When Prayer Seems Unanswered

By Adrian Rogers

Date Preached: April 2, 2003

Main Scripture Text: Luke 1:5–17

"But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John."
LUKE 1:13

Outline

Introduction
I. The Problem of Unoffered Prayer
II. The Problem of Unanswered Prayer
  A. Sometimes the Answer to Prayer Is Simply Denied
  B. Sometimes the Answer to Prayer Is Strategically Delayed
    1. God Delays to Display His Glory
    2. God Delays to Dispense His Grace
  C. Sometimes the Answer to Prayer Is Significantly Different
III. What Do You Do When You Pray and the Answer Doesn't Seem to Come?
  A. Check Up
  B. Continue
  C. Conform
Conclusion

Introduction

Turn with me tonight for our Bible study to Luke chapter 1. And as we study tonight, we're going to talk about this question: "When Prayer Seems Unanswered." I think all of us could say there are times when we have prayed, and we have prayed our hearts out, and it seems like our prayers go unanswered. Well, we're going to try to look into that tonight and see if we can get some answers to why answers don't come or they seem not to come.

I. The Problem of Unoffered Prayer

Now there's a problem even greater than unanswered prayer—and that is unoffered prayer. People don't even pray. Let me read these words to you:

I got up early one morning and rushed right into the day;
I had so much to accomplish, I didn't have time to pray.

Copyright ©2018 Love Worth Finding Ministries, Inc. | Used by permission from the Rogers Family Trust. | www.LWF.org/ARTreasury

Anybody ever been there? Lift your hand. Be honest. Okay: "I had so much to accomplish, I didn't have time to pray."

Problems just tumbled about me and grew heavier with each task;
Why doesn't God help me, I wondered: He answered, "You didn't ask."
I wanted to see joy and beauty, but the day toiled on, gray and bleak;
I wondered why God didn't show me—He said, "But you didn't seek."
I tried to come into God's presence: I used all my keys at the lock;
God gently and lovingly chided, "My child, you didn't knock."
I woke up early this morning and paused before entering the day;
I had so much to accomplish that I had to take time to pray.
—GRACE L. NAESSENS

Oh, if we could only learn the truth of that: we're not wasting time, if we're chopping wood, when we sharpen the axe!

II. The Problem of Unanswered Prayer

There is the problem of unoffered prayer. And then, there is the problem of unanswered prayer. Why sometimes do we pray and prayers are not answered? Let's look in Luke chapter 1 and begin, if we might, in verse 5. It's a familiar story. Actually, it's around Christmastime that we frequently look at this passage of Scripture: *"There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they were both now well stricken in years. And it came to pass, that while he…"*—that is, Zacharias—*"while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, according to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense. And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard;"*—and may I say right here that this phrase, *"thy prayer is heard,"* may adequately, and I think accurately, be translated, "thy prayer was heard"—*"and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of*

Copyright ©2018 Love Worth Finding Ministries, Inc. | Used by permission from the Rogers Family Trust. | www.LWF.org/ARTreasury

the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn unto the Lord their God. And he shall go before him"—that is, John the Baptist—*"in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."* (Luke 1:5–17)

Now we know there is unoffered prayer. But why sometimes is there unanswered prayer? Now verse 13 says to Zacharias that his prayer was heard. Why do we pray sometimes and our prayers are not heard?

A. **Sometimes the Answer to Prayer Is Simply Denied**

Well, first of all, the answer to the prayer sometimes is just simply denied. God does not answer prayer. Not all prayer is heard. It's obvious, when you look at this passage of Scripture, that Zacharias and Elisabeth were righteous people. They were on praying ground. Look in verse 6—it's talking about the man and his wife: *"And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless."* (Luke 1:6) They were on praying ground. Many times we pray, and the answer does not come, because we are not walking before the Lord, we're walking in unrighteousness, and our sin keeps God from answering our prayer. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure it out.

Put in your margin James chapter 4, verses 1 through 4. James says, *"From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not."* Now that's a problem of unasked prayer. But now, watch this. What about unanswered prayer? *"Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss,"*—that is, wrongly—*"that ye may consume it upon your lusts. Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity"*—that literally means warfare—*"with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God."* (James 4:1–4) Plain English: God is not going to answer prayer for His enemies. And if we're worldly, if our prayers are not in the will of God, God is not going to answer the prayer.

Prayer is not some exercise where we get earth's will done in heaven, but heaven's will is to be done on earth. Many prayers are selfish. And he uses an illustration of friendship with the world as being like keeping company with an unclean harlot. What man would subsidize his wife if she had a boyfriend that she went away with, wrote home for more money so they could have a big time in Las Vegas, or in New Orleans, or wherever it might be, "Send help; send money." Of course, he'd be foolish to do that!

