

Why? – 2. Why Do My Prayers Go Unanswered?

Luke 11:1-13

January 15, 2022

Pastor Bethany Nelson

This morning, we're continuing our sermon series called, *Why?* And through these next few weeks, we're exploring this simple question and real concerns we've all wrestled with throughout our lives. Last week, Pastor Tami offered a message tackling the question of suffering in our world. In coming weeks, we'll explore seeing God's will for our lives, and how God sustains us amid all the questions of worries of life. But today, we're asking this question: *Why do my prayers go unanswered?*

One of the foundational practices of our faith is prayer. Again and again throughout scripture, God invites us to bring our whole selves to God in prayer. And scripture is filled with examples of people praying to God – we have an entire book in the Psalms, which are songs and prayers – some of praise, giving thanks for God's gifts and faithfulness. And some filled with lament and grief, seeking God's counsel and guidance. And the book of Lamentations, a small book in the old testament, is filled with prayers pleading for God's mercy and presence. And Jesus regularly practiced prayer and teaches us how to pray, as we heard read this morning.

But we need not look only to scripture for examples *all* the ways and reasons we go to God in prayer. Because our lives are filled with them, too. All of us, at one point or another, have turned to God in distress – seeking God's answer and guidance. We've wondered why someone we love died so suddenly, or why the healing we've longed for in relationships and our health, hasn't come as we desired. We pray and pray. And sometimes, it feels as if there is nothing in response.

In the Old Testament, there is a story about a man named Job. He was a good man, who seemed to have everything going for him. He had many children, a successful farm with thousands of livestock – and it seemed everything was going right for Job. Until it wasn't. And then, one day, he lost it all. His children died, his livestock and land consumed by fire, and Job was left all alone.

There was no consolation to be found for Job, his grief was palpable. His days a blur, as his heart was filled with sadness, and there seemed no sense of direction or hope to be found. In this space, Job cried out to God in distress – cursing the day he was born, and unable to make sense of anything. Throughout this book, Job goes on a journey of grief and despair. This question of *why?* stood always ready at his lips, but no response seemed to satisfy.

And then, at long last, God responds. God begins by taking Job on a tour of the cosmos, reminding Job of all that God has created, showing God their strength and faithfulness throughout the ages. God seems to remind Job, that the world is large and vast, and though it includes much suffering, it is not without God's intimate presence. From the forming of the stars and the skies, to the feeding patterns of animals, to the complex ways our entire system work together to sustain and create life. God is at work in our lives in infinite ways, more than we can ever understand.

But significantly, just as God tends to all of creation, God also tends for us. For Job and you and me. Still, there remains suffering and pains in our world, as it – and we – are imperfect. But the sufferings of our life are not an indication of our faithfulness or righteousness.

God doesn't cause the pains in our world. God doesn't cause the hurts and griefs in your life. Instead, God promises to be with us through them, and to redeem the whole world.

Now, for those who heard Pastor Tami's message last week, this is a bit of review. But I think the question of Why doesn't God answer my prayers, and why is there suffering in the world are intricately connected. And the first answer to both, put simply is that God doesn't always act in ways we expect. That even through our sufferings, or what feels like unanswered prayers: God is here, actively creating and redeeming our world.

When I was in confirmation, we were all asked to select a verse to memorize and reflect upon. Like many teenagers, life felt difficult for me and overwhelming at times. I struggled to make sense of the world around

me, and how God was carrying me through. Why? I wondered, didn't God just answer my prayers. Certainly God is powerful and capable to remove the aches of my heart. To bring physical healings to my family members, to restore relationships.

And like Job, I wondered, *Why not me, God?* The answer came for me in a verse from 1 Corinthians 10:13. "No temptation has seized you, except what is common to man. But God is faithful. God will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear, but when you are tempted, God will provide a way for you to endure it." - 1 Corinthians 10:13

This verse reminded me of three things:

- (1) God did not cause my suffering.
- (2) God is faithful.
- (3) And God will provide a way.

And though sometimes, I wish God would answer prayers by sending me a simple text, or making a phone call to quickly assure and comfort my fears – that's not the way God is at work in our lives. Instead, God promises to be present with us, to answer our prayers and comfort our suffering by God's faithfulness. Not just to me or you, but to all of creation.

As Christians, we see this most vividly thru the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. So what does Jesus say about prayer? In our reading today, Jesus teaches us *how* to pray, using the familiar words of the Lord's Prayer we say together every week. Immediately following that, however, Jesus assures us that God hears. He says, starting in verse 9:

"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."

