

May 23-27, 2022 Edition

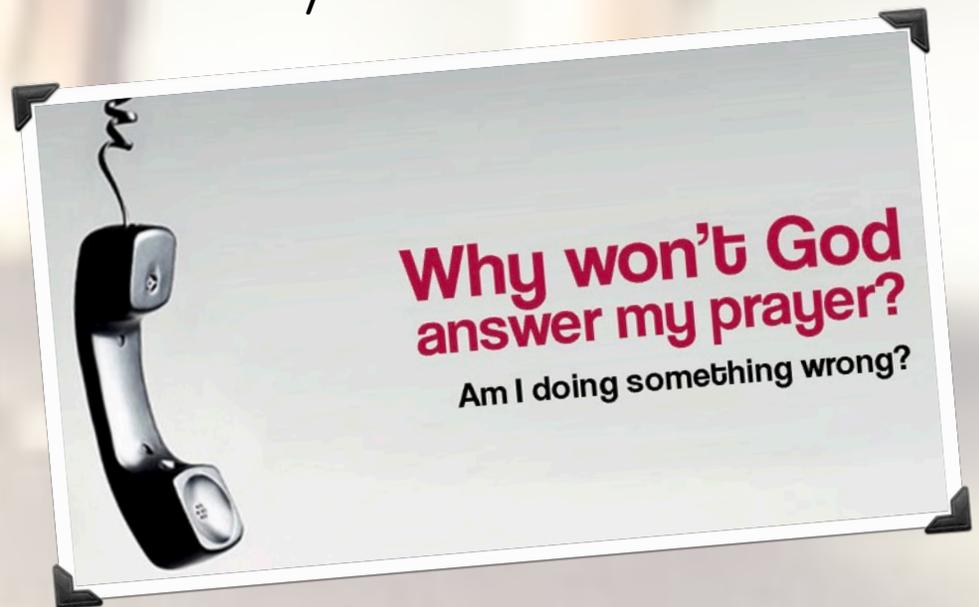
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The Year Of Jesus Part 22

What's The Deal With Unanswered Prayers?

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

May 29/29, 2022



When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we are looking at the power of prayer. James seems to think prayer makes a difference:

Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven. Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. Elijah was as human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for three and a half years! Then, when he prayed again, the sky sent down rain and the earth began to yield its crops. James 5:13-18 (NLT)

Sounds like prayer makes a difference. In fact the Bible uses so many absolutes when talking about prayer that it's hard to not get discouraged when my prayers go unanswered. Look at what Jesus Himself says about prayer:

I tell you the truth, anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father. You can ask for anything in my name, and I will do it, so that the Son can bring glory to the Father. Yes, ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it! John 14:12-14 (NLT)

Seriously? I'm supposed to do "greater works" than Jesus did?!?!?! I don't know about you but I feel like I have fallen miserably short of that lofty goal. Jesus says something else that deeply troubles me: "You can ask for anything in my name and I will do it for you." So what is it that troubles me about that promise? Only the millions of prayers I've offered up over the course of my lifetime (sound like an exaggeration to you? Maybe- I know I heard once that 83.75% of all statistics are made up on the spot so take that for whatever it's worth ;o) that have seemingly gone unanswered. And I know... sometimes prayers are answered even though it doesn't seem like it to me but still... what should I think about myself and prayer if I have prayed prayers that seemingly went unanswered?

Thankfully there is a vast resource of instances of unanswered prayers in the Bible. We'll look at them carefully over the next few days but the point is, if you've ever prayed for something you didn't get then you're not alone. Can you imagine how the folks that James is writing to feel? They are suffering for their faith. They are losing the right to shop at the local marketplace. They are losing their jobs, their businesses, their homes, their families, their freedom and sometimes their lives. They are watching as brothers and sisters in Christ go through the same thing. I imagine they've been praying themselves to sleep every night. Praying like they've never prayed before. Lord...HELP!!!!!!"

And then they watch as things go from bad to worse. What does James have to say to them? As he wraps up his letter to a community struggling with suffering and pain James reminds them of Job (remember last week we talked about the lesson of Job- God's in control even if it doesn't look like it and He cares about what we're going through even if it doesn't feel like it) and then he reminds them to pray because prayer is powerful- even if it doesn't appear to be having any impact at all. James' advice is to talk it all over with God. He says prayer matters. He says prayer is powerful and it makes a difference. Does it always show up in ways

we can see with our own eyes? Nope. Sometimes it takes an awful lot of faith to stay connected to God while our world seems to crumble all around us. But bother Job (who we studied last week) and Elijah (who James brings up this week) lived lives that mattered because they refused to let go of God- even when He was confusing them.

