

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

Dealing with Unanswered Prayers

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Hi, I'm Emily Stimpson Chapman, and today we are going to ponder the problem of unanswered prayers. Before we do that though, let's pray. In the name of the Father, of the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. *Come, Holy Spirit, and fill the hearts of your faithful, and enkindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and we shall be recreated, and you shall renew the face of the Earth.*

Okay, I am really going to need the Holy Spirit's help today because for some reason I agreed to talk about the inexplicable mystery of unanswered prayers. The reason I say inexplicable is because of Jesus. It's his fault. In the New Testament, we hear him promising his disciples that if they pray, he will answer them. In Matthew 7:7, he says: ***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, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.*** Also, in John 14:3 he says it a little bit shorter. He promises: ***Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it that the Father may be glorified in the Son.*** So that sounds pretty straightforward, right? Ask and it will be given. "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it. Whoever asks receives." Importantly, it's not some random disciple or the Pharisees saying those words, right? It's Jesus, like, the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God. So, he should know what he's talking about.

But we all know that's not actually how it works out. Sometimes, a lot of times, we ask, and what we ask for is not given. We pray for spouses or babies that never come. We pray for healings that never happen. We pray for hurricanes to change course that don't. They hit right where we didn't want them to hit. There are a million prayers a day prayed, and maybe more, that don't result in the answers we sought. So, what are we going to make of that? How do we make sense of all those unanswered prayers, or at least, prayers that are answered but not with the answer we wanted?

There are all sorts of answers to that problem that people get. People love coming up with answers to this question. Some argue that as fallen creatures we often ask for the wrong things or things that are not good for us, and so God, who also said that no father would give his child a stone when he asked for a loaf of bread, is not going to give us the bad things that we ask for. He's not going to give us things that are bad for us. And that's true. People will also say that people are often praying for opposite things. So two men are praying for the love of the same woman, or

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two couples are praying for the same baby who needs a home, two women are praying for the same job, and God can't give all those people exactly what they're asking for because that's a logical impossibility. And this is also true. Then, of course, there are those who remind us that God's "no" to our prayers often isn't a "no". It's a "not yet". Now, that was very much my experience with my husband. For those of you don't know my story: my husband and I met in 2005, and I was immediately smitten, and he was not. We ended up becoming good friends, but that wasn't what I wanted, and I made that clear to God in no uncertain terms again, and again, and again for nine years. For nine years it seemed like God was saying no, but really it was just a not yet. After nine years of friendship, my husband finally came to his senses and we began dating, and fairly quickly moved on to engagement and marriage.

Looking back now from the perspective of this year, I can see that God's answer was "not yet". It wasn't "no". But it felt like "no" for a long time. Okay, what other answers do people give for unanswered prayers? There's the answer that often God answers our prayers in a deeper and truer way than we ask for or realize. We pray for healing for our child who is lying in a hospital bed, unable to talk or walk after a fall, and God does heal her. He heals her soul, how he perfects it through her silent suffering and then calls her to himself where she can be forever whole in body and soul with Him. Or we pray for a child, we pray to be a mother, and God sends lots of people our way who need to be welcomed, and loved, and nourished, and nurtured, and encouraged, and guided; people who need a mother, and God asks us to take on the deepest work of motherhood for them, which is spiritual motherhood. It's mothering a soul.

Those prayers, answered in ways we don't expect, can look unanswered, so much so that we miss the answers God's given, and we reject them. We wanted something else, not this. We wanted physical healing, we wanted a baby in our belly, we wanted the earthly comfort or a manifestation of some divine, eternal truths. We were after the fleeting, passing symbol that points to some eternal heaven reality, but God goes and gives us the heavenly reality, which is definitely the better answer, but not the answer we wanted or asked for. That disparity to a breaking heart can feel so great, too great to even count as an answered prayer. I could go on and on about answers. Lots of the best and holiest minds the human race has ever produced have wrestled with this problem of unanswered prayers, so there is no shortage of possible reasons God says one thing but then seems to do another.

