

Unanswered Prayer

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

This is the story of Jericho and I used to wonder did God think we were really dumb to simply keep repeating the thing. Then I realized when I started to try and pray myself that I was really dumb and I didn't understand how much God wanted to do things by his own power. Probably most of us would have been under the walls with dynamite trying to help ourselves. And it's just a good teaching of how God wants to do things through his power and by us obeying him -- doing things that are apparently irrelevant like walking around city walls seven times. It seems as if that would have nothing to do with the walls falling and yet God wants us to obey what he tells us to do and he will bring the walls down in his own way.

So it's really a good teaching on that. It's Joshua 6:1-8 and I'll try to choose versus that will lead us quickly through it. Josh 6:1-9 – Now Jericho was shut up from within and from without because of the people of Israel; none went out, and none came in. And the LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have given into your hand Jericho, with its king and mighty men of valor. You shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once. Thus shall you do for six days. And seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark; and on the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, the priests blowing the trumpets. And when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, as soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people shall go up every man straight before him." So Joshua the son of Nun called the priests and said to them, "Take up the Ark of the Covenant, and let seven priests bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark of the LORD." And he said to the people, "Go forward; march around the city, and let the armed men pass on before the ark of the LORD." And as Joshua had commanded the people, the seven priests bearing the seven trumpets of rams' horns before the LORD went forward, blowing the trumpets, with the ark of the covenant of the LORD following them.

And then Joshua 6:15-16; on the seventh day they rose early at the dawn of day, and marched around the city in the same manner seven times: it was only on that day that they marched around the city seven times. And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, "Shout; for the LORD has given you the city.

And then Joshua 6:20; so the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city.

And we have the archeological evidence that those walls fell down outwards, not inwards as in a siege. We have actual photographs of it even at this time. And God can help us do the same kind of thing in our lives. Amen.

If you have suffered through Hamlet you know that there are six soliloquies and the most famous one you know, "To be or not to be that is the question. Whether it is nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them." And it's famous because it expresses the whole problem of the play. A man of action is required and Hamlet is in fact, a man of thought and meditation. That's why presumably Shakespeare is able to speak to so many of us because we often find ourselves in places where a man or woman of action is required and we want to just think, and think, and think until eventually the ghost of our

father comes up and forces us to some action which is so rash that it brings about nothing but chaos.

Now that is so often the situation with us academics in regard to God. So often we spend our days thinking, thinking, thinking, considering where Metternich was right or where Garibaldi was wrong, or deciding where Roosevelt was right or where he was wrong and we spend all our days thinking and meditating upon what other people have done. Or, we think perhaps from time-to-time about what we may do when we get out into the great big world ourselves. We tend unfortunately, to carry that whole attitude over to Sunday. It's very easy for you to listen to me saying again, and again, "Look, God is good. He loves you and will give you anything that you really need and that is really good for your life." And it's easy for you to sit there and say, "Yes, I believe God is good and I believe he is generous. I believe he's friendly. I believe it. I believe it." But you never try him out for yourself.

It's very easy for us to do that. It's very easy for us all to be involved here in a consideration of the situation such as Hamlet gave and think, "Well maybe it's true, maybe it's not true," but never actually tasting and seeing that the Lord, your God is good. That's why I thought it would be good to spend at least two Sunday mornings talking about prayer because prayer is the method by which you taste and see that God really is your Father, that he really is good, he really will give you things, and he really will do things in your life. And if you never engage in prayer you're never going to find that out. You're always going to be in the position of the guru meditating on the possibility, thinking about it and saying, "Perhaps it's true," but never knowing for yourself that it is true.

Now loved ones, the way to get into touch with God's reality is through prayer and sooner or later you have to pray if any of what we say these Sundays is going to become real for you. That's why last Sunday we talked about prayer and I tried to show you that it really is a power by which God brings about physical changes as well as spiritual changes. For instance, look at Luke 1:13. You remember that Elizabeth had no child and her husband Zechariah prayed. You remember it says in Luke 1:12 that "Zechariah was troubled". This is Luke 1:12, "And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.'" And that actually happened.