That's what James is asking of us. Don't let go. Don't give up. Keep on praying. Even if it looks like nothing's happening. Keep. On. Praying.

Tuesday Reflection: In Bill Hybel's book, *Too Busy Not To Pray*, he uses a memory device to help us come to grips with unanswered prayers. We are going to use his device to try to understand why our prayers seemingly go unanswered at times. He breaks unanswered prayer into four categories. The first category is... no.

Sometimes what we ask for isn't good for us or would do great harm so God simply says, "no." We may not like it when God says no, but it is an answer, right? I think I mentioned yesterday that the Bible is filled with examples of unanswered prayers. We could spend all day talking about this subject but we don't have to go any further than the gospels and Jesus' disciples to find several. One day Jesus took Peter, James (not the one who wrote the book we are studying currently but the brother of John), and John up on a mountain top. While He was up there he was "transfigured". We're not sure exactly what that means but from the disciples' perspective He was shining a blazing, blinding white and was standing there talking to Elijah and Moses. This was just before He would begin His final journey towards Jerusalem where He would stay until the Jewish leaders got so angry they would kill Him. Peter looked up from the ground (where all 3 of the men had fallen to when the light appeared) and said:

"Teacher, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents- one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Peter did not know what to say, because he and the others were so frightened. Mark 9:5-6 (NLT)

Peter never wanted to leave that "mountaintop" experience. It was so amazing and so enriching that Peter wanted to stay forever. It would seem to be a great request. Filled with spiritual desire and a sincere wish to grow closer to God. How could that be wrong? And yet... Jesus says, "no. Sorry Peter, but we've got work to do down in the valley. Yes... the valley where the danger lies. The valley where the hard work lies. The valley where the mean people who want to hurt us live. I can't stay up here forever because there's work to be done down there." Peter's prayer isn't unanswered- he gets an answer. The answer was no.

Another time Jesus and His friends are walking through Israel and they come across a town that wants nothing to do with Jesus. Jesus was a controversial figure in ancient Israel (heck... He's still a controversial figure in modern Israel but that's another discussion for another time) and not everyone wanted what He was offering. Look at what happens next:

When James and John saw this, they said to Jesus, "Lord, should we call down fire from heaven to burn them up. Luke 9:54 (NLT)

Another no. James and John were just trying to stick up for Jesus. Shouldn't those who reject us be harmed in some way? Jesus says, "no." Another prayer that is answered with a "no". Answered? Yes. Answered the way James and John thought it should be answered? Nope.

Later on James and John's mom comes to Jesus to ask a favor:

She said, "Promise that one of my sons will sit at your right side and the other will sit at your left side in your kingdom." But Jesus said, "You don't understand what you are asking." Matthew 20:21-22 (NCV)

They didn't understand what they were asking. I wonder how many of my own prayers have Jesus looking down from Heaven and saying the same thing? "Ed... you don't understand what you're asking." What were James and John asking for? They wanted to have influence and they wanted to help Jesus with His Kingdom. Sounds like a very worthy prayer, right? But they didn't realize a few things. One was that Jesus' "kingdom" was not going to be of this earth. Another was that it wasn't going to be Jesus on the throne- it was the Father on the throne and Jesus was at His right hand. James and John didn't have all the facts or they would never have dreamed of asking for what they asked for (through their mom of course... ;o)

These are just a few examples but the Bible is filled with people asking for things that they got a "no" to. Abraham, Moses, David, Paul, Peter, Jesus' mom Mary. If you've ever asked for something you didn't get then you are in very good company. Heck... even I (Pastor Ed) have gotten many "nos" to my prayers. Doesn't make you feel any better to be lumped in there with me? Fair enough. But you get the picture, right? God says "no" all the time. The Bible is filled with the greatest heroes of our faith being told, "no". Why? Lots of reasons but in the end all that matters is, they (like we) didn't always know what they were asking. They (like we) didn't have all the info. Do you know what I think made them heroes in spite of being told "no" by God? They decided to trust that He knew what He was doing even when it didn't make sense to them.

