

The Promise of Answered Prayer, Part Two

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at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.
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Isaiah 30:19

(Holman Christian Standard Bible)

For you people will live on Zion in Jerusalem and will never cry again. He will show favor to you at the sound of your cry; when He hears, He will answer you.

Prayer is a paradox. A paradox is defined as something that appears to contradict itself or some other truth, but in reality it doesn't. The paradox of prayer I am referring to is that prayer is both easy and difficult.

For example, prayer is easy when you consider to whom you are praying—the Lord God who loves you more than you love yourself. Prayer is easy when I understand the wonderful access I have because of the finished work of Jesus Christ, who has opened the door between you and God so that there is no hindrance or obstacle to approaching the Lord. We can come boldly with full assurance that the Lord will hear us and not turn us away because we fear no rejection or resentment from God. You can easily pray when you understand and believe that God incomprehensibly loves you and delights in answering your prayer. That makes prayer altogether less difficult.

It's easy to pray when we have a promise God has made to us. It's exactly as the Apostle John declared in 1 John 5:14-15, "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him." It's easy to pray when you know you have a promise God has made you.

There are other ways prayer is easy, but, as easy as prayer is, it is also difficult. The Bible acknowledges this fact about prayer in Romans 8:26, "Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses." Well, of course, we have weaknesses. Everyone knows that; we're not perfect yet. But the Apostle Paul is not dealing with our infirmities in a general way but a specific one—our weakness in prayer. Paul continues, "For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." The Bible acknowledges that prayer is not easy. We often don't know what to pray for or, if we do, how to pray for the need.

When you're visiting an aged parent or grandparent in the hospital who is very ill, do you pray

for their healing or that the Lord take them home to be with Him? How do you pray when you don't know what God's will is, when you don't know what He is doing?

What if you have a loved one going through extreme circumstances seeming to crush them? Do you pray that God will give them victory by removing the terrible circumstances or do you pray that God would strengthen them and give them the faith to tunnel through?

Well, if you don't know God's will in the matter you don't know how to pray and this is a great difficulty for us. When we get on our knees and sit before the Lord we often don't know what we should pray for.

Prayer is also difficult because there is a part of us not yet redeemed. It's purchased by God but not transformed, as our spirits are and that is our human nature. Or you might know it by another name, the flesh. The flesh resists submission to God. You see, when you pray you are submitting yourself to God. If you're truly, genuinely praying from your heart to God, it is an act of yielding and giving up control. The flesh resists submitting to God. In fact, *resist* is too soft a word; the flesh violently and viciously fights against submission. It fights to survive on its own. You could say it fights for dear life. It does not want to submit. Therefore within our own flesh is this difficulty. The mind is distracted easily, the body can grow weary in prayer, and many things seem more pressing than prayer. All in all, prayer is a spiritually intensive labor, not always easy.

Therefore, to help us overcome prayer's difficulty God, in His mercy, has given us helps to prayer. Before I give them to you this morning, let me say that there is no greater help to talk to God than to know God. The person who truly knows God finds prayer delightful and enjoyable. I think that's the whole point of last week's sermon—know God and you'll know He desires to bless you abundantly. He wants to answer your prayers. If you would but know His heart toward you, you would know He's not against you. He's not opposed to you. He's your biggest fan, and I say that respectfully. He is pulling for you, cheering for you. But more than that, He's not on the sidelines cheering while you're in battle. He's in there with you supplying the strength to fight, granting you faith not to waver. He's there in you to work mightily. Oh, if you would but know your God you would know He is for you not against you. That is the greatest aid I know in prayer.