In other words, God through prayer was able to affect what was going on inside of Elizabeth's body and was able to affect whatever the problem was between her and Zechariah and was able actually to bring about a real human being. So through prayer God was able to affect a physical change. Now, he's able to affect psychological changes also. If you look at Acts 4:31 it's perhaps more the kind of position (in these overpopulated days) that we face rather than Zechariah's problem. It's the whole problem of fear and loneliness. The disciples felt they were being opposed on every side, they felt there was no hope for them. They were timid and had locked themselves in the upper room but they began to pray.

Acts 4:28-31; And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness, while thou stretchest out thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of thy holy servant Jesus." And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. And God is able to bring about confidence in the midst of fear and timidity. He's able to bring about a freedom from worry in the midst of worry.

Now brothers and sisters, God wants to change the world through releasing his power, his Holy Spirit, to do this kind of thing in response to our prayers. That's it. That's really God's plan. God gets no glory from you dynamiting the walls of Jericho yourself. Do you see that? But then you just go set up a shop selling dynamite. "Okay, you want any walls dynamited? I have dynamite." But you become the important person in the whole business. God does not want to achieve things in the world through you doing it yourself. He wants to bring it about through the power of his own Holy Spirit in your life and through your life.

God wants to bring the world back under his control through our prayers. The problem is not Brezhnev or Moa Zedong. The problem is not the political system. It's not about the miserable state of the democrats. Those aren't the problems. The problems are that we have never had any contact with God in real prayer that is answered. Therefore God is not able to release the spirit of his life into our lives and into the life of the world.

Now many of you may say, "Well, it sounds good. I've tried it. I've prayed for lots and lots of things and have never got them answered. And so what do you do with the whole problem of unanswered prayer? How do you answer that?" Well first by saying that there is no such thing. There's no such thing as unanswered prayer. God can answer, and I'll explain in a moment. So don't get too cynical right off. God can answer yes, or he can answer no, or he can answer wait, and you can know which he's answered.

You don't just sit there and say, "No answer, he must be saying wait." No, God can let you know through his Spirit how he's answering but there's no such thing as unanswered prayer. There are unanswered prayers when you treasure God's gifts above God. Then your life is filled with unanswered prayers. As long as you treasure God's gifts more than you treasure God himself then God will flood you with unanswered prayers. But as soon as you begin to treasure the giver more than the gifts then you will begin to find your prayers being answered in a flood.

Now I really mean that. I've found the difference in my own life. I've sat like many of you and heard them talk about answered prayers and I couldn't put my finger on one that had been answered. Then I began to get things right with myself and God and he began to answer my prayers. So God answers prayers on the basis of certain principles. What are the principles? Well 1 John 5:14-15, "And this is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him."

Now do you see the principle stated in verse 14? "This is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us." God has a certain will for each one of us and for each one of our situations. God doesn't ask you to work it all out by yourself. We have a tendency to say, "Well now Lord, about Vietnam you could perhaps abolish the demilitarized zone, or you could influence Chu Van Tan that he'd resign or retire in France, or you could influence the North Vietnamese." And we have a tendency to suggest to God about half a dozen alternatives and say, "Okay, would you like to pick which one you want?"

Now loved ones do you see God is a good and a wise Father and he has a purpose for every situation in which you and I find ourselves? If you're sick God has a certain will in that situation. If you're facing an impossible examination God has a certain will in that impossible situation. If you have a difficult family situation God has a certain will for that situation. And if you ask

according to his will then he is able to bring that about.

Now if you say to me, “Do you mean he can’t bring it about unless I ask?” That’s right. If God brought about his will apart from our wills then we would be simply robots. Do you see that? If he looked at a difficult family situation that you had and cured it without you asking or knowing what he was doing he would be treating you as a robot. He would just be running around the world fixing things as he thought best. But God will not act apart from your will and mine. That’s why we pray dear ones.