That's what James is asking the Jewish first century Christians that he is writing to to do as well. Don't stop praying- just trust that if you don't get what you asked for it doesn't mean God doesn't care or that He's not in control and it doesn't mean prayer doesn't make a difference. He does, He is and it does. So don't stop praying... even if you're getting a bunch of "nos" to your prayers.

Wednesday Reflection: Ok... so one reason our prayers seemingly go unanswered is because God just says, "no". No way. Not a chance. Wouldn't be prudent for anyone and really, if you think it through you're actually glad there is such a thing as unanswered prayer. Why? Because you don't always know what's best for you or for other people. In fact, I'd wager that if you got exactly what you asked for each time you prayed it wouldn't take long before you stopped praying. Why? Because you'd cause all kinds of destruction and devastation in your own life and others lives. How many times have you prayed for something that later on you realized how thankful you are that God didn't give you what you asked for? If it's not already the Garth Brooks song, Unanswered Prayers, should be running through your mind whether you're a country western fan or not. Let's all sing together- "Sometimes I thank God... for unanswered prayers. Remember when you're talking to the Man upstairs. That just because He may not answer doesn't mean he don't care. Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers." Did you sing it with a gravelly twang in your voice. You did, didn't you. Yeah... me too.

Anyways, that's one reason our prayers seemingly go unanswered. God just says "no". But there's another category of unanswered prayers and that is when God says, slow. In other words God says, "yes... I want you to have that but it's not time yet. So wait patiently. God is always at work and I believe with all my heart that His timing is always better than mine is. One of my absolute favorite verses is from the book of Isaiah:

The LORD says, "Forget what happened before, and do not think about the past. Look at the new thing I am going to do. It is already happening. Don't you see it?" Isaiah 43:18-19 (NCV)

God is always at work doing something new in your life. But your life isn't the only life God is working on at the moment. There are about 6 billion other people (and that number is growing every day) whose lives He's also working on and in. The time may not be right for the fulfillment of what God is working on and it may even be hard to see what's happening while He's working but patience and trust are areas that we can all grow in while we're waiting to see what new thing God is up to in our lives. We don't always like practicing patience (and practicing is what it is, right? We are continually figuring out how live within the framework of God's timing and it's never an easy thing to do, is it?) but it is irreplaceable in its ability to bring about maturity in our lives. So be patient and let God's plan for your life unfold in the timing God has set up:

These things I plan won't happen right away. Slowly, steadily, surely, the time approaches when the vision will be fulfilled. If it seems slow, wait patiently, for it will surely take place. It will not be delayed. Habakuk 2:3 (NLT)

What I've noticed is God's timing may seem slow but when the time hits suddenly things can start unfolding at a very rapid pace. It can be hard to keep up with once the time arrives so we need to be prepared for it when it happens. How do I prepare myself? We'll look at that tomorrow but for today let's ask ourselves how we're doing at waiting patiently for God's plan to unfold. And how do we know when to wait patiently and when we should be doing something? Not easy questions to figure out but invaluable questions to wrestle with in our lives with Him.

Thursday Reflection: So far we've looked at 2 out of the 4 categories of unanswered prayer- when God says, "no" and when God says, "slow". In other words when God just flat out says, "what you're asking for is not good for you or for others and so I'm gonna have to turn you down on that one..." and when God says, "I want you to have what you're asking for but the timing isn't right so let's take it slow." There can be lots of reason that timing isn't right and it may not be all about you and your life. God is working with billions of other humans and sometimes God tells me to wait because it will harm someone else if He gives me what I'm asking for right now or maybe it will bless someone else if I wait. I've seen it happen over and over again in my life and many of yours. But there are also times I never find out what God had me waiting. That's where trust comes in.

So how do I grow my trust? I'm so glad you asked! I was just going to tell you. It's like you're psychic or something. We grow in trust by waiting on God:

Even youths will become weak and tired, and young men will fall in exhaustion. But those who trust in (or, wait on) the Lord will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint. Isaiah 40:30-31 (NLT)

Whenever you find a scripture that has several different words used in the translating of a particular idea then you know you've got one of those Bible words that is multilayered and that there is no real English equivalent so the translators do their best but it's tough. The word from Isaiah 40 that is translated as "trust" in the NLT is translated as "wait" in several other translations. Why? Because neither word gives the full picture. That's why sometimes I like to use the Amplified version of the Bible because, like me, they don't mind never ending run on sentences that seem to go on and on and never finish because they're having a tough time making the point that they're really trying to make so they just keep writing hoping eventually something will click and the reader will better understand the point...