Well, today let me show you some of the God-created helps to prayer. Remember, as we go through this text, that God made me a promise a year and a half ago to reconfirm the promise He made to me twenty years ago. Somebody asked me this week, when they came to my office for counseling, if I was discouraged. I would be lying if I said I'm not tempted to be discouraged. But I can say to you most truthfully I am not discouraged in the least. In fact, I have never been as hopeful as I am with what God is doing as well as what He will do as I am at this moment. And the reason is because of a year and a half ago when God burdened this text into my soul and used it as a way of bolstering me up. I know that at this very moment as I'm speaking to you I am in the arms of God safe and secure. I know that nothing can come to me or to you

except by His gracious hand. Even though He allows difficulties to come I'm persuaded to trust Him. I'm absolutely convinced that my Father loves me. How could I be discouraged?

Here is a promise and this promise is to pour out an extraordinary blessing on this church and us. We should be praying for this promise to be fulfilled. That's why we're doing this. Not so I can encourage you with this promise and say, 'See what God's shown *me*?' But rather I'm sharing this with you so I can solicit your prayer support and that you will join me in prayer as you too sense the promise of God that He is going to do something in this place with you, not just me. That will be awesome.

The first thing I want you to see that is help from God in prayer is:

I. GENUINE DESIRE MOTIVATES PRAYER

“...at the sound of your cry ...”

The words, “at the sound of your cry” speak of great desire. You do not pray and weep unless you have great desire. And it's great desire that motivates you to pray. Do you wish to see a genuine revival and a corresponding awakening? Do you wish to walk in the Spirit and receive all God has for you? If so, how much do you pray in faith to God to do these things?

The most important thing I can say about desire is this:

A. God Cultivates Desire.

My heart is a desire machine and it can only have desires as it's inclined. In other words, your heart loves what it loves and hates what it hates. You don't have to make yourself hate. When God saved you He put a new heart in you. You are a new person. Oh, would you believe you are a new person? You've got a completely new and different identity with God and with that new identity came a new heart with all new desires. That new heart desires the things of God not the things of this world. But even though the desires are there for the things of God and His will to be accomplished in your life, only God can cultivate those desires. There are things you can do to cooperate with God but it's God that cultivates desires.

Last week I greatly stressed that prayer is not overcoming reluctance in God or climbing a threshold test of fervor and sincerity. It's not tug-of-war with God where if you pray longer and harder you win and get what you want. Prayer is not proving your spirituality or worthiness to receive the answer you seek. However, having said that, it does not mean desire is not involved in prayer. You should not have left last week understanding me to say that your desire level did not matter. I tell you if you are not too terribly concerned whether you get what your seeking in prayer, don't be surprised if you don't get it.

Why would God give much concern to grant the petitions you're asking if you're not much concerned about the petition? A lackluster desire does not help the heart to pray, but a great desire helps you to pray. A heart that is hungry for what it seeks is the kind of praying God honors. It's not a test, it's not trying to prove something to God, it's simply having your heart in alignment with His. I have discovered that God has postponed answers to prayer in order to intensify the desire in order to create desperation so I want something like God wants it. Case in point—the Syrophenician woman whose daughter was demon-possessed.

In Matthew 15 you read the story of a woman, a Gentile not a Jew, who comes to Jesus who repeatedly ignores the woman's petitions and cries for her daughter. In fact, Jesus says to her that His ministry was not for her or her child. To add insult to injury He calls her a little dog. The more He seems to put this woman off the greater her desire is to come to God and gain what she seeks from Him. The Bible says she falls at His feet and Jesus says to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour" (Matthew 15:28). It seems Jesus links great faith with great desire. In John 15:7 Jesus teaches the apostles one more lesson on prayer before His arrest that night and He links prayer and desire, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you."

When Jacob wrestles with God and pleads with God for His blessing so determinedly that Jacob says to the Lord, "I will not let You go unless You bless me." God blessed him.

I can only conclude that half-hearted prayers, prayers with little desire for what we are asking, are nothing more than religious exercises that affect nothing in the kingdom of God.

Weak-hearted desire for the things of God brings little results.