But a lot of those answers feel like splitting hairs, especially when you're the one who has the unanswered prayer on your hands. Again, Jesus said all we had to do

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was ask. He promised he would answer our prayers. He didn't put all sorts of technical qualifications and waivers on his statement. So, what gives? I don't know. I'm not a saint, I'm not a mystic, I'm not a doctor of the church. All I can really tell you is how I've made sense of my unanswered prayers and what I've learned through my own experience of praying and not being answered, or praying and being answered in ways that I didn't expect.

Just to give you a little insight into my personality, I am so stubborn and so tenacious, so when I want something I tend to not to give up until I have it. I will put in all of the work, and all of the effort, and all of the prayers into all of the novenas to make what I want happen. Remember, I am the woman who waited nine years for the guy of her dream to figure out that he loved her and wanted to marry her. I don't give up easily. But during that time of waiting, and praying, and wrestling with God over Chris, I saw God do some amazing things in my heart.

First, all the praying I did, all the asking God that brought me to my knees and brought me to the Lord day in and day out, longing for what I didn't have, and asking God why, all of that kept me close to the Lord during a time that I might have been tempted to wander far from Him. In that, it helped me see how sometimes delayed answers to prayer can be a gift in themselves, that they can be part of the process that God uses to draw us closer to Him and keep us close. My time of praying and praying without an answer also kept me offering up my heartaches to the Lord, giving Him my pain and asking him to use it for Chris and for others. That season of waiting and praying taught me the importance of uniting my suffering into Christ's, and it showed me the power that comes from spending time with him on Calvary.

Today, Chris and I both believe that Jesus used my suffering during that time, and my offering of that suffering, to help heal Chris in both body and soul so that we could be married. Sometimes the hard parts of waiting actually are helps to the answering of our prayers. Third, all those years of praying taught me who I am, or more accurately, they taught me who I'm not, and that is not God. This should be obvious, right? But you see, I am so good at making things happen. Remember, I'm the girl who gets things done. And so when you have that skill it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that you are in control, that if you just work hard enough or apply your brain enough to a problem, that you can get the result you want. But with Chris, I couldn't. I couldn't force a relationship with Chris, I couldn't wrestle God into it or wrestle Chris into it. I couldn't control the situation. I am not God, and the more I came to see that the more I realized just how little I was, and just how little I knew or understood, and that it was really silly to try to wrestle the all-

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knowing, all-loving God of the universe into giving me something that maybe wasn't good for me after all.

So at some point I stopped wrestling. I continued to pray my novenas and share my heart with the Lord, but I also started telling the Lord that what I wanted most was what He wanted. I would beg, "Change my heart Lord if this isn't what you want for me." And I would say again and again what Jesus said. I would say, "Not my will but Yours." That, I came to see, was what I really wanted too. I wanted to live the life God had for me, I wanted to be the person God made me to be, I wanted to do what God wanted me to do, and I wanted most of all an eternity with Him.

Over time, the more that I prayed, the more that I went to God, the more time I spent with Him, the person that I came to want most wasn't Chris but Jesus. I wanted Jesus more than anything or anyone. I didn't want the prizes or the rewards or the miracles or the healings or the spouses that he was handing out, I didn't want just what he could do for me. I wanted him. And that was probably the greatest gift God gave me during that time of unanswered prayers, a desire for the giver of all gifts that exceeded my desire for the gifts. God changed my desires and that changed my prayers. The closer I grew to God in prayer, the easier it was to trust Him on what was going to get me to where I really wanted to go, and that was not, most of all, to the altar with Chris, it was heaven.