Why should God underwrite our worldliness? Why should God underwrite our

Copyright ©2018 Love Worth Finding Ministries, Inc. | Used by permission from the Rogers Family Trust. | www.LWF.org/ARTreasury

wickedness, our friendship with the world, which is spiritual adultery? So if I pray, and my prayers are not answered, I have to ask, are my motives pure? Why would God give me more strength to serve the devil? Again, *prayer is not bending God's will to fit my will; it is finding the will of God and getting in on it.* So there's the problem, yes, of unasked prayer. There is certainly unanswered prayer when God just simply says, "No, your heart is not right. Your motives are not pure and clean. I will not give you something that is outside of my will."

Listen to 1 John 5, verses 14 and 15: *"And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us."* (1 John 5:14–15) Now prayer outside the will of God is not going to be answered, plain and simple. Selfish prayer, something that we consume upon our own lusts, God is not going to answer the prayer. God will meet my personal needs, but God is not going to meet my selfish needs.

B. **Sometimes the Answer to Prayer Is Strategically Delayed**

But now, let's come back. Why sometimes, when we are like Elisabeth and Zacharias—we're walking with the Lord, keeping His commandments, praying for something that is His will—does the prayer not seem at times to be answered? Well, prayer is sometimes not simply denied; it is strategically—underscore strategically—delayed.

Now, look again in verse 13 of this passage, and here's what the angel says to Zacharias: *"But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer…"*—now, remember it may be translated—*"thy prayer [was] heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John."* (Luke 1:13)

Now evidently, Zacharias had prayed and prayed and prayed, and he'd even stopped praying. As a matter of fact, you're going to find that he had given up all hope. Look in verse 18: *"And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife is well stricken in years."* (Luke 1:18) Now God says through the angel, "Zacharias, your prayer was heard." He said, "How can it be? I'm an old man now. My wife is well stricken in age. There is no way that this is going to happen. The time of childbearing is past." Look back at verse 7: *"And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years."* (Luke 1:7)

And so the point is this: God had heard and granted the answer to their prayer many, many years ago. God heard the prayer, but God delayed the answer. And as I worked on this message, I found many places in the Bible where God hears prayer, but He delays the answer, and He does it strategically.

Put this verse in your margin—Daniel chapter 10, beginning in verse 12. Daniel is praying, and an angel comes to Daniel: *"Then said he unto me,"*—Daniel is speaking of

Copyright ©2018 Love Worth Finding Ministries, Inc. | Used by permission from the Rogers Family Trust. | www.LWF.org/ARTreasury

the angel—*"Fear not, Daniel: for from the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand, and to chasten thyself before thy God, thy words were heard, and I am come for thy words"*—or, "because you have been praying." *"But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me one and twenty days: but, lo, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me; and I remained there with the kings of Persia."* (Daniel 10:12–13)

Now, folks, I'm going to tell you this is a deep passage right here about the prince of Persia, which was a demon spirit wrestling with an angel of Jehovah and delaying the answer to prayer. There is a lot there that your pastor doesn't understand. Maybe you need to get another pastor. But I want to tell you this much. The point is clear and plain that Daniel's prayer was heard but it was delayed. You can get that much, whether or not you get anything else. It was a prayer that was heard, but it was a prayer that was delayed.

Now the Bible says in Isaiah chapter 30, verse 18, *"Therefore will the LORD wait, that he may be gracious unto you, and therefore will he will be exalted, that he may have mercy upon you: for the LORD is a God of judgment: blessed are they that wait for him."* (Isaiah 30:18) When God waits, you wait.

And God just simply delayed with Zacharias. God delayed with Daniel. God delayed with Mary and Martha. Lazarus got sick, and Mary and Martha asked Jesus to come and to heal Lazarus. And Jesus, the Bible says, deliberately delayed. He waited until Lazarus was in the grave dead and decaying before He came. (John 11:1–15) Now He had a purpose for that. He had a purpose for that, just as He had a purpose with Elisabeth and Zacharias. With Elisabeth and Zacharias, He waited until it was humanly impossible, and then did it. With Lazarus, He waited till Lazarus was dead and decaying, and then He raised Lazarus. (John 11:16–44)

1. God Delays to Display His Glory

So, let me tell you one reason I believe that prayer is strategically delayed: to display the glory of God. God waited. God gave Abraham a promise and Sarah a promise that they were to have a son, and yet God did not fulfill that promise when they were young, vigorous, virile, and potent, but God waited till Abraham was a hundred and Sarah was ninety, and then God gave the answer to prayer. And when it came, it was obvious it was a miracle. Look in Genesis chapter 17 and verse 17: *"Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?"* (Genesis 17:17)

See, God is waiting with Zacharias until humanly it's impossible. God is waiting with Abraham till it's humanly impossible. God is waiting with Lazarus until it is humanly impossible. Let's just go to the Lazarus passage and look, if you will, there in John chapter 11 and see that it's so clear that He is waiting for a purpose. In John chapter 11,

