

The Answer to the Problem of Unanswered Prayer

(By Pastor Dennis Kiszonas)

The phone rang right after the *Grace For Today* broadcast; the caller was a listener from Far Rockaway in Queens.

"I called just to let you know that I used to believe in God, but I don't believe any more," she said. I asked her why she had lost her faith and she related to me this experience:

A few years ago, she and her husband were attending a Bible believing church in Queens. One day her husband, who wasn't feeling well, came home from the doctor's office with some bad news. The doctor told him that he had cancer. They went to their church and told the pastor and asked everyone to pray for her husband's recovery.

Their church prayed for him. Other churches prayed for him. The pastor prayed and the elders prayed. All the time they were praying, her husband was slowly becoming weaker as the cancer continued to spread.

But her pastor continued to encourage them, "Just have faith, God will heal." The pastor quoted verses from the Bible:

"So Jesus answered and said to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, Be removed and be cast into the sea, it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive'" (Matt. 21:21-22).

So the pastor said, "Have faith and do not doubt; God will heal."

"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you" (John 15:7).

The pastor said, "God promises, 'You will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.' Believe it; trust God and He will heal."

As her husband continued to suffer and the sickness grew worse, she followed the teaching in the Letter of James and called for the elders to come and pray:

"Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (James 5:14,15).

Her pastor continued to encourage her, "You see, the Bible says that the prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise him up. Believe it, and God will heal."

Eventually her husband died. The pastor had to try to explain this failure, and told her that it must be that she did not have enough faith, or maybe there was some secret sin in her life, or maybe her husband wasn't really a Christian. Obviously something was wrong.

She had no explanation. She had tried her best to believe, she knew of no secret sin, and she always thought that her husband was a real Christian. She came to the conclusion that the Bible must not be true, that there really is no God and that all that she once believed was not true. At least it didn't work when she needed it.

This sister in Christ is an extreme example, perhaps the most extreme that I have ever talked to, but there are many Christians who are quietly, in their own hearts, troubled about unanswered prayers. Why is it that these promises, "whatever you ask, whatever you desire," do not work in their own experience? Some preachers keep saying, "Just have enough faith, and God will do it." But many a Christian knows that it just doesn't work that way.

What is the real answer to the problem of unanswered prayer?

We begin to find the Bible's answer when we notice that all these promises are found only in certain parts of the Bible. In the Four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—there are many promises about answered prayer, "if you believe." But we notice that in the Four Gospels, the Lord Jesus was only ministering to the nation of Israel. When a Gentile woman came with her request to the Lord, He wouldn't even speak to her, and told His disciples that He "was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). He had come as their Messiah, and to fulfill all the promises made to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. God had promised them a kingdom in which there would be peace, prosperity, health, life, and no more fear. But when the Prince of Peace came, the nation of Israel rejected Him. From the cross, their King prayed for His people, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." And so, in the beginning of the Book of Acts, we read how God offered forgiveness to the nation of Israel. In fact, in Acts 3:19-21, Peter tells the people of Israel that if they would repent for their sin of rejecting their Messiah, God would not only forgive them, but send Jesus back for them, and all that He had promised them concerning that Kingdom of Peace and prosperity and health, He would now fulfill for them.

"Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began" (Acts 3:19-21).

Yes, they had rejected their King and Messiah, but He had prayed for them, and God was giving them a second chance. How would they respond to the Holy Spirit's offer of pardon and the coming again of the Messiah and His Kingdom?

We don't have to read very far in the Book of Acts to begin to see that they would not repent, they would not accept God's offer of forgiveness and the coming of the Kingdom. In Chapter four of Acts the Apostles are arrested; as we read on they are arrested again, threatened, beaten up, and finally Stephen, the Spirit-filled deacon, was actually murdered by the leaders of Israel. They had rejected the King, and now they rejected the message of forgiveness. As a result, God "cast away" the nation of Israel, for a time (See Rom. 11:15).

"For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" (Rom. 11:15).

The nation of Israel was “cast away” for a time, and the Kingdom they waited for was “put on hold.” Those great prayer promises made to Israel would also be put on hold for a future time.

