

**EASTSIDE COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH**

**SUNDAY, JULY 25, 2021**

**UNANSWERED PRAYER: DID I DO SOMETHING WRONG?**

**TEXT: Isaiah 1:10-20**

When I was in Seminary, we had a visiting missionary speak in our chapel one day. He was a missionary to the refugee camps in northern Iraq. The refugee camp he was working in was sponsored by different government group, and the refugee camps actually had a fair amount of money, health care, food, all the things needed to keep people safe and healthy. They were coming into the winter season and the missionary told us that what they really needed to do their work was good weather. The area they were in was known for severe winter weather. The missionary told us that many, many people were praying to God for good weather...and then the severe weather hit and many people died. He told us that during that crisis in his work, he almost lost his faith due to unanswered prayer.

Unanswered prayer! How are we to understand those times when we sincerely pray and it seems that God ignored our pleas?

Let's begin with our scripture lesson which is Isaiah 1:10-20:

**<sup>10</sup> Listen to the LORD, you leaders of "Sodom."**

**Listen to the law of our God, people of "Gomorrah."**

**<sup>11</sup> "What makes you think I want all your sacrifices?"**

**says the LORD.**

**"I am sick of your burnt offerings of rams**

**and the fat of fattened cattle.**

**I get no pleasure from the blood  
of bulls and lambs and goats.**

**<sup>12</sup> When you come to worship me,**

**who asked you to parade through my courts with all your  
ceremony?**

**13 Stop bringing me your meaningless gifts;  
the incense of your offerings disgusts me!  
As for your celebrations of the new moon and the Sabbath  
and your special days for fasting—  
they are all sinful and false.  
I want no more of your pious meetings.**

**14 I hate your new moon celebrations and your annual festivals.  
They are a burden to me. I cannot stand them!**

**15 When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will not look.  
Though you offer many prayers, I will not listen,  
for your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims.**

**16 Wash yourselves and be clean!  
Get your sins out of my sight.  
Give up your evil ways.**

**17 Learn to do good.  
Seek justice.  
Help the oppressed.  
Defend the cause of orphans.  
Fight for the rights of widows.**

**18 “Come now, let’s settle this,”  
says the LORD.  
“Though your sins are like scarlet,  
I will make them as white as snow.  
Though they are red like crimson,  
I will make them as white as wool.**

**19 If you will only obey me,  
you will have plenty to eat.**

**20 But if you turn away and refuse to listen,  
you will be devoured by the sword of your enemies.  
I, the LORD, have spoken!”**

Prayer for healing goes unanswered. Prayers for safety end in accidents and death. Prayers for deliverance from chaotic and harmful situations seem to go unheard. You turn on your television, read a Christian blog or

your favorite inspirational author and hear of miraculous healings, rescues and occurrences. What is going on? Why does answered prayer seem like a cosmic lottery at times?

We have studied some of the foundations of our prayer practices and we have even looked at the practices of Jesus. Certainly Jesus prayed as if it made a difference and he spent much time in prayer. Philip Yancey, in his book ***Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?***, reminds us of the fact that Jesus prayed all night before he chose the 12 disciples. His choices included Judas Iscariot, who would betray him. He chose James and John, the "Sons of Thunder" who often lived up to that name. He chose Simon renamed Peter whom he would call "Satan" at one point. Jesus, at a particularly exasperating moment with the 12, would look at them and say, "How long shall I put up with you?" Yancey goes on to remind us what theologian Ray Anderson stated about prayer. He wrote:

***"Prayer is not a means of removing the unknown and unpredictable elements in life, but rather a way of including the unknown and unpredictable in the outworking of the grace of God in our lives."***

Did Jesus make the wrong choices of the twelve? At times they disappointed him. At times they were extremely petty and showed a lack of faith. When Jesus needed them the most they ran away. After all of these "shortcomings" eleven of them transformed into the dynamic, powerful, founders and leaders of the Christian church. Ten of the eleven died for the cause of Christ. Jesus' prayer for them certainly was fulfilled (Yancey, 82-83).