Copyright ©2018 Love Worth Finding Ministries, Inc. | Used by permission from the Rogers Family Trust. | www.LWF.org/ARTreasury

let's read the first six verses there of that eleventh chapter: *"Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus, of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. (It was that Mary which anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick). Therefore his sisters sent unto him, saying, Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick. When Jesus heard that, he said, This sickness is not unto death,"*—now here's the key—*"but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby. Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. When he had heard therefore that he was sick, he abode two days still in the same place where he was."* (John 11:1–6)

Now, see those things juxtaposed: He loved them, and yet He delayed. If God doesn't answer your prayer immediately, it doesn't mean that God doesn't love you. It doesn't mean that God doesn't have a plan for you. There was a purposeful delay. There was a postponement. Now Mary pouts, and Martha rebukes Him, and they're waiting on Jesus. Lazarus is getting weaker and weaker and weaker. "Where is Jesus? Where is Jesus? Where is Jesus? Why doesn't He come?" Jesus just stays away. They're probably thinking, "Is Jesus ignorant? Doesn't He know that Lazarus is sick?" or "Is Jesus indifferent? Doesn't He care?" or, "Is Jesus impotent? Does He have no power?"

Well, look in John 11 and verse 4: *"When Jesus heard that, he said, This sickness is not unto death,"*—now here's the key—*"but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby."* (John 11:4) And then, look down in verse 40: *"Jesus saith unto her, Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?"* (John 11:40)

Now here's the cardinal rule. All prayer is for the glory of God. And God always answers prayer in a way that brings to Him the greatest glory. Later on He says in this Gospel of John, in John chapter 14, verse 13, *"And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do,"*—now, watch it—*"that the Father may be glorified in the Son."* (John 14:13)

Why does God answer prayer? For His glory. Why did Jesus delay to raise Lazarus from the dead? He says very clearly, "This sickness is for the glory of God." Now Jesus, obviously, could have come and healed him and gotten some miniscule glory, but He waited to get the greater glory.

2. God Delays to Dispense His Grace

God delays, number one, to display His glory; number two, to dispense His grace. Remember the scripture over there in Isaiah chapter 30, verse 18: *"Therefore will the LORD wait, that he may be gracious unto you."* (Isaiah 30:18) You see, the greater blessing was the raising of Lazarus from the dead. The greater blessing was to wait and give Zacharias and Elisabeth a son in their old age, because God had a plan. God's

Copyright ©2018 Love Worth Finding Ministries, Inc. | Used by permission from the Rogers Family Trust. | www.LWF.org/ARTreasury

plan was to send Jesus Christ to this earth. For four thousand years the Messiah had been prophesied, and the time was ripe. The Bible says that Jesus Christ was going to come in the fullness of time. He needed a forerunner. He needed someone to go before Him, before the Messiah. God chose John the Baptist.

Now, suppose God had given them John the Baptist when they first asked. John the Baptist would have been out of sync. He could never have been the forerunner of the Lord Jesus Christ. They would have missed the blessing. They had had a baby boy. It may have been an answer to prayer, but he would just have been another baby boy. But now Jesus said of him, "There is not a greater born of woman than John the Baptist." (Matthew 11:11) What I'm trying to say is that God delays, but delays are not denials. Sometimes prayer is simply denied because we're asking wrongly. But sometimes it is strategically delayed.

C. **Sometimes the Answer to Prayer Is Significantly Different**

Now, not only is it strategically delayed, but sometimes the answer may be significantly different. Go back to our text again in Luke chapter 1, if you will, and let's look in verses 13 through 17: *"But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn unto the Lord their God. And he shall go before him"*—before the Messiah—*"in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."* (Luke 1:13–17)

Now God gave them John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Lord, and He waited until the last to do it. God often saves the best till the last. Psalm 34, verse 10: *"The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger: but they that seek the LORD shall not want any good thing."* (Psalm 34:10) And then, Psalm 84, verse 11: *"For the LORD God is a sun and shield: the LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly."* (Psalm 84:11) Now, listen to me. If God will withhold no good thing, why would you want anything else? If God doesn't give you exactly what you asked, He's not withholding a good thing: *"No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly."*

Billy Graham's wife, Ruth, is a very gracious lady it has been my privilege to know. She said on one occasion, "I thank God that He hasn't given me everything I asked. If He had, I would have married the wrong man on four different occasions." But, you see, *"no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly."*

Copyright ©2018 Love Worth Finding Ministries, Inc. | Used by permission from the Rogers Family Trust. | www.LWF.org/ARTreasury

I had a need, a deep need. I was desperate, praying to the Lord. You've heard me say before, I even shouted at the Lord, argued with the Lord, reasoned with the Lord, begged the Lord, pled, stained heaven with my prayers; but God said to me one time, "Adrian, you're asking me to do something I'm not going to do. But I've heard your prayer." And my prayer was, number one, strategically delayed, and it was significantly different—but what an answer to prayer!