I think most of our praying is out of duty alone. We pray and ask for the right things because God expects them and we believe it's our duty to do so. I believe that kind of praying is not only an insult to God but it borders on the blasphemous. Do you go to God with a half-empty heart, not passionate about what you're asking Him? You're seeking Him to release His power and His might and His glory on something you're not too terribly concerned with? That's the kind of praying that has riddled the church with apathy and powerlessness. Oh may God rid us of this kind of praying! If we seek His face and call out His name in prayer there should be a fervency. The "effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

B. Four Reasons for Small Desire.

I. Not Really Concerned.

I didn't say you weren't concerned at all. I'm not saying you're totally apathetic or nonchalant about it, no, you're asking because you desire it. But you're not asking without any sense of urgency and therefore, while you may want what you're asking God for, you're able to live, at

least for the time being, without it. That's what I'm talking about. You do really want it, but for the time being you can live without it. That is the kind of praying that insults the graciousness of our God.

Let me give you a couple of examples.

Revival

There is not a single person who in this room listening that does not want revival. There is not a born again believer in this place who would not desire God to come in glory and power and ways we have never seen or witnessed before and do a mighty work that will serve to the praise of His magnificent name. We often pray *God please be faithful and pour out Your Spirit and blessing on us that we might be faithful in the labor of Your service.* We want it. But is it not true that at the same time we utter those words there is an unholy contentment that we can live without it if God so chooses? That's a lackluster, half-hearted prayer with little to no desire.

Yes, I want to see a move of God, I want to see many brought into the kingdom. I want, when I preach, to see many come to Christ. I want to see saints strengthened in the faith so they will leave here bold to do mighty acts for God. But my dear friend, do I want that so badly that I'm so troubled, I'm so broken that I cannot let God alone, and I weary Him with prayer until He says "I'll do it!"

"Weary God"? Well I'm just using His terminology. Jesus says that in the parable of a woman who sought an unjust judge for justice. He continued to say *no* but she would not be put off. Rather she incessantly continued to plead her case. The judge said, "Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me." Jesus says, "Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?"

Let me give you one more example before I move on. I'm not saying you don't pray with desire but that the desire is combined with an unholy contentment that says you can live without it for the time being.

Children's Salvation

Now you know what I'm talking about and it's not just theory. There is not a one of us, who has an unconverted child or grandchild, who doesn't long to see them saved. I know it's so. How could you be a Christian and not want that? You pray that God save your children but, my friend, there's no urgency or troubling of your soul. At this moment you're fine to live without it. There's no knocking at the door of God's throne, there's no grabbing His hems saying 'I'll not turn loose until You give me my children!' there's no fasting, there's no nights of prayer. We pray, but without the fervency that prayer deserves and therefore we should not be surprised we don't have the answer yet.

I know you want it. But at the same time there are other things you want in this world and in this life and as long as you have those things you're not going to be upset. What would make you pray for your children with this kind of fervency and full, red-hot desire? Let them get in trouble. Let trouble come. Let circumstances change. Let them get deathly sick and you would not be able to sleep at night until God gave you the assurance that He would save your child.

May God open our eyes to see they are in a far worse condition than if they were laying terminally ill in some hospital today. May God grip us with the eternity that never ends, where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. May God strike our consciences with the serious reality that our children are lost without God. Then the desire will come.

The other reason I think desire is minimal is because we:

2. Assume it Will Happen.

This was my reason. I tell you ashamedly, but truthfully, this is why when I prayed for my sons' salvation there wasn't great desire. I just assumed God would do it one day. I believed He would, but my word *belief* isn't the Scriptural, Bible kind of faith, it's an assumption. I presumed that He would. But when they got old enough and started experimenting in the world and dabbling in things and directions I knew would not prove good for them, I began to be alarmed. Alarmed so much so that I became desirous for their salvation.