You may say, “If God has a certain will for every situation in my life why do I pray?” Because the bible says God knows what you need before you ask. Well, you pray because he cannot act unless you ask him to. If he acts apart from your asking then he is acting as a deist God who acts apart and overrules people’s wills. So God has a certain will for every situation in your life but he can only act in that situation if you will discover that will of his and ask him to act.

Now you find the teaching of that in case some of you haven’t heard it before, in Ezekiel 36:37. The Jews had just passed through an experience that reduced their numbers tremendously through exile and the nation obviously needed to be increased again if it were to continue to survive. Ezekiel 36:37 and this is God speaking, “Thus says the Lord GOD: this also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them: to increase their men like a flock.” Now do you see God says, “I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them: to increase their men like a flock.” Now if he knew that the men needed to be increased why didn’t he just do it? And the reason is that God cannot act against his own will but he will not act apart from your will.

Now what is God’s will? Because a lot of us have a tendency to think, “Well, I’ll pray whatever prayer I think is good and then I’ll ask if it be your will.” Now loved ones, do you see if you pray that way it’s impossible to pray in faith? You can see that, “Lord, I’d like you to make Susan fall in love with me if it’s your will.” Now he probably will have difficulty making Susan fall in love with you anyway but if you ask, “If it’s his will,” then you’re not asking with nothing wavering. And that’s what Jesus says, “If you want a prayer answered you have to ask in absolute faith, nothing wavering, for anyone who hesitates will get nothing from God.”

Now you cannot pray without hesitation if you add to the end of your prayers, “If it be according to your will.” So do you see our problem now? God can only answer prayer that is according to his will but how do you ask according to his will? Well, you find out what his will is. That’s your first job in every situation, to find out what God’s will is in that situation. And God has three great principles really that he uses in answering our prayers. The first great principle is his primary purpose for us and that’s fellowship.

Now you see that in 1 John 1:3. That’s the first principle that God uses when you study the answered prayers in the Bible. 1 John 1:3, “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” God wants most of all to have fellowship with us and that’s the primary purpose of prayer. Often he will hold back from answering a prayer to draw you closer to himself.

Now really, God does that. You may think it’s unfair, but God knows what is the best that you can possibly have. He knows that his fellowship and the reality of his person in your life are more precious to you than all the answers and all the money in the world. And so he will often hold back an answer to a prayer to draw you closer to himself. It’s like you probably have done with some

little child. You wanted him to sit on your knee. He asked you for something and you said, “Okay, come over here.” Then when he came right over you popped him on your knee and you gave it to him.

Now the Father is like that. The Father wants fellowship with you more than anything else. So often he will hold back on an answer to a prayer to draw you nearer to himself. If he gave you the answer right away you would go off and treat him as a slot machine that gave answers to prayers. So that’s the first principle that God uses, he wants fellowship with you and me.

The second principle is that he wants the world to see him through you and the world to get to know himself through you. You find that in John 17 and Jesus states it very plainly. John 17:25-26, God’s first great desire is to fellowship with us and then the second desire is that the world may actually see him and get to know him through us. John 17:25, “O righteous Father,” Jesus is praying to God, “The world has not known thee, but I have known thee; and these know that thou hast sent me. I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.” Now God will answer our prayers on the basis of that principle, that through our characters and through our actions he may make himself more known to the world.

Now dear ones, at times that will come about through him healing you of cancer. But at times that will come about through him giving you grace to live in the midst of the pain and have absolute peace and confidence. At times the world will get to know God through you best by him giving you success in the examination. At times your roommate will get to know God better by you experiencing failure in the examination. But God governs the answers to your prayers on the basis of that principle. He wants to make himself known to the rest of the people in the world through you and through your actions.

That’s why loved ones God says so often, “My hand is not shortened that it cannot save, nor my ears heavy that they cannot hear, but your iniquities have hidden my face far from you.” Often God will not answer because you have some blatant disobedience in your life that is obvious to all your friends and relatives. That is in no way revealing God to them and God will not move on an answer to pray until you deal with that situation in your character.