Jesus appears to be promising us, that when we seek God diligently, God will answer. When we knock – the door opens. He makes this even more clear in the next verses:

"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give... to those who ask him!"

This is not the only place where Jesus offers such words of assurance. Throughout scripture, Jesus tells the disciples and us, that God hears and answers our prayers. And we know Jesus believes, this because he models it in his own life. After teaching the crowds, Jesus goes off to find quiet and prays to God. When performing a miracle, Jesus publicly prays to God for healing. And even in the moments before his own death, Jesus prays – for God's will to be done, and for his own suffering to end.

But you know – I have prayed and prayed to God. Many times, I can see evidence of God answering these prayers. I made it home safely on a night when roads were scary. My friend had a successful surgery, or the 'good news' we'd hoped for arrived.

And just like you, there have been times when I have begged and plead for God to answer my prayers – to heal my loved one, to restore a relationship, to give an answer. And all that seemed to come was silence.

And why, even if my prayers were answered, were others not? When I made it home safely, but see news reports of car crashes and deaths. When my friend's surgery went smooth, but your parents did not. *Why?*

There are three big lies that have been told, or sometimes we think ourselves, about how God responds to prayer.

And these are: I am not faithful. I have too much sin. And I don't have *enough* faith.

Beloveds, created and redeemed by God... these are lies.

These, all three of them, are facts about the human condition because we are imperfect people. But they are NOT reasons for unanswered prayers.

Ours is a God who has proven to want to know us, be with us, and walk alongside us.
Ours is a God who has proven to be intimately and intricately connected the entire universe.
Ours is a God who promises abundant and newness of life.
Ours is a God of grace.

Nothing you have done, or can do, will change this.
Prayers that feel unanswered are NOT because you didn't believe enough or pray hard enough or be good enough.
You hear me?

I think one of our lifelong lessons is coming to understand and accept this. That God loves you. Right now. Full stop.

How then, can we understand why sometimes our prayers are unanswered? One way, I think, is to change our perspective or understanding about how Jesus uses language. Jesus teaches in a lot of ways. He sometimes healed or performed miracles and taught about God through his actions. He sometimes gave simple examples, or led by examples, expanding our views of God. Like when he went to the home of Zacchaeus, a hated tax collector. Or he healed those seen as "impure" and unworthy. And a lot of the time, Jesus taught through hyperbole or metaphors. Hyperboles are an exaggerated statement used to make a point. We use them all the time, like when my kids tell me, 10 minutes after dinner: *I'm so hungry I could die!* No. What you mean, is that you're hungry and want a little snack. Or, should have eaten more at dinner.

But often when we read Jesus' words, we read them literally. Instead, we are meant to take them seriously, but understand that these are types of speech used to make a point quickly. Let me give you an example... In Matthew, Jesus says, "if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." Now does Jesus want us to mutilate ourselves every time we sin? No. He is telling us to take seriously our attempts to avoid sin. Or when Jesus says, "faith can move mountains" does he literally mean that we can push over the Rockies? No. But Jesus does mean that our faith will allow us to do big things.

I think when Jesus tells us today, that "everyone who asks, receives" - that he's speaking in broad strokes. Jesus doesn't mean that if we ask for the snow to stop or Vikings to win, that it will be answered in just that way.

Pastor Adam Hamilton said it this way (A Hamilton. Why? Ch 2),
"They did not think he was saying, "Pray for world peace" and it would instantly happen. Or if they prayed with faith all their problems and illnesses would magically disappear. I think they understood that Jesus was saying,

"Go to God with your burdens. Be bold when you pray! Trust God hears you.
And, in ways you don't fully understand, God will see you through this situation you face."

Our prayer life is intended to be part of our relationship with God. Just as our personal relationships require intimacy, vulnerability and honesty, so too, do our relationships with God. It's an open line of communication – where we share and speak, but also listen.

Last year, one of my boys were given a Magic 8 ball for their birthdays. Maybe you remember them? It looks like an oversized 8 ball used in pool, but inside there is a floating dice with quick answers on each side. The "game" then is to ask a question, roll the ball over and see the response. *Will mom let me watch more tv?* My son asks, "not likely" the 8 ball responds. *Will it snow tomorrow again?* we ask nervously. *Most certainly,* says the 8 ball.

It's a silly toy, but it gives fast, randomized responses to whatever we ask. Prayer is not this way. And though we struggle at times with prayers that seem to go unanswered, we also know – if we're honest – that we don't

want responses like this either. We, too, desire a relationship with God that is honest and intimate... even if it makes the answers to life's biggest questions more complicated.