Another reason for small desire is that you:

3. Believe There is Yet Something You Can Do.

As long as you think there is something you can do to help God answer your prayer you will not pray with great fervency and desire. This is where desperation comes into the discussion. One of the reasons why I do not teach dependency upon God—yes, you heard me right. I don't teach dependency on God—but *desperate* dependency is because as long as I pray and there is any self, self-help, self-love, self-control, self-reliance, or self-assurance then I am not truly depending on God. Until I understand "*nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling*," I won't desperately depend on God to answer prayer. As long as I think I have something to do with the outcome, then I'm not absolutely and completely depending upon God.

For this reason our desire is small. May God help us to really believe Jesus when He said, "without Me you can do nothing."

Another reason we pray with little desire is because we:

4. Don't Believe it Will Happen.

This is a safety mechanism. I'm a perfectionist but that doesn't mean I'm perfect. The perfectionist is the farthest thing from perfection and he's not a pleasant person to live with because he's always miserable with his imperfection. A perfectionist will never attempt to do something if he doesn't think he can do it or do it very well. He's the greatest procrastinator there is because he will procrastinate on things he doesn't believe he can do very well or near perfect.

The same is true when it comes to prayer. You will not pray with intensity and desire for things you don't really think will happen because you want to protect your emotional wellbeing. You don't want to be crushed and disappointed by God so you don't put the thing to the altar of prayer. Or if you do pray, you pray with little desire, for in the back of your mind you think, "God's not going to do this for me. Why should He do this for me?" A lack of faith creates small desire when you pray.

The more you desire the more you will pray. If we truly want to see God fulfill the promise of Isaiah 30:18-26 for us, then we will begin to pray more fervently with great desire. That's all God is waiting on.

I hate to give you a crude illustration, but everyone has one so you'll understand. The bathroom commode, the toilet, has a float valve in it. If you have no clue what I'm talking about just listen, I'll make it clear. In the back tank there is a little ball that floats on the water. Some of them are on a cylinder that rises and falls, but it's a floating ball. The float is connected to a mechanism that shuts the water off when the water gets so full in the tank. That's a closing valve. It shuts off the water. But there are other valves, like a sump pump, that works just the opposite. When water comes in and raises the float, the pump comes on and begins to pump out the water because you don't want water in your basement.

Desire works exactly the same way. As the desire level of your heart rises you begin to pray. What helps you to pray? Desire. And then the pump comes on, that's prayer. As you're praying the water is flowing through and the job is being accomplished. That's how desire works. It raises the prayer valve and kicks on sincerity and faith to see God's work happen.

May God raise the levels of our desires that we would pray intensely until we receive the answer.

One more thing I see in this text that I think is an encouragement in our prayer life is that:

II. GOD CONFORMS US TO HIS WILL

Once again I want to answer the question of why God invented prayer in the first place. It doesn't really make sense. Jesus said, did He not, "Your Father knows what you have need of before you ask Him." If He already knows, why make me go to all the trouble of asking, then take me through the struggle of whether I can believe God or not? Why did He create such a system? Because prayer is more than just getting things from God. Mainly and mostly prayer is

about changing you and me. One of the greatest tools God has invented for our sanctification is prayer. And one of the things God does in order to develop us spiritually is that He builds in delays to your prayers being answered.

I want to change your mind today, if possible. I want our minds to be renewed. I want you to cease the way you look at delays to answered prayers. I don't want you to see them as delays anymore because they're not delays.

A. Delays Are Not Delays But God Keeping His Promise to Change Us.

A delay in answered prayer is not a delay but God keeping His promise to sanctify you, mold you, and change you. The Lord knows how much change I still need and He's using prayer to change me.

I want you to see this in the text.