Now again on the positive side, often God will only answer when you discover what part of himself he wants to reveal to the world. That’s a difficult principle so I’ll repeat it. Often God only answers your prayer when you discover what part of his nature he wants to reveal to the world through that situation. Here’s an example. You remember that Abraham had a nephew called Lot who was in Sodom and Gomorrah. And Abraham discovered from God in prayer that God was determined to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of the sin in those cities.

Abraham was faced with the problem of how to pray for his relative Lot. Now the tragedy with most of us is we would have reckoned that God was just a little slow on the uptake. We would have kept repeating, “Lord, don’t destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Lord, don’t destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Don’t destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Please, don’t destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.” Now that isn’t the way to pray.

The way to pray is to find out from the Father, “Lord, what part of yourself do you want to reveal in answering the situation? What part of your own nature do you want to reveal in answering the situation?” And here’s how Abraham discovered it. He knew the part of God’s nature through prayer that is outlined in Hebrews 1:9. Maybe you should look at it and then I can show you how it was applied in the prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah.

You can only discover this in conversation with God. “What part of your nature Father, do you want to reveal?” Hebrews 1:9, “Thou hast loved righteousness and hated lawlessness.” And Abraham realized in prayer that’s the part of God’s nature that he wants to show forth. He loves righteousness and he hates lawlessness. And then Abraham began to approach God on the basis of his own nature.

Look at Genesis 18 and you’ll see what we often think of as virtually impertinent prayers. They are so bold, so outright and brazen. You can see how confidently you can approach God once you discover the part of his nature he wants to reveal. Genesis 18:23, “Then Abraham drew near, and said, ‘Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked?’” Do you see what he said? He said, “Lord you are a God that loves righteousness and hates lawlessness, are you going to destroy the righteous people with the lawless people?” So he approached God on the basis of his own nature and he appealed to God on behalf of that nature.

Now brothers and sisters, God loves to be taken seriously. God wants you and me to treat him seriously. He wants us to treat him as a real person, one who has real desires, real wishes, and real preferences. You’ll see how much God puts up with for the sake of that. I would have thought God would have struck Abraham dead long before he got to the end of this prayer. Wait until you hear, “Then Abraham drew near, and said, ‘Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked?’ Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from thee.” You see he appealing on the basis of God’s nature. “Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

Brothers and sisters, God loves you to come that way to him. He wants you to take him seriously, he wants you to take his character seriously and appeal to him on the basis of it. We tend to think that is a ridiculous rebellious prayer. It isn’t. God loves you to take him seriously.

And then Verse 26, “And the LORD said, ‘If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.’” And then I don’t know how this man had the courage but, “Abraham answered, ‘Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five,’ he was a subtle businessman, “Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Wilt thou destroy the whole city for lack of five?’ And he said, ‘I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.’ Again he spoke to God, and said, ‘Suppose forty are found there.’ He answered, ‘For the sake of forty I will not do it.’ Then he said, ‘Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there.’ He answered, ‘I will not do it, if I find thirty there.’ He said, ‘Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.’ He answered, ‘For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.’ Then he said, ‘Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there.’ He answered, ‘For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.’” It wasn’t the numbers, it was the principle involved.

Now brothers and sisters God will answer you as a real person. God will deal with you as a real person if you’ll only start dealing with him as a real person and stop treating him as some kind of impersonal slot machine. The Father is good and kind and there is reason to the way he answers our prayers. It is something you can know. You can know when he’s answering a prayer. But it depends on you taking seriously his will which is to fellowship with us and to let the world see him through us and through our actions.

Now dear ones, maybe we'll have two or three minutes for questions.

Question: How do you explain God's sustaining grace?

Answer: You know there are two graces that God makes available; redeeming grace to bring us to Jesus and then preserving grace. Now preserving grace is that power of the Holy Spirit by which he holds all the atoms and all the nuclei together. He holds the whole world in place and keeps it regular in its orbits, and keeps the sun rising. And God stated that principle clearly when he said, "He makes his rain to fall on the just and the unjust." He has promised that harvest will not fail throughout the life of mankind on the earth. He has promised that that preserving grace of his will be available whether we pray for it or not.