This doesn't mean that my desire to marry Chris went away. It didn't. It also doesn't mean that I stopped sharing my desire to be a wife or a mother with God. I kept on sharing, but I started making every prayer truly subject to His will. I didn't want to marry Chris if it wasn't what God wanted for me. If God wanted me to love Chris forever and never be loved back, then I told Him I was okay with that too, and I was! I gave God my heart and told Him to do with it and the situation what He willed, and my prayers changed, and I changed, and eventually, praise be to Jesus, the situation changed too. Chris did fall in love with me and we did marry.

But that led me to another unanswered prayer because when we married no baby came. During the first year, we were dealing with infertility, I slipped back into my old ways of wrestling with God, demanding a baby, and not understanding why he wasn't answering that prayer. But then I remembered the lessons I'd learned during that decade of praying for Chris, so I went once more back to concluding every prayer for a baby, genuinely, with the words, "Not my will but Yours," and asking God to change my heart to conform to His. And He did. He did it really quickly, like, much more quickly than nine years, and He opened my heart to adoption and led Chris and me to our son. God answered my prayer to be a mother in a way

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more beautiful and joyful than I could have imagined when I first started praying for a baby.

But that only happened because I learned to ask for what God wanted above all else. All that being said, there are lots of other prayers I've prayed that God has not answered or at least answered in ways that I understand. I have dear friends who are struggling with cancer, and dear friends who I have lost to cancer, friends who had husbands and wives and small children that were left alone after death of the person we were all asking God to heal. And, I don't understand it. I don't understand why some people have to lose loved ones and other people get to keep them. I don't understand why some people's children are protected from harm and other little ones have to go through unimaginable trauma. I don't understand why some people get spouses and babies and other people don't. I don't understand why some people have to suffer tragedy after tragedy and loss after loss while other people's lives seem so simple and carefree.

I don't know how God understands His own promise to answer our prayers, but, all my years of going to Him in prayer have taught me that He loves each and every one of us more than we can possibly imagine. Those same prayers have taught me that He wants more for us than any single one of us want for ourselves, and they have taught me that God is more capable of taking care of us and helping us and giving us exactly what we need when we need it than we are even capable of imagining. Prayer taught me trust. It gave me the ability to have my deepest prayer be not my will but Yours.

And so, That's the best advice I have to give you about unanswered prayers. Don't ever be afraid to share your heart with the Lord. Don't ever stop asking Him for what your heart desires. Go to Him again and again and again with your needs and your wants and your fears and your anxieties. He wants to hear from you. But don't just ask Him for what you want. Ask Him for what He wants. Ask Him to open your eyes to His plan for you and His gifts for you. Ask Him to conform your heart to His. Ask Him to fill you with His desires and to make them the desires of your heart. Also, ask Him to help you receive all that He has for you each day and every day and give thanks for it. And that is a prayer He absolutely will answer, so much so, I believe, that somehow from the perspective of eternity, you will find yourself with everything that you ever truly desired.

I think you also will find yourself looking back, realizing that God somehow answered every prayer you ever prayed in exactly the way you truly wanted it to be answered. I don't know, maybe that's the answer to the whole problem. Maybe Jesus answers every prayer we pray in the way we would want it to be answered if

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we saw what he saw and knew what he knew. Maybe he takes into account not just the prayers we pray in the moment, but the prayers we pray throughout our entire life, like both in this world and the next. Maybe he grants us the deepest desires of our everlasting hearts, not just the fleeting desires we have at one moment in time. Again, I don't know. It's a mystery. But one day we will see, and one day we will understand, and for now, let's just pray.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for answering our prayers, even when we don't realize you're answering them. Thank you for answering our prayers in ways better than we have asked you to answer them. Thank you for the mystery of your love, and your mercy, and your compassion, and please fill our hearts with the trust, and the faith, and the strength we need to hold fast to you, even in times of darkness and confusion when it feels like no prayers are being answered. We love you, Lord Jesus, and we are so grateful that we will be celebrating the Resurrection soon on Easter day. Until then, help us hold faster in this Lent so that we can celebrate all the more joyfully when Easter comes. Amen. In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.