This prophecy, Isaiah 30:18-26, was not written to Oak Grove Baptist Church. It was written to the Jews before they went into Babylonian captivity. It's about the Babylonian captivity, specifically the Jews' release from Babylon and their return to their homeland. Surely when Jerusalem was ransacked and overthrown by the army of Babylon there was much crying; there was a lot of "Oh God, help us!" Does not our text say, "He will be very gracious to you at the sound of your cry; When He hears it, He will answer you"? Yes it does. But here, when the Babylonians destroyed their city, killed most of the occupants and carried many of the others back to Babylon, they wept mightily before God, God did not answer. No doubt they wept and wept much but God did not answer. Seventy years would go by before He would answer the prayers to return home. Why did God ignore the tearful prayers at the beginning of the 70 years and finally answer the cries of His people at the end of the 70 years?

In the case of exiled Judah I don't think a lack of desire was the issue. I believe as they were in chains being dragged to the northern city of Babylon, a several week journey, they longed and prayed *Oh, God, I want to go home. I don't want to be a slave in exile, take me back home! I'm sorry for all of my sinning. I'm sorry for my idolatry. I repent. God, please hear me.* I don't think they had a desire issue, do you? But I do believe they did not desire to return to their homeland for the same reasons God wanted them to return. Had God heard their cries of the people and answered at the beginning of the exile, I'm positive His purposes would not have been achieved, namely to change Israel and deliver them from the terrible sin of idolatry.

If God would have answered them on the way to Babylon and miraculously an angel was sent and destroyed the Babylonian army and led them all the way back to the land of Jerusalem, it would have been a few short months, if not a few short years, and they would have turned their back on God again and worshiped idols.

God had something more important than their comfort in mind. He wanted to deliver them

from their idolatry so that their hearts would genuinely pursue Him. Seventy years would come and go and God burdened men like Daniel, Nehemiah and Ezra to pray. As God had promised, at the sound of their cry, He heard and delivered His people and sent them back to their homeland, free of the sin of idolatry. They had become a people jealous for the name of God.

B. Sanctification and Prayer are Linked.

When God delays answering prayers it might not be because it's not His will, but because you're not asking for the right reasons.

Some of you have heard this story but you may not have heard the application like I'm going to bring to you today.

In 1990, before we came here in '93, Karen and I had been given some land in Ballard county. I was the general manager of a local car dealership at that time and we wanted to build our own home so we bought a nice secondhand, three bedroom mobile home and put it on the property for us to live in until we built our new home.

In January of 1990, as I was on the way to the bank in Wickliffe to secure the loan, God spoke to me. God spoke to me directly as I was sitting in the front seat of that Oldsmobile and said to me, "Don't do this."

But I had already established my agenda and my will was set. This is what we were going to do. There was no sin in it, there was nothing wrong with it. We were going to build our own house. I rationalized my disobedience to God on the way to the bank where I signed the papers, bought the home and had it delivered.

But unbeknownst to me, three months later my business was sold and I didn't have a job? The Lord was trying to protect us, but I foolishly disobeyed.

God took care of us and the bank really worked with us, but for ten years that was a financial ball and chain around Karen and I. It took every spare penny for us to keep the thing going. We were always trying to find somebody to lease it but it was an albatross.

Let me tell you why it took God ten years to answer my prayers to be finally free of property.

Had He answered the prayer, *God, I want to sell it. I want to get out from under it*, and God would have answered, I would have thanked Him and been delighted, but the next time God told me *no* I don't know that I would have listened.

I'm just telling you about me. I know me, therefore I'm telling on me. I'm telling you, if God would

have answered my prayers early on I would have said “thank You, Lord. You’re gracious,” and I would have continued in willful disobedience when my will backed up against will. But after ten years of misery and suffering with that thing, when God tells me *no* now, I pay attention. I’m not always obedient, but I have learned my lesson. I don’t want to go through that ever again. God’s delay was not a delay, it was Him keeping His promise to me to change me and make me more like His Son—obedient to His will.

Friends, 20 years ago God gave me a promise about this place and I want you to know it has very little to do with me. God said it this way, “It doesn’t matter who the name of the pastor is, I’m going to do this.” I’ve heard that more than once from Him. I now understand why. When we came here I thought I was more essential to the kingdom than I now realize. I now know it doesn’t matter who stands in this pulpit if God said “I will do something” it will happen.

