

The problem of unanswered prayer

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Date: 27 October 2019

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[0:00] with a series of problems in the Christian life, and the problem this morning is the problem of unanswered prayer. And for that, we turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 12, beginning at the first verse. 2 Corinthians 12, verse 1.

I must boast, there is nothing to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ, who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven, whether in body or out of the body, I do not know, God knows. I know that this man was caught up into paradise, whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know, God knows. And he heard things that cannot be told, which a man may not utter. On behalf of this man, I will boast. But on my own behalf, I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. Though if I wish to boast, I shall not be a fool, but I shall be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I sought the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you.

My power is made perfect in weakness. I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and distresses. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Amen. May the Lord bless to us that reading. He said to me, my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness. That particular example in 2 Corinthians 12 is the clear case of a prayer which the apostle had made to God but remained unanswered.

Now, if you remember sermons, you will doubtless remember many sermons about the power of prayer.

[3:24] But having been an ardent listener of sermons since 1966 in many different places, I'm afraid to say I can't recall one about unanswered prayer. But this is it this morning.

When we go into 2 Corinthians as a whole, we find that the way the first nine chapters are written are different from the final chapters from 10 to 13.

And it's generally assumed by reputable scholars that chapters 10 to 13 were written before chapters 1 to 9.

And they're often referred to as Paul's terrible letter. And they're referred to actually right at the beginning of 2 Corinthians 2 and verse 3.

He says, And I wrote as I did, that so when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice. For I felt sure of all of you that my joy would be the joy of all of you.

[4:36] So what he's doing here, he's talking about the problem of unanswered prayer. Now, the basis of this unanswered prayer, as far as Paul is concerned, is that he's been given a thorn in the flesh.

And since scholars like to argue and discuss what this might have been, I've got one solution to give you. And the solution to this problem of the thorn in the flesh, as far as I can see, is that of partial blindness.

At the moment of his conversion, the apostle was smitten with fool blindness, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles. Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing.

So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. So one of the immediate results of this conversion experience was that of blindness from which he never fully recovered.

Now, if you accept that as being right, it actually gives some purpose of some things he says in the Galatian letter. In chapter 4, he says, I bear you witness, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me.

[6:11] And right at the end of that letter, he says, See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.

Paul usually employed a secretary. But you can see here what's happening is, this idea of the thorn in the flesh, if it was blindness, there's evidence to support it.

Now, we're told in this letter that he three times made this a matter of prayer. Verses 8 and 9.

Three times I thought the Lord about this, that it should leave me, but he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness.

So what's being said here is simply this, that Paul made this prayer and there was an answer. But it wasn't the answer he wanted.

[7:17] It's not the answer he wanted. The actual answer was the supply of grace. What he wanted was the restoration of sight.

Now, if you read the Acts of the Apostles and in some of his letters, you will find that the Apostle was no stranger to God performing miracles through his own hand.

So, he thinks about this. If God has done that for others through me, why can't he do it to me directly? So the problem of unanswered prayer comes with it this question.

Why? An example of this, of Paul praying for the sick, is found in the Acts of the Apostles when he was shipwrecked on the island of Malta.

The chief man in the island of Malta was called Publius and his father was ill and Paul heard about it. It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery and Paul visited him and prayed and put his hands on him and heal him.

[8:38] So he's no stranger to God moving in this very wonderful way of the Lord performing miracles through his own hands.

So why not now? And he gives you the answer in verse 7. To keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me from keeping me from being too elated or puffed up with pride.

So, in this first section of this message which I'm giving this morning, what we learn is it isn't that God has not answered prayer.

What is happening? He's not answered it in the way that Paul would like. Now, many of us, I'm sure, have experiences of prayer that remains unanswered.

And we have this question, why is it that God is not doing this? After all, he made a very commitment in the person of Jesus, whatsoever you ask in my name, I will do it that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

[10:15] Why not? There's a lesson to be learned. And so, we go on to the reason. My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness.

so what we need, we need to find out what the mind of God is behind unanswered prayer.

Now, according to Paul in his statement here, the mind of God to him was to keep Paul from being too elated or puffed up with pride, saying to himself, I must be a great guy with all the revelations of truth that God has made to me.

So, to stop that, there comes along this thorn in the flesh to torment me.

Now, there is an exact parallel to all this in the Old Testament. And that parallel takes in the person of Moses.

[11:41] In Deuteronomy chapter 32, when they're preparing to enter the promised land, the Lord said to Moses that very day, ascend this mountain of Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, and die on the mountain which you ascend, and be gathered to your people as Aaron your brother died in Mount Hor, and was gathered to his people, because you broke faith with me in the midst of the people of Israel at the waters of Marabath, Meribeth, Kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin, because you did not reveal me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel.

So the judgment comes to Moses like this, you shall see the land before you, but you shall not go there into the land which I give to the people of Israel.

And you might think that's a very hard thing to say after Moses is the person who's put up with all the stubbornness of the people of Israel, and has led them through the wilderness over 40 years, and they are now on the brink of seeing this land and entering it, which God had promised to Abraham.