But then the Lord did something that had never been prophesied or promised. Instead of unleashing His wrath upon the world, He reached down in utter grace and saved the man who was leading the rebellion of the nation of Israel. He saved His greatest enemy, a man named Saul, who would now become the Apostle Paul. The enemy—he called himself “the chief of sinners”—was saved by the grace of God and sent to the Gentiles with a message that had never been revealed before. Listen to Paul explain what the Lord Jesus revealed to him from heaven:

“For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery...” (Eph. 3:1-3).

The Lord Jesus Christ had a “mystery”—which simply means a “Secret”—and He revealed this new message, this “dispensation of the grace of God” to this new apostle. Paul often writes about this special ministry given to him, that he was not preaching the same thing as the others before him, but that the Lord Jesus had revealed something new, something different to him.

“To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the dispensation of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ...” (Eph. 3:8,9).

The Lord Jesus revealed to Paul “the unsearchable riches of Christ.” The Kingdom blessings were promised and written about all through the Old Testament, but now the Lord revealed a program of blessings that were “unsearchable.” You can “search the scriptures” but you won’t find this new message, because it was “hidden in God” until the Lord revealed it to Paul for you and me today.

Now, let’s see what the Lord Jesus told Paul about how prayer works today in the dispensation of grace. Here’s where we find the answer to the problem of unanswered prayer!

We begin with a passage in Paul’s letter to the Romans where Paul begins to explain what the Lord told him about prayer today under grace, and why we don’t get everything that we pray for today:

26 “Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. 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.

27 “Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

28 “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:26-28).

For those of us in the dispensation of grace, God never promises that He will give us everything that we ask. You can abundantly prove this by simply reading through the letters written by the Apostle Paul. He wrote thirteen letters, from Romans to Philemon, and we never read a prayer promise like “Whatever you ask,” or “ask what you desire.” Instead we read that “We do not know what to pray for as we ought” (Rom. 8:26).

God has promised to “work all things together for good” in our lives, but He hasn’t revealed HOW He is going to do that. He has promised it, and we take that by faith and believe that He is working all things—even the “tragedies” of life—together for good for us; but we often don’t see it. But as Paul wrote, “We walk by faith and not by seeing.”

Since we don’t know how God is going to work all things for good, we don’t know exactly how to pray. How could God promise us that He will answer all our prayers, if He tells us up-front that we don’t even know what to pray for?

Paul’s letters contain many testimonies of unanswered prayers. People flock today to hear testimonies of answered prayers, but Paul writes of many of his unanswered prayers! He knew how to pray in the dispensation of grace, and didn’t become discouraged when he didn’t receive what he asked for. He believed that his Father in heaven had everything under control and was working all things together for his good. He gives us a great testimony of unanswered prayer in 2 Corinthians 12:8-9.

7 “And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

8 “Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

9 “And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

10 “Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

We see in verse 7 that God allowed Paul to suffer with this “thorn in the flesh,” some physical suffering that even came from Satan, but God allowed it for a good purpose in Paul’s life. But Paul pleaded for the Lord to remove the problem. Don’t we always pray, “Fix it, Lord!”? We find Paul praying, pleading three times, for the Lord to fix his problem.

And then the Lord spoke, and He didn’t say, “Whatever you ask you’ll receive, if you have faith!” No! Not at all. The Lord told Paul that His grace would be enough, sufficient for him—and His grace means His power working in Paul’s life. “My power is made perfect in your weakness.” We always want the Lord to just fix the problem; He wants to show the sufficiency of His grace, and the magnificence of His power working in our lives so that we can “bloom wherever He has planted us!”

Paul’s whole attitude about suffering changed as a result of this prayer experience. He says that he learned to take “pleasure [!] in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

We need to learn that it is not God’s will to take away all our problems, to fix all our weaknesses, to remove all our needs, but it is God’s will in all the circumstances of our lives to give us all the grace and strength that we’ll need to live through the problems, and even to rejoice in them!

Paul prayed for the Colossian saints:

“For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding...strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy” (Col. 1:9-11).