Today I want us to search our hearts to see if WE might be the problem as we pray certain types of prayers:

## FRIVILIOUS

When we analyze the contents of our prayers could they possibly be seen as frivolous. I know that I have prayed in this manner. I remember as a teen our church youth group was planning a trip to our local theme park that I loved. There was a threat of bad weather and my prayer was for God to change the outlook. As a pastor, I once asked a farmer in our congregation if it was true that they needed a great deal of snow for their fields to produce well. I hate winter and would often joke about praying the snow away. Imagine my great delight when he told me that they did not need snow because our water table was so high. Prayers offered to fend off a major stormfront that could endanger lives...absolutely! Prayers offered up for no snow because I don't care for it...probably frivolous at best. I was asked several times to pray with a local hockey team on their opening night. I was honest with the team that I wouldn't pray for wins and victory but I would pray for safety, health, comradery, that they would grow together as a team and that their hard work and diligence would be seen. It is said that you will never be able to remove prayer from schools as long as teachers give exams. This may be true, but prayers asking for good results on a test when the work was not put into the study would be a frivolous prayer. James and John's mother asking Jesus for her sons to have places of prominence in His kingdom was a frivolous prayer. Jesus' response to the request was "You don't know what you are asking!" The request was a surefire sign that they were not understanding his mission and message.

## PERSONAL FLAWS

Have you ever thought about the fact that your prayers may be affected by your own personal flaws? It sounds a bit strange, but the Bible is quite clear that our failures and sins can interrupt our relationship with God. Right from the start we have Adam and Eve breaking the one command

they were given about eat from the tree at the center of the garden. What was the result of that sin? In Genesis 3: 8-10 we find out:

**<sup>8</sup> Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. <sup>9</sup> But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"**

**<sup>10</sup> He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."**

Before they sinned, Adam and Eve had personal relationship with God. They spent time together and the fact that they were naked didn't matter. Sin spoiled the intimacy.

At times we get caught up in willful habitual sins that we have no intention of stopping unless we are caught. We cannot expect God to respond to our prayers, as sincere as some of them may be, if we are not repentant and wanting to back in the will of God. You can use as many loopholes as you like...you can't justify sin that goes against the will of God for your life and the teachings of scripture. If you are willfully sinning against God and your neighbour, the first prayer you should expect God to listen to is the one where you are crying out for mercy, repenting of your actions, and asking God to restore your relationship. This is the context of our scripture lesson today from Isaiah 1. The prophet was warning Israel to repent. The people's actions of worship and their rituals of sacrifice mean absolutely nothing to God if they don't mean it. God cannot be fooled by vain words, empty promises, and songs of praise without meaning. God's reactions to prayers that are not backed up by action are that he will "hide my eyes from you...I will not listen!"

## CONTRADICTIONS

There are times when our specific prayers may not be answered because they conflict with another person who is praying? What is an example of this? You have your heart set on your dream job. You have worked hard and believe that you would be the best person for the position. You have even done what the preacher tells you to do and you have prayed your heart out to God telling Him how much gratitude you would have if He would just give you this job! What about the other dozen people who believe it is their dream job? If we don't get the job, it is too easy to complain to God and even accuse Him of not caring or not listening. Once again, it is not a bad thing to pray for a job, even a specific job! But are you also praying that God would open the doors that would provide you with the job that would best suit you, would help you care for your family, and most importantly, bring God glory as you serve him while working in your job. As Garth Brooks says in his hit song:

***"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 prayer!"***

WOULD EVERY PRAYER ANSWERED BE SO BAD?

Philip Yancey, in his book, posed the question that has been asked for thousands of years...probably from the first day humankind started praying. That question is, "What would happen if God answered every prayer?"

Think about our own history as humans of failures. The humanists tell us that we are getting better, stronger, and smarter with each passing century. We don't need God, we are told, because we have growing wisdom to chart our own course in life! The human race is not advancing in the areas that

make us better as human beings. We are just as greedy and self-centered as ever and we have found new, unique, more advanced ways of taking out those who stand in our way.

This is what we have done with the freedom God has given us! We have fought wars, created plagues, established dictatorships and have created a system where billionaires spend billions on ideas and adventures just because they can...and those without die because of the lack of basic needs. We are inherently selfish because of the nature of our fallen world and the reality of sin.

Our model is Jesus. On earth, though he could have called on the divine or performed the miraculous, chose to limit his own power when you would think he needed it the most. He was newly baptized and beginning his ministry when he was confronted and tempted by Satan. Three times Satan tempted Jesus and three times Jesus stood firm being obedient to the Father. Jesus trusted that his Father's plan was good, right, wise, and proper.

Unanswered prayers remind us that God is sovereign and we desire for His will to be done, even when we don't understand and are sincere in our requests.

Search your heart. Take note of how you pray and what you pray. Ask God to "create in you a clean heart and to renew your spirit." May we be content that God is in control even in the face of unanswered prayers.

Let's pray...