So how does God answer prayer?

At the start of the pandemic, we were all – suddenly – at home. Some of us continued to work from home, our rooms crowded by children and distanced learning. Some of us were incredibly isolated, living alone, and unable to connect well with others. Some of us had work that required our physical presence – those gas station attendants and nurses in the covid units, first responders who came to our homes, and those who stocked the grocery shelves. And some of us lost work. Some had jobs that weren't required to continue and couldn't be remote.

Quickly, there was concern for those who would lose access to food. For people who couldn't afford it already, and now had another set back. For the 30% of Minnesotan children who receive free lunch at school. You and I know, that there were thousands of prayers to God for security and sustenance. For answers to a million different questions.

And God responded. God did not rain down manna like they did for the Israelites. Instead, God nudged the people here. Suddenly, restaurants in various communities around the state started making lunches that kids could pick up for free. And organizations started figuring out how to get quality food to their people. Here at Messiah, a need was seen and a ministry began: Totes for Hope... which provides food options and menu ideas for the families at Bloom.

God answered these prayers, by working through God's people, calling us into action to be the instruments of God. I have come to understand, through my own experience, that God desires for us to be the answer to one another's prayers.

There's an old joke that's told about a man whose house was flooding. And he prayed for God to rescue him. A neighbor came by and offered a ride. But now, the man said: God will see me through. First responders came by, with a boat, as the waters raised, and still the man refused. Finally, a helicopter came, lowering a ladder. But no. God will answer my prayers. And, inevitably, when the man met God in heaven – he asked: why didn't you answer me?

Now what did God say? I sent you a neighbor, a boat, a helicopter! Why are you here?

You are an answer to prayer. Your kind acts and faithfulness. The way you welcome and greet newcomers here, or the watch out for your neighbor. There are ways big and small that you make an impact in the world. And one of our jobs, I think, is to pay attention and listen for the ways God is nudging me to act. But also? When I am on my knees in prayer? God asks me to look up and look around – because there, in my neighbor and my friend, is an answer.

You see, the ways God responds to our prayers, is intricately woven. God promises to accompany you and me through our lives, and does so, *very often*, through the gifts and presence of others. We see this echoed in the story of Job, and even in the death of Jesus – where Jesus received comfort from God, and was accompanied to his death by his loved ones, and disciples. Though the journey was his alone, Jesus was not alone.

I have come to learn that this is so true for us. Here's what I notice... the story of God in scripture is of a God who desire to be in relationship with us, and for us to be in healthy relationships with others. *Love the Lord your God. And love your neighbor as yourself.* And the primary way God does this is through *accompaniment*. That is, God is with us. Or, as the old hymn declared,
And God walks with me and talks with me, and God tells me I am God's own.

And so, in our prayers, God takes the same approach. God doesn't promise that life will be without suffering our unanswered questions. But God does promise that we will not be alone. We will be held securely by the strong and faithful arms of our Savior. And we will witness, if we pay attention, that God has deployed a vast army of protectors and caretakers to be among us... that is, you and me, our neighbors around the world. A whole people of God, called to care for one another.

God does not disrupt the order of nature to respond to our prayers. God is not a magic 8 ball or vending machine. God is also not a puppeteer that interferes with the free will and lives of others. Instead, God works *within* the world God has lovingly made. Working in the people and all of creation – so that our needs are met.

Now, if all of this is true... If God answers prayers by working within God's world and people and accompanying us through it? Then why do we pray? Here are four quick reasons:

Prayer sustains our relationship with God and makes us more open to noticing God around us.
We pray, because God has promised to hear us and listen to the cries of our hearts.
We pray, because God tells us to pray and it makes a difference in our world and heart.

It calms our bodies, minds and hearts, and aligns our thinking with God's. It slows our nervous systems, and makes us more patient and empathetic. And lastly, we pray because

God loves to hear us pray, and promises to be with us always.

So this morning, *before* we pray together...

I want to invite you, again, to share your prayer requests with us through the welcome card, so that we can accompany and care for you... trusting that God will be at work, stirring in our hearts. And, I encourage you to sign up for our GPS, the daily emailed devotional... because this week, every day will include a new prayer practice for you to try, and notice how God is at work in and thru you.

