

Serious Answers to Hard Questions

When There's Only Silence Frankton – 8/10/14

Scripture: Matthew 21.18-22 praying and faith

Proposition: God doesn't necessarily answer every prayer with a "Yes."

We are in a short series of four sermons that I have titled [SLIDE] "Serious Answers to Hard Questions". And the series is really what the title suggests: well thought answers to important questions people have asked me at sometimes difficult times in their lives. Last week we talked about why innocent people suffer. We came to the conclusion that God did not cause the suffering, that the natural laws that God set up to sustain this world and also the God-given freedoms that people have in it sometimes cause us harm, even though we are the innocent by-standers. Today, we're going to talk about prayer and why sometimes we think it goes unanswered.

There was a husband and wife that had difficulty conceiving, but after much work with a fertility clinic they became pregnant. However, early in the pregnancy, she became ill and by the fifth month, her doctors told her that if she continued to carry the child she, the mother, would die, and therefore the baby would too. Much prayer - from the couple and their family, friends, and church - went heavenward asking God to intervene in the situation. Her health continued to become worse, and so did that of the unborn baby. After much weeping and gnashing of teeth, they opted out of the pregnancy in order to save her life. The young woman said that she had never before wrestled with the will of God and had thought that if enough people with enough faith prayed, then God would answer those prayers. Yet God did not answer her prayer. The experience led her to abandon her faith in God. Did I mention that the young lady was a pastor of a small church?

Many people struggle with their faith because of God's silence and his apparent impotence or apathy when they cry out to him in their greatest time of need. What makes the unanswered prayers more disturbing is that some well-meaning Christians claim that God regularly answers their prayers for things of no consequence. You know the type, they pull into a crowded parking lot and pray to God for a parking place close to the door and "Voila" one opens up on the front row. Or we watch professional baseball players point to the heavens after hitting a home run. Does God answer prayers for parking places and home runs, but not for those who have cancer or whose unborn child will die without a miracle? Those types of questions are what I'm going to try to answer this morning.

First, let's see what Jesus had to say about prayer. Here's Matthew 21.21-22: [SLIDE] *If you have faith and don't doubt...you can even say to this mountain, [SLIDE] 'May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and it will happen. [SLIDE] You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it.* Jesus seems to be promising that whatever we ask for in faith will be given to us. This has to confuse us when our lives don't reflect that idea, like when we pray for a job and don't get one or when we pray for someone's healing and they die. Some well-meaning-but-theologically-challenged Christians explain the 'failure' of these prayers by placing the blame on the one praying. They say things like, "You have unconfessed sin in your life," or "your motives were improper," or (here's the big one) "you lack faith" as reasons the prayers were not answered.

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I find that appalling. To say that God would have answered your prayers for your sick child or dying friend if only had tried harder to please God or if you had confessed all your sins is just plain cruel. What about if a whole bunch of people are praying. Almost certainly one of them lacks “enough” faith, so then no prayers would be answered. Here’s my point: [SLIDE] Jesus heals because he is holy, not because those he heals are holy. Don’t get me wrong, living to seek and please God is important, but to explain that God withholds answers to prayer because we are not holy enough seems odd for a faith that is built on God’s grace. Faith is important in prayer. Faith is the act of trusting that God hears our prayers, that God cares about us, and that God is able to act as we have prayed.

So, perhaps the answer isn’t found in what we do wrong when we pray, but in our failure to understand what Jesus meant when he said we could move mountains and have whatever we ask for if we pray with faith. I need to remind you of something. Jesus often spoke using a figure of speech called [SLIDE] hyperbole, which is an over-exaggeration to make a point. For instance, if we say that we are hungry enough to eat a horse, that’s really an exaggeration to make a point. We probably couldn’t eat a whole horse. Our problem with reading the words of Jesus today is that we sometimes take his words hyper-literally rather than reading them hyperbolically. For instance Jesus said that if your hand causes you to sin you are to cut it off and if your eye causes you to sin, you are to pluck it out. [MT 5.29-30] I don’t believe that Jesus was teaching self-mutilation. In other places in scripture, self-mutilation is looked down upon. I think he was telling his listeners that sin is serious business and we should do all we can to avoid it.