*But those who wait for the Lord [who expect, look for, and hope in Him]
Will gain new strength and renew their power.*

Even that doesn't quite do it, does it? Waiting and trusting are pretty much the same thing in Isaiah's mind. But what does it mean to "wait"? I used to think it pretty much meant I sat around twiddling my thumbs doing nothing until God did whatever God was going to do. But that's not what Isaiah is getting at. To "wait" on God means to do everything I already know I'm supposed to be doing while I trustingly (is that a word? It is now... I'm gonna go over to Urban Dictionary and add it just to make sure) and patiently wait on the future He has planned for me.

When I decided I wanted to go into ministry full time I talked it over with my wife. I had gone to college and gotten my degree in Biblical studies but I had resisted working for a church. I had seen how badly God's people could hurt ministers and I didn't want to put my family through that nightmare. So I tried everything else I could think of. I told myself that I was protecting Judy and that full time ministry wouldn't be good for her psyche but I was probably more worried about me and just didn't want to admit it. But when I was 34 a series of things led to me praying about it and deciding I was ready to do what I felt like God was asking me to do. I talked to Judy about it. I was extremely nervous. We were living in Alaska near her family and attending the church that I now work for but the church up here couldn't afford to hire me and so if I was going to go full time into ministry we would have to move. I told her what was on my heart and sat back to see what she'd say, bracing for the worst. She looked at me and said, "well, I guess we better have a garage sale and sell all our stuff so we can move down south." I will be eternally grateful to her for that and I made a decision right there and then that my family would always come first. Riverside has made that an easy promise to keep but that's another story...

The reason I write all of that is that after I had decided I'd go full time into ministry I expected God to launch me into my new future. But He didn't. He left me right where I was for several months. And even after we moved I didn't get a job right away. Part of that was timing but I know now that a big part of that was me. I wasn't ready. God wasn't saying, "no" and he wasn't simply saying, "slow"... He was also saying, "grow". And that is what "waiting" on the Lord is all about. It's about doing the things I already know I am supposed to be doing

while I patiently wait for Him to usher me into the future He has in store for me. What did I already know I should be doing?

Well, becoming more like Jesus. Working on my character. I don't need to be any specific place or situation to work on my character. The catalog in Galatians chapter 5 where Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit is more than just a list of things we should be working on in our lives. It is also a snapshot of the complete character of Jesus. Think about it- love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, self control. Jesus is a perfect 10 in all of those categories. If I'm honest with myself I have some strengths in some of those areas and some pretty glaring weaknesses too. God's plan is that while I'm "waiting" on Him I will also be growing in the fruit of the Spirit. Getting stronger in the areas I'm already doing well in and making progress in the areas I could use some work in. Because it doesn't matter what future God has in store for you. No matter what it is I can tell you one thing about that future- it contains a stronger you than you are right now. It contains a you that has grown more and more like Jesus in the past year. Not a perfect you (there is no such thing) but a you that is reflecting Jesus' glory more and more brightly:

And all of us... can be mirrors that brightly reflect the glory of the Lord. And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory even more. 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 (NLT)

Did you catch that first line? If not I'll repeat it- ALL OF US. Not some of us. Not only the chosen few. ALL of us. That means me. That means you. We are all called to reflect the glory of Jesus in our lives. How do we do that? By growing in His character. Becoming more and more like Him. Why is that important? First of all because that's God's greatest dream for your life. That you would bear a family resemblance. That when people look at you they'd say, "I'm not exactly sure what it is but there's something about you that reminds me of Jesus." And the other reason is because God only shares His power, His blessings, His knowledge and His very presence with those who are developing the character of His Son. That may sound like it's not fair but remember two things: first that ALL OF US have the potential to develop that character. It will look different in all of us but this isn't something that some people can do and everyone else is just out of luck. But also remember that for God to give His power to someone who didn't share His values and the character of Jesus would be a dangerous combination. God's power without God's character equals disaster for everyone involved.

So while you're waiting to see if a prayer you've prayed is a "no", a "slow" or a "grow" keep developing Jesus' character and likeness in your life. Then no matter what the future holds you will be ready in ways you never dreamed you could be.

Friday Reflection: The final category of unanswered prayer is, I don't know. Sometimes I've prayed prayers and they seemed to be the perfect combination of what looked like the right thing for everyone involved and my prayers weren't answered. I have to confess something to you right now, that troubles me. A lot.

