

This One Thing:
When Our Prayers Go Unanswered
2 Corinthians 12:1-10

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Text Introduction: We are in the middle of a prayer challenge. We are calling our challenge “This One Thing.” This is not only guiding our times together on Sunday morning as we examine the Scriptures about prayer, but we are also challenging one another about our discipline and habits of prayer. And what a time it is to pray! I could not have imagined the importance of this effort when God birthed this in my heart early this summer. But, now, all of this makes perfect sense, right?

In recent weeks, we have built a theology of prayer. We have considered Jesus’ example and the Early Church’s example. Sooner or later, we have to come to this question of answered prayer and unanswered prayer. Last time we considered “Positioning Ourselves for God to Answer our Prayers.” Today, we come to that most unpleasant subject of unanswered prayer.

Text: Boasting is necessary. It is not profitable, but I will move on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2 I know a man in Christ who was caught up into the third heaven 14 years ago. Whether he was in the body or out of the body, I don’t know, God knows. 3 I know that this man—whether in the body or out of the body I don’t know, God knows— 4 was caught up into paradise. He heard inexpressible words, which a man is not allowed to speak. 5 I will boast about this person, but not about myself, except of my weaknesses. 6 For if I want to boast, I will not be a fool, because I will be telling the truth. But I will spare you, so that no one can credit me with something beyond what he sees in me or hears from me, 7 especially because of the extraordinary revelations. Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so I would not exalt myself. 8 Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away from me. 9 But He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may reside in me. 10 So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, catastrophes, persecutions, and in pressures, because of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Introduction: Perhaps you can identify with the thoughts of Pastor Randy Frazee of the Oak Hills Church in San Antonio, Texas. (Co-pastor with Max Lucado)

My mother was dying. I went to God and made a special request. By her bedside I prayed 50 times. I counted. Fifty times I asked God to grant my request. I did this because I had studied the teaching of Jesus on prayer; he admires someone who knocks at the door continuously. This gave me the notion that if I knocked continuously, eventually God would arise from his seat and fix my problem.

I asked God specifically to give my mother one of two things. The first of my requests was my desired request. The second was a concession. The first request was that he would give my mother 18 more years. I prayed 50 times, "God, give her 18 more years." Or I told him, "Take her today."

I asked for 18 more years for a particular reason. Number one, my mother was 62, and 18 more years would make her 80. I thought that was a good round number. But more specifically, my oldest brother just had a baby girl. I thought it would be great if my mother could see her graduate from high school.

This request did not just come out of the air as it might sound. I received the request from a creative prayer that was done by a man named Hezekiah in 2 Kings 20.

God heard his (Hezekiah's) prayer, saw his tears, and gave him 15 more years. Now, I asked for 18. But he didn't give me 18 more years, not even 18 months, not even 18 days. Within 18 hours my mother passed away.

I had to ask myself the question: *What's that all about? Does God not love me? Have I not served him like Hezekiah did? Did he not see my tears when I turned my face to the wall and wept bitterly? Why did God come through for Hezekiah and not for Randy Frazee?*

Randy Frazee, "When God 'Doesn't Come Through,'" Preaching Today (209)

You probably have asked the same question as Randy Frazee many times. Two weeks ago, I asked that our This One Thing be praying for jobs. I have to be honest with you. I have heard more stories in the last two weeks of new job loss than I have job gains. That can be downright discouraging.

One of the most difficult elements of our praying is when our prayers go unanswered. Perhaps the real issue is not whether God answers our prayers, but that we do not like the answers sometimes. We can find encouragement in the fact that even Paul (this passage) and Jesus (Prayer before cross for the Father to take this cup) had requests denied by the Heavenly Father.

In light of these Biblical accounts we learn several important principles of reaction when we sense that our prayers have gone unanswered.

Analyze our own lives.

Often times our prayers cannot be answered because of our own sin. This can be most any form of disobedience against God. (Isaiah 59:2—Your iniquities have built barriers . . . so that He does not listen.) However, the Bible does give us these as specific reasons.

- The sin of unbelief (James 1:6-8)

But let him ask in faith without doubting. For the doubter is like the surging sea, driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ An indecisive man is unstable in all his ways.

- Sin in a marriage relationship (1 Peter 3:7)

Husbands, in the same way, live with your wives with an understanding of their weaker nature yet showing them honor as coheirs of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered.

- Wrong motives (James 4:3)

You ask and don't receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your evil desires.

- An unforgiving spirit (Matthew 5:22-24)

But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Fool!' will be subject to the Sanhedrin. But whoever says, 'You moron!' will be subject to hellfire.²³ So if you are offering your gift on the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you,²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

You don't have to assume that sin is the problem, but you would do well to start here.

Accept God's Answer in light of His Sovereign Plan.

Sometimes unanswered prayer is the result of our sin, but other times unanswered prayer is the result of God's sovereignty. When this occurs, there is going to be either . . .

- Greater growth and grace in your life, or
- Greater good in someone else's life, and
- Greater glory to God.

Affirm again the things you know to be true about God.

- God is able.
- God loves me.
- God sees what I cannot.
- God's grace is sufficient.

Align yourself to the will of God.

"Lord, I will always trust You, and I will always serve You.

One of the Bible's great statements on unanswered prayer actually comes in a story of answered prayer, but before the prayer is answered. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, Daniel's three friends, were going to be thrown into a fiery furnace for refusing to bow down to a false god. Nebuchadnezzar, the wicked king, gave them one final chance to bow down. He taunted them with the words, "And who is the god who can rescue you from my power?"

Here is their response:

If the God we serve exists, then He can rescue us from the furnace of blazing fire, and He can rescue us from the power of you, the king. ¹⁸But even if He does not rescue us, we want you as king to know that we will not serve your gods or worship the gold statue you set up." Daniel 3:17-18

This is faith.

This prayer is the same prayer that Habakkuk prayed when things were not well.

Though the fig tree does not bud
and there is no fruit on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
18 yet I will triumph in Yahweh;
I will rejoice in the God of my salvation!
19 Yahweh my Lord is my strength;
He makes my feet like those of a deer
and enables me to walk on mountain heights! (Habakkuk 3:17-19)

This prayer is the same prayer that Jesus prayed when He prayed:

And He said, "Abba, Father! All things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will." (Mark 14:36)