Preserving grace continues to be activated whether we pray or not. It keeps the breath in our bodies, and it keeps us living. He has promised that it will be available whether we ask or not. He expects us to thank him for it, but whether we ask him for it or not it will be available. But it's redeeming grace, the grace that brings us to himself and that makes available the healing properties of Jesus to our bodies and our spirits, that will only become available if we pray.

So I'd make a distinction brother between the preserving grace of God and the redeeming grace of God. The redeeming grace comes only when we ask. The preserving grace is available apart from our will.

Question: If you're praying for guidance and you seem to get a definite answer but things don't seem to be working out that way, what do you do?

There are two possibilities. First of all, you may not have got guidance but because your own wishes may have been strong in your mind that's what impressed itself upon you. So first of all, God is good in that he never lets you go astray in guidance. He will ensure even by the very circumstances that you go his way if you really ask for it. So first of all there's the possibility that you didn't get the right guidance and God is simply showing you that.

But secondly brother, it is important what you're pointing to. You must be prepared to walk in faith not by sight and to walk often against a storm of obstacles. Often God will ask you to walk on in faith. That's another principle of prayer that we didn't really have time to deal with. You need to walk in faith that your prayer will be answered and to walk expecting it to be answered. There's no point in you praying for a good day, praying that there'll be no rain and then going out with the umbrella in your hand. You have gone out with no umbrella in your hand believing that God is going to keep the rain away.

So it is important to be prepared to walk in faith. I think it is important too brother to be able to have the spiritual insight to see where the difficulties are concerning God's guidance to you and where there are simply a few obstacles on the way. There is no question; there will be an overall flow to God's will. It won't all be easy but there'll be an overall flow to it. We could tell you that we know we should produce decoupage in Fish Enterprises but oh we have had incredible trouble with our sanding machine and the adhesive that we use. So there are some obstacles always on the way to God's will but there is a general flow with it.

Question: How do you know whether it is or isn't God's will?

If you're bent on looking at the circumstances, comparing the ten obstacles to the five favorable circumstances then you're lost. You're playing a mathematical game and you're lost if you're trying to decide that way. It has to be what Jesus said, "My sheep know my voice." It has to be a going back to God with a gentle spirit saying, "Father, if this isn't your will, will you convince me inside that it isn't?" The guidance should come inside in the intuition of your spirit and you should stay with God until he confirms or denies that guidance.

I would have walked both ways. I would have walked at times through a mass of opposing circumstances and at other times walked with very favorable circumstances. And both the situations were God's will.

Question: What does it mean to wait on God? At times I've got down and tried to pray to God and at other times I've felt maybe it was just right to say nothing.

Answer: It's very important to see that waiting on God is an act of adoring him. It's an act of thinking of him, an act of loving of him, and worshiping him. It has nothing to do with the passive meditation that the gurus or the spiritualist use to open themselves to evil spirits. No, waiting on God is always an active cooperation of the mind, the emotions, and the spirit in worshiping and loving God. So brother it's always an active thing but it is a waiting on him in a sense of conversing with him until he lets you know what his will is in a certain situation.

And that's why all the old saints that you read about spent so much time in adoration of God, in just looking at him. It is a bit like you do with your friend, "Would you really like to go to that movie?" And you just have to look at her face and you can tell. The little fellow looks up at the face of the father to see if the father really wants to do that or not. Now, it's like that you look up into the face of the Father. Why? Because God said, "I will guide you with my eye." See, "I will guide you with my eye. You'll see my eye moving and you'll know which way I want you to move." That's why it's necessary to spend time actively loving God and looking at him.

How to Pray by Torrey is a good book. Also, Power Through Prayer by E.M. Bounds is the best value in Christian publishing. It's a great book that will really encourage you in praying a little longer than five minutes.