Now the actual incident isn't found in Deuteronomy, but it is in the 20th chapter of Numbers. Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock, and he said to them, hear now you rebels, shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?

then it goes on, Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his rod twice, and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle.

[14:05] Following that comes this reproof, God said to you did not believe in me to sanctify me in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.

These are the waters of Meribah where the people of Israel contended with the Lord, and he showed himself holy among them. So what is it that God is actually saying to Moses?

There was the rebellion of the people, because they had no water to drink, and this was one of many rebellions that had taken place.

But what God is saying to Moses is this, the reason that this prayer is not being answered is because you acted in the way that you did, just like the people of Israel who were in rebellion against God.

Now this is to be seen in the way that Moses responded to the rebellious actions of the people of Israel who were in fact on the point of going back to Egypt.

[15:30] Like Paul in the New Testament, we find that Moses also made this a matter of prayer to be allowed to enter the promised land.

And you find that in Deuteronomy chapter 3. I besought the Lord at that time saying, O Lord, you have only begun to show your servant the greatness and your mighty hand.

Let me go over, I pray, and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that goodly hill country and Lebanon. But what Moses got was a blank refusal.

the Lord was angry with me on your account and would not hearken to me. And the Lord said, let it be sufficient for you.

Speak no more of me in this matter. Now, in both of these cases, the case of Paul the Apostle and of Moses in the Old Testament, the mind of God is revealed as to why the prayer is not answered.

[16:52] And that's what we have to do. We have to find the mind of God. I want to thirdly and quickly talk about the implications of an answered prayer.

To keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a form was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.

Three times I sought the Lord about this, that it should leave me, but he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness.

So, when we come to talk about the implications of an answered prayer, what I mean is the finding out of the positive results that come to the person involved as a result of their prayers not being answered at all.

This requires seeking. prayer. This requires further prayer. This requires allowing God's word to speak to us.

[18:17] Three times I sought the Lord about this, that it should leave me, but he said, my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness.

Unanswered prayer. During the years of 1994 to 1998, I was applied by the University of Sheffield. Through a number of circumstances which I don't want to really go into because they're not glorifying, I lost that appointment and the problem was I was now 50.

So, yes, my wife at the time and myself, we made an exact prayer that God would open another door. But the fact is, he never did.

Why not? Looking back, what God was teaching me was to trust him where you can't see him, do.

[19:31] Where you can't see God doing something, you have to trust as to what he's doing. My grace is sufficient for you.

My power is made perfect in weakness. So, if you take this case of Paul's thorn in the flesh, flesh, if you believe it to be, as I do, this problem of partial blindness, the question you have to ask, following on from this confession he makes in 2 Corinthians 12, did this unanswered prayer, leaving him with partial blindness, did it impair the work of the apostle in preaching the gospel or in founding the churches?

Well, if you go into the Acts of the Apostles, you will find that the apostle was responsible for three very successful missionary tours, in which he founded and built up a great number of churches. He gave himself to this unsparingly, that God's work might go on. You also have to reckon with the fact that as part of his pastoral ministry, he wrote some 13 letters to the churches.

So, if we ask the question, did this partial blindness, this thorn in the flesh, impair the work of the apostle and exercising his ministry of evangelism and teaching the faith, the answer is no, it did not. [21:27] So, what did it do? It did this. It taught the apostle to trust in the power of God, being made perfect in this weakness.

grace. Now, what he was now forced to do was to rely on the Lord, who was making this supply of grace.

Now, there are provisions which God makes to us when the prayer that we make to him isn't answered. And these provisions are detailed in 2 Corinthians 1, 18-20.

Surely as God is faithful, he can say that in spite of the prayer not being answered. Surely as God is faithful, our work to you has not been yes and no.

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you, was not yes and no, but in him it is always yes.

[22:48] For all the promises of God find their yes in him. Faced with this problem of unanswered prayer, what we have to do is direct ourselves to the scripture and see exactly where God is saying yes.

Where God says yes are in the many promises that you find in this book. And these promises are still with us.

We often sing, great is thy faithfulness. All I have needed, thy hand has provided.

Why? Because God has said that he will provide. So in the scriptures we can find God's yes.

Now the apostle was no stranger to suffering, opposition, and persecution. but in writing to the Philippians, which is really a thank letter to them for their gift to him, he tells us how he can do this.

[24:15] And how he can do it is in this great text. I can do all things in him who strengthens me.

What about the problem of partial blindness? What about the problem of opposition? What about the problem of other people saying things about him that weren't true?

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. He also says something similar when he writes to Romans in Romans 8.

in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Yes, the Christian life has problems. The Christian life has difficulties and the way you overcome them is through the promises of God.

[25:28] In all these things more than conquerors through him who loved us. The apostle believed that and when he died in AD 65 he had not changed his mind.

the Lord will rescue me from the lion's mouth he said. That's 2 Timothy 4. In all these things more than conquerors.

Amen. We'll glorify God by singing the great hymn to God be the glory great things he has done.