But why 20 years, why this long delay? Well, once again, God has not delayed but kept His promise to work in my life to prepare me to be ready when He answers. I’m convinced. Had the answer come years ago, it would have destroyed me spiritually. I was not trustworthy of those blessings then, not to say that I am now, but now I live by the grace of God alone and not by my worthiness or unworthiness.

But it’s not only about me. Listen to this closely. God also had to get a people ready. Those of you who were here when I came here, God’s been getting you ready. It’s not just about Michael Durham. Oh no, it’s far more than that. I’m just one piece of God’s puzzle. God has been working in many of you to bring you to the spiritual maturity so that when God gets ready to bless us in a supernatural way we’ll be able to handle it and it won’t destroy us through pride.

But not just that. What God has foreordained to do and the blessing that He intends to give here, He intends to do through certain people—those who will be here at that time. Do you know that if it would have happened 15 years ago that some of you would not have experienced the initial outpouring of God’s Spirit? But God has waited until you got here because He wanted you to be a part of this blessing and the receiving of it.

For years God has been putting together the church He intends to build here and He has those here whom He wants to be here, people who are a part of the promise and who will have the joy of receiving the blessing. Had it happened 20 years ago you would have enjoyed the results of it, and who knows where we’d be, but you wouldn’t have been on the ground floor of watching God move. To see it happen is something altogether different than hearing about it 20 years later.

Unfortunately there is a flip side to that. There are some I believe God wanted to be here and be a part of His work who said, ‘I just can’t wait. I’ve got to do this, I’ve got to have this, I need to do this, I need a church who will say this or help me in this regard, I need to be involved in this way.’ They couldn’t wait on God. I’m praying God will be merciful and bring those folks back. Let it be a warning to any and all of us: if we’re not willing to wait upon God and let Him work in us and patiently prepare us, we could miss the blessings He has in store.

The delay is not a delay. It's God keeping His promise to develop you and change you so that He can bless you and it not hurt you.

I want to say something to our lost family here. A lack of desire is a deadly thing. To not want God will be a ball and chain that will sink you into the lowest hell. What can you do about it? Here's what you ought to do about it. You ought to look at it the way it is—as the proof of your sinfulness. What kind of a person is it who doesn't want God to be Lord of his or her life? What kind of person has a heart that doesn't desire the things that God desires? It must be an evil person, wouldn't you agree? If you don't want the things that God wants you must be opposed to God. Look at it for what it is and let it speak volumes. Let the Spirit of God preach to you and convince you that you are a desperate sinner, a dire sinner, a damnable sinner, for you have a heart opposed to God. One that does not desire the things of God nor wants them to the degree or intensity that He does.

What a lesson, what a proof, that you need a Savior. You are not as good as you think you are. I say that not in superiority or to rebuke you but to warn you. You may be moral as we judge morality but God doesn't judge it that way. He looks on your heart.

When Samuel came to anoint David, he looked the eldest son upon the sons of Jesse, Eliab, and said, "Surely the LORD'S anointed is before Him." And God said, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have refused him. For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." That's where God looks. God isn't looking at how you perform, whether your actions are good or evil, that's not the root of the matter. The great root of the matter is your heart. God looks at your heart and says, "You don't want what I want for you. I want to bless you. I want to give you things that no other person could give you because no one loves you like I do. But you have another agenda. You have a will that's not My will. Therefore you are opposed to Me." How wicked is it to resist God and His will? To be opposed to God in your desires? It is the very essence of evil rebellion.

Oh, I pray this morning that God will speak to your heart and blow away the pretense of your goodness and show you your true self. I pray He would love you enough to show you these things and that in desperation and dependency you would humble yourself before God and cry out to Him, "Save me, O God. I'm wicked and undone, I need a Savior."

When He hears your cry, He will answer. Amen.