I'll never forget Judy's second pregnancy. When we had Jonathan we decided it was time and got pregnant the first month and she delivered like clock work in the ninth month. There

were small bumps in the road but overall we got exactly what we thought we'd get (other than the fact that our little girl turned out to be a boy... we were very surprised... it couldn't be a boy... we don't have any boys names picked out!). So we expected the same when we decided to have another kid. I was working full time at a church in Southern California at the time as a youth minister and I was away at a youth ministry convention. Judy called and told me there were problems. She was something like 8 or 10 weeks along and I was in Denver when she called. I can remember clearly thinking to myself, "I'm not worried about the baby but I better go home because this is something that Judy will need me around for so I'll leave the convention early and head home to take her to the Dr."

I'll never forget when they couldn't find a heartbeat. I was stunned. I can remember thinking clearly, "that can't be right... God wouldn't do that to me or Judy. We've dedicated our entire lives to Him. He might let that happen to someone else but not to us. There must be some mistake."

But there wasn't. We had a miscarriage. It was devastating for both of us but I can only speak for myself. I couldn't understand why God hadn't stepped in and done something. I mean, how hard would it have been for Him to fix whatever was wrong? Isn't this the One Who with nothing more than words created everything around us? Isn't this the God who makes the lame walk and the blind see and the dead live again.

Yes... sometimes. But not always. Why not always? That was my question. At least why not always for me? Why have I prayed at the bedsides of some people and seen absolute miracles occur and other times I've prayed and watched as people (sometimes even children) slip away? I have to admit. It bothers me. It bothers me that I can't answer the question, "why" when I ask it and when people I'm praying with at hospitals ask me.

I have to admit that when it comes to why some prayers seem to get answered with such miraculous energy and some don't the only answer I have is, I don't know. But I do know one thing- at the heart of the gospel is an unanswered prayer.

On the night before He would die Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed the same prayer three separate times:

He went on a little farther and bowed with his face to the ground, praying, "My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine." Matthew 26:39 (NLT)

Isn't that strange? Wouldn't you think Jesus already knew there wasn't any other way? Why then does He pray three separate times for God to step in and do something? Because He's not just fully God- He's fully human too. And the human part of Him can't stand what He's about to have to go through. It's stressing Him out. The Bible says He was sweating drops like blood. And whether that means His sweat was tinged with blood from his capillaries bursting (a sign of EXTREME stress in the human body) or that He was sweating so much it was pouring off Him the way blood pours from a wound the picture is the same- Jesus was stressed out! He prayed three times and all three times the silence was deafening. He knew what it meant but it had to hurt.

Now whenever I struggle with an unanswered prayer (and I still struggle with why we couldn't have another kid... but after two miscarriages we stopped trying) I remember that Jesus knows what that's like. He knows the pain and loneliness and frustration and confusion and surreality of unanswered prayer. And He was willing to experience all of that for me. And now He just asks that I trust Him.

And here is what I've learned over the last 30 years of walking with Him- some days doing a much better job than others- Jesus cares deeply about me. And His plan for my life is always so much more beautiful and generous and meaningful and amazing than anything I could have come up with on my own. And when it comes to my disappointments in this life I know this- we live in a broken world. A world broken by sin and its effects not just on our spiritual lives but on our physical lives as well. Sin broke our relationship not just with God but with nature as well and because of that accidents, sickness, disease (and miscarriages), and death are a part of this world that were never part of God's plan. I believe with all of my heart that when my heart is broken from the pain and confusion and frustration of unanswered prayer that God's heart breaks with mine.

But I've also learned that if I put the broken pieces of my shattered dreams in His hands He can and will turn the broken pieces into something beautiful. It doesn't mean He makes the tragedies themselves good- even God can't do that. But He can make something beautiful out of the broken pieces of my life if I hand them to Him and continue to trust and follow Him. And I have watched over and over again as He's done it in my life and the lives of many of you who are reading this right now.

So don't stop praying. That's James' message to the suffering Jewish Christians he was writing to in the first century and I believe that's his message to you and me.

When a believing person prays, great things happen. James 5:16 (NCV)

We don't get to pick what the great things that happen will be, but one thing I guarantee- God will blow you away if you hold on to Him in the midst of your unanswered prayers and suffering and put the broken pieces of your shattered dreams in His hands along with the rest of your life.