All right Beloveds. Let's pray. I invite you to whisper this prayer with me:

Thank you, God for walking with me. For your love for me. For the hope I find in you. I offer myself to you. Help me to be the answer to someone else's prayers. Guide me and lead me. Draw me near to you. In Jesus name, Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 15, 2023

Weekly Prayer

Almighty God, with humility, I sit in your presence, trusting you are with me. I bring to you today my questions and doubts, my hopes and dreams. I do so knowing you are already loving, listening, and welcoming me in. Help me to listen and notice your presence today. Speak, inspire, and guide me now and always. Amen.

Monday, January 16

Scripture: Luke 11:1-4

Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

Jesus told them, "When you pray, say: 'Father, uphold the holiness of your name. Bring in your kingdom. Give us the bread we need for today. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who has wronged us. And don't lead us into temptation.'"

Observation

In this passage, the disciples have asked Jesus how to pray. Already, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus has called the disciples, and has sent them out into their communities. The disciples are leaders and practicing followers of Christ. But still, they are eager to learn more and grow in their faith.

Application

Just as the disciples, we too, can continue to strengthen our prayer life and daily practices. Notice what Jesus offers as an example in prayer. Jesus begins by addressing God, and praising God's name – acknowledging God's holiness and power. After this, Jesus prays for God's kingdom to come, that the promises and presence

of God fill our lives and world. Thirdly, Jesus asks God to meet the needs of the people. Daily bread, as we understand it, is not just a piece of a meal. Rather, Jesus is instructing us to ask God to meet our daily needs: food and shelter, security, healthy relationships, and work. Lastly, Jesus calls us to confess and ask both for God's forgiveness and guidance to avoid further temptation.

Prayer

This week, let us practice prayer and notice how God is guiding and speaking to you through the week. In addition to praying the Lord's Prayer, one way we can model Jesus' example is through the acronym **PRAY**:

Praise: God for who God is.

Repent: of your sins, ask for forgiveness and guidance.

Ask: God to provide for the needs of yourself and others.

Yield: to God and pray for God's kingdom and presence to transform our world.

Tuesday, January 17

Scripture: Psalm 96

Sing to the LORD a new song!

Sing to the LORD, all the earth!

Sing to the LORD! Bless his name!

Share the news of his saving work every single day!

Declare God's glory among the nations;

declare his wondrous works among all people

because the LORD is great and so worthy of praise.

He is awesome beyond all other gods

because all the gods of the nations are just idols,

but it is the LORD who created heaven!

Greatness and grandeur are in front of him;

strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

Give to the LORD, all families of the nations—

give to the LORD glory and power!

Give to the LORD the glory due his name!

Bring gifts!

Enter his courtyards!

Bow down to the LORD in his holy splendor!

Tremble before him, all the earth!

Tell the nations, "The LORD rules!

Yes, he set the world firmly in place; it won't be shaken.

He will judge all people fairly."

Let heaven celebrate! Let the earth rejoice!

Let the sea and everything in it roar!

Let the countryside and everything in it celebrate!

Then all the trees of the forest too

will shout out joyfully

before the LORD because he is coming!

He is coming to establish justice on the earth!

He will establish justice in the world rightly.

He will establish justice among all people fairly.

Observation

The book of Psalms is the hymnbook of scripture. Some are songs of praise and others lament. Some are long, and others brief. But all of them show us that one way to address God through prayer is in song.

Application

Music can often challenge and encourage us in a new way, especially when we feel as though words fail us. What are the songs your heart is ready to sing? What are the songs of faith that have sustained, encouraged or inspired you throughout your life?

Prayer

Today, turn to God in song. You might be so bold as to write your own psalm. Or turn to a beloved hymn and let its melody become your own. Here are a few suggestions for your prayer practice today:

- *So Will I (100 Billion X)* by Hillsong Worship: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyYn21RdBBQ>
- *My Father's World*, sung by Gungor: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YR5k6jHc4aY>
- *Shelter Me* by Michael Joncas: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3KifN7Jfpc>
- *Lord, I Need You* by Matt Maher: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuvfMDhTyMA>

Wednesday, January 18

Scripture: John 20:19-23

It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven."

Observation

This chapter of John tells us the story of Jesus' resurrection. At the beginning of the chapter, we read of Mary going to the tomb, early in the morning. Jesus meets her and calls her by name. Now it is evening of that same day, and Jesus first appears to the disciples. His first words to them are that of peace. I imagine the disciples were afraid, grieving, and startled. Knowing their hearts, Jesus brings peace. But then, in verse 22, Jesus *breathes* on them and gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit - a gift of lasting peace and forgiveness.

Application

Breath is powerful. It not only sustains our lives through the exchange of oxygen, but breathing also alerts our brains and nervous systems to our surroundings. Fast breathing can indicate trouble, slow breaths can cause our bodies to rest. Breathing helps us to relax, to listen well, and to calm our entire bodies.