Now that we understand hyperbole, we can return to Jesus’ words Matthew 21.22: [SLIDE] *You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it.* Were these words a promise to be taken hyper-literally or are they a hyperbolic statement inviting Jesus’ followers to pray boldly and with faith? I suggest that Jesus’ listeners understood that Jesus was speaking hyperbolically. They did not think that he was suggesting they could pray for wealth and have it, or they could pray for the Romans to leave and they would be gone. I think they understood that Jesus was saying, “Go to God with your burdens! Be bold when you pray! Trust that God hears your prayers and that God will see you through the situation.”

I wish he had said it that way but he didn’t. So, we have Jesus’ statement which, on the surface, leaves us feeling that God is not fulfilling his promises. But if you can wrap your mind around Jesus using hyperbole, it provides for deeper reflection on how prayer really “works.” We want to take Jesus’ words literally, but there’s a problem with that. What would our world look like if we asked for everything we prayed for? Picture a teenage boy praying earnestly and in faith that the young lady he has a crush on say ‘yes’ when he asks her out on a date. Is God going to make her go out with this guy even if she didn’t want to go? Would you want to live in a world where you are forced to do something because someone else prayed for it? Neither do I.

So, what about intercessory prayer – prayers we lift to God for the other people and their situations. If all we had to do is pray for healing and our prayer would be answered, we would have no need for immune systems, doctors or hospitals. We wouldn’t need to take care of ourselves, watching what we eat and getting regular exercise. All we would need is prayer. Somehow, I don’t think that is what Jesus intended in his promise in Matthew. The challenge of applying Jesus’ words literally means that ultimately, we wouldn’t have to work, strive, research or put forth any effort. We pray for food and it appears. We pray for money and it just starts rolling in. We pray for

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health and we are instantly made well. This cannot be what Jesus meant when he spoke about prayer.

Let's look at a prayer that went unanswered in the New Testament as an example. Paul describes his own struggle with unanswered prayer. Paul has what he calls a "thorn in his side." We don't know what this thorn is, but it's apparently some sort of physical pain in his side. Today we might question his gall bladder. Here's what Paul writes about this pain and his prayer: Paul wrote in his letter that three different times he had begged the Lord to take it away. God's answer: **[SLIDE]** *Each time [God] said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness. [2 Cor 12.9]* What kind of answer was that? Paul found great comfort in it. God would not heal him, but God would help him to deal with the struggle. Not only that, God would use Paul's weakness. Paul came to see the pain in his side as an opportunity for God to work in perfecting Paul's soul and in accomplishing good through him. I think this teaches us that God does not always answer our prayers the way we want, even when we offer them in faith at times of real need. But it also teaches us that God does not abandon us and that God can work in this situations for our betterment.

Ok, so let's turn to the question of "How God answers prayer." **[SLIDE]** God typically works through natural laws and through people. Don't get me wrong, God still uses miracles, but that is not God's ordinary way. Most often God works through people, calling us and nudging us into action, working in our hearts and lives to be the instruments God uses to answer the prayers of others. **[SLIDE]** God will not suspend another person's free will to answer my prayers. I can pray for someone to come to faith in Christ or fall in love with me, but I can't expect God to make someone do these things. A more faithful prayer would be that I might be an effective witness, or that I might be worthy of someone's love. God will not violate another person's free will in response to my prayer. **[SLIDE]** God's answers to my prayer is often not to deliver me from suffering, but to walk with me through it. Then he can use that situation to transform my life so maybe I can help him transform the world.

So, let's wrap this up. God does not answer prayers like some genie in a bottle that we rub and he magically appears ready to grant us three wishes. God is not some divine vending machine that we can walk up to, say our prayer, and punch in the code to get what we want. God is not some all-you-can-eat buffet that we can pray for a little of this and a lot of that and absolutely none of this other thing. I believe our thinking about prayer as "something to be answered" is really a case of "stinking thinking". Maybe **[SLIDE]** prayer is more of yielding our lives to God. Maybe it's less of a transaction and more of an investment. I think too often prayer has become our way of instructing God on how to run the world. But I think prayer should be simply a conversation with God. Maybe prayer is more like we what experienced as a child. When we got hurt, we climbed up into our parent's lap for comfort. Their way of making us feel better was simply to hold us tightly and reassure us that somehow everything was going to be okay. I really think our prayers with God should be more like that. Letting him reassure us that even if the worst happens, and sometimes it does, everything will eventually be ok. And until then, he will be here to help us the muck and the mire.