He prayed that these saints would be “filled with the knowledge of God’s will” and the result would be that they would be “strengthened with all might [wow!], according to His glorious power [think of that!], for all patience and longsuffering with joy.”

“Patience” here speaks of endurance and perseverance in the face of life’s circumstances, while “longsuffering” speaks of having a “long fuse” on our tempers when faced with unpleasant people in our lives, and Paul says to do this all with “joy!” God doesn’t promise to take away all our problems, to answer all our prayers—we don’t even know what to ask for—but He does promise to give us the grace and strength that we’ll need to live under the difficult circumstances of life, and to live with the difficult people of life, and to do it all with joy.

That’s God’s picture of being “strengthened with all might according to His glorious power.” It’s living in the midst of trying circumstances and difficult people that would drive anyone else crazy, but instead of despair, there’s joy. That’s real power, and grace—and the Lord Jesus says to us today, “My grace is sufficient for you wherever you are, and whatever your problems may be, I’m working it all together for good, and My power is being made perfect. It reaches its greatest expression and demonstration when you are weak, but miraculously, you find that by faith you are ‘strengthened with all might...for patience and longsuffering with joy.’”

Paul never forgot the lesson that the Lord taught him from his “thornprayer.” Many years later Paul would write to the Philippians out of a prison cell—near the end of five years spent in prison for the Lord:

11 “Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content:

12 “I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.

13 “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:11-13).

Paul says that he has learned the secret of contentment, he knows how to abound, and also how to be abased. God does not promise us today, living in the dispensation of grace, that He is going to fix all our problems, but He does promise us grace more than enough to make us able to rejoice through it all. So Paul writes that everywhere and in all things he has learned how to cope, and more, how to cope with joy. And the secret? “I can do all things through Christ who [constantly] strengthens me.” We can almost hear those words from years before still ringing in Paul’s heart, “My strength is made perfect in your weakness” as Paul writes, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

When the woman from Far Rockaway prayed for her husband and had everyone praying for him, if only her pastor had understood how to “rightly divide the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15), realizing that the prayer promises in the Four Gospels are not given to us today, living under grace in the dispensation of grace, but were made to Israel with their Messianic Kingdom in view. Even in the Letter of James where he writes about the “prayer of faith,” and how God would heal the sick, we need to read the first verse of James’ letter, and see that he is only writing to “the twelve tribes scattered abroad.” This is not “our mail” in the Bible. We can read it and study it and learn from it, but we need always to remember that the twelve tribes and the chosen nation are today “on the outs with God,” and these promises, their promises, don’t work today.

But the Lord Jesus saved a new apostle, the Apostle Paul, and sent him to us with a new message even more wonderful, the message of grace (Eph. 3:2). Should we pray today? Of course! Listen to Paul encouraging the saints to pray:

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thes. 5:16-18).

But we can only rejoice and give thanks always when we understand what the Lord is doing in the dispensation of grace and in our lives today. God’s people are destroyed when they are told that God’s plan is to fix all their problems, because the Lord never said that to the Apostle Paul for us in the dispensation of grace. There can only come disappointment, discouragement and spiritual ruin when we claim a promise that God never made to us. But what joy and what freedom there is when we begin to learn to hear the Lord’s promises for us today in this wonderful time called the “dispensation of the grace of God!”

We close this brief study of prayer in the dispensation of grace with one more prayer promise for us today found in Ephesians 3:20-21....

“Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

We pray in our ignorance (Rom. 8:26), we do not know what to pray for as we ought. We ask and we think we know what would be best. But Paul says here that God is able to do above all that we ask or even think. In fact, He is able to do “exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think.” But notice carefully how God is going to do that in your life: “according to the power that is at work in us.” His power and strength and grace are sufficient for us in every circumstance of life. That power is available to work in us if we will only believe it and trust Him. He is able to do in us, above all that we ask or even think, for it is nothing less than “resurrection power” that is at work in us.

When we “walk by faith” and allow Him to “fill us with the knowledge of His will” and “strengthen us with all His might,” then Paul says, “To Him be the glory in the church by Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen.” May He be glorified in your life and mine today.