Prayer

Today, let's practice prayer by setting aside time to pause, sit in silence, and allow our breath to center and draw us near to God. Sit comfortably. Relax your body and mind. Now imagine a simple square. Stand at the top right corner of the square and inhale slowly, pray: *Lord, Jesus Christ, son of God* Now slowly exhale your breath and image yourself moving to the next corner of the square. As you exhale pray: *You are with me*. Repeat this practice four times, until you've 'completed' your square.

Thursday, January 19

Scripture: Matthew 4:23-25

Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues. He announced the good news of the kingdom and healed every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread throughout Syria. People brought to him all those who had various kinds of diseases, those in pain, those possessed by demons, those with epilepsy, and those who were paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from the areas beyond the Jordan River.

Observation

Jesus spent much time walking with his disciples. It is easy to imagine them praying as they moved from place to place, seeking God's guidance and wisdom with each step.

Application

Prayer walks are a means of asking God to open your eyes and heart to what is around you in your neighborhood or city, in nature and land. And it gives us space to connect with God's good creation in an intentional way.

Prayer

Consider taking a prayer walk today. You might do this around your home, or outside. Walk slowly and with intention. Allow your prayers to extend beyond your own needs, and focus on the needs of others, as your eyes and body wander. Ask God to guide your steps, your focus, and your heart. Then, pray as you are moved. For example, you might walk past a school and offer a prayer for the students and teachers. Or you might walk past a lamp in your home and pray that God's light will shine on others.

Friday, January 20

Scripture: Luke 5:12-16

Jesus was in one of the towns where there was also a man covered with a skin disease. When he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged, "Lord, if you want, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do want to. Be clean." Instantly, the skin disease left him. Jesus ordered him not to tell anyone. "Instead," Jesus said, "go and show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses instructed. This will be a testimony to them." News of him spread even more and huge crowds gathered to listen and to be healed from their illnesses. But Jesus would withdraw to deserted places for prayer.

Observation

We know Jesus had a rich prayer life and spent much time in conversation with God. Jesus often prayed after teaching or ministering to others. We see this as one way Jesus tended to his own soul and relationship with God. It gave him space to talk freely, to listen, and to be restored for the next place God would guide him.

Application

Many of us likely have practices of praying before meals or bedtime. But do you, like Jesus, carve out intentional space throughout your day to connect with God? What might it feel like to spend time with prayer before heading into an appointment? How might a tricky conversation go more smoothly if you pause to connect with God first?

Prayer

Take time today to practice making prayer a part of your routine. Try offering a brief prayer before or after meetings or appointments. Or designate specific times to pause your actions and pray (example: 6a, 9a, 12p, 3p, 6p, 9p). These can be brief, but like the example of Jesus – use this time apart to seek God's restoration for your day.

Saturday, January 21

Scripture: Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength,
a help always near in times of great trouble.
That's why we won't be afraid when the world falls apart,
when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea,
when its waters roar and rage,
when the mountains shake because of its surging waves. *Selah*
There is a river whose streams gladden God's city,
the holiest dwelling of the Most High.
God is in that city. It will never crumble.
God will help it when morning dawns.
Nations roar; kingdoms crumble.
God utters his voice; the earth melts.

The LORD of heavenly forces is with us!

The God of Jacob is our place of safety. *Selah*

Come, see the LORD's deeds,

what devastation he has imposed on the earth—
bringing wars to an end in every corner of the world,
breaking the bow and shattering the spear,
burning chariots with fire.

“That’s enough! Now know that I am God!

I am exalted among all nations; I am exalted throughout the world!”

The LORD of heavenly forces is with us!

The God of Jacob is our place of safety. *Selah*

Observation

This psalm is a song that declares the strength of God in all places and circumstances. From the mountains to the rivers, God’s steadfast presence is sure. We see the goodness of God throughout nature, and can be reminded of God’s goodness to us, too. In verse 10, the Psalmist says, “Be still, and know that I am God.” What a reminder! Our powerful God is trustworthy and faithful.

Application

This is one of my favorite verses, as it reminds me to find rest in God, trusting that God is “strong enough” to hold any of my worries or fears. I can give it all to God, and find rest there. In Matthew, Jesus tells us, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

Prayer

Today, let’s rest in these strong and sure words from God. Read each line and sit quietly with it for a few breaths, before moving to the next one. Notice how your body, heart, and mind respond to these promised words from God, true to each single word:

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.