s no such thing as unanswered prayer. God gives us what we would have asked if we knew everything He knew.