Now we don't always know what to pray for as we ought. John and Elisabeth thought they wanted a baby boy when they were young, and they begged God for a baby boy, and they never got a baby boy, not when they were young. God gave them not what they asked for, God gave them something better than they asked for; not just another boy, the greatest man on the face of the earth born of woman, according to Jesus Christ, apart from Jesus Christ Himself.

If you go down the streets and you see these big old metal boxes hanging on the poles, they're transformers. And the high voltage comes into those transformers, and then it drops down off that transformer into your house, into your toaster, your waffle iron, your coffee maker, and your dishwasher. Now if that power were to come without going through that transformer into your house, it wouldn't only toast your toast; it would toast your toaster.

So God sometimes takes our prayer power, and He takes our prayer power and He puts it into a great transformer called the Holy Ghost. And we ask one thing, and we don't know what to ask for, but we're sincere. The Bible makes it plain that John and Elisabeth were so sincere, but they didn't know what to ask for. They thought they knew. But the Holy Spirit said to the Father, "Now, Father, here's what John and Elisabeth are asking. But that isn't what they need. Here's what they need. So, Father, hear their prayer." Here's the scripture that deals with that—Romans 8, verse 26: *"Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit [Himself] maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."* (Romans 8:26)

Sometimes before I go out of my study, I'll have a guest in there, maybe visiting before a service, and I'll say to the guest, "Would you lead us in prayer?" And they'll say, "And bless the pastor this morning; bless Pastor Rogers as he preaches this morning." I just bow my head, smile, nod, and say *amen*. But I'm not going to preach that morning. There's going to be another preacher, a guest speaker. They don't know that. Well, do you think that was a waste of prayer? It wasn't a waste of prayer. The Holy Spirit knew what that person had in his or her heart. And so the Holy Spirit says, "Now, Father, that man thinks Adrian is going to preach this morning, but Adrian's not going to preach;"—Gray Allison or somebody else, Mike Spradlin or somebody like that is going to preach; Stephen Olford is going to preach—"so, God, bless Mike; bless

Copyright ©2018 Love Worth Finding Ministries, Inc. | Used by permission from the Rogers Family Trust. | www.LWF.org/ARTreasury

Gray; bless Stephen." You see, God takes our prayers, our prayer energy. Our hearts may be pure and clean, but our prayer sometimes is strategically delayed, and sometimes it is significantly different. And so, don't give up.

Old Zacharias had almost given up. He had asked God for something. God heard his prayer. And he didn't even know God had heard his prayer. He was shocked when God heard his prayer. One of my staff members was talking with me yesterday. We had a great prayer burden in the staff about something. And we prayed, and a staff member said, "Boy, God answers prayer, doesn't He?" We had a wonderful answer to prayer.

III. What Do You Do When You Pray and the Answer Doesn't Seem to Come?

All right now, what do you do when you pray and the answer doesn't seem to come? Well, let me give you some *c*'s.

A. Check Up

First of all, just check up. "Is my heart right with God? Is this for your glory, Lord? Is there any unconfessed, unrepented–of sin in my heart?" Well then, deal with it.

B. Continue

All right, suppose you check up and you say, "So far as I know, there is no unconfessed, unrepented-of sin in my heart and in my life." Then you keep on praying. The next *c* is continue. You continue to pray until you have the answer to your prayer either in your hand or in your heart. Now the Bible teaches that we're to continue to pray. Luke 18:1: *"And he"*—Jesus—*"spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint."* (Luke 18:1) The word *faint* means to "give up." Don't give up. Just keep on praying. And He told the parable of this widow who just kept on asking this judge to rectify her needs.

Now again, let me give you another scripture that just teaches we should continue—Matthew 7, verses 7 through 11: *"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?"* (Matthew 7:7–11) Now the Scripture says, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you'll find; knock, and it shall opened unto you." It literally says—and I don't want to get too technical—but the Greek is "keep on asking; keep on seeking; keep on knocking." Do not stop praying.

Copyright ©2018 Love Worth Finding Ministries, Inc. | Used by permission from the Rogers Family Trust. | www.LWF.org/ARTreasury

C. **Conform**

Check. If there's no unconfessed sin, continue. Well, suppose the answer doesn't come and you don't have the answer in your hand. Well, do you have the answer in your heart? Remember what I told you about the prayer that I had with the Lord when I wrestled with the Lord, and the Lord said to me, "I have heard your prayer"? I had the answer in my heart. I did not see the answer. It took me maybe a year to see the answer. But I had the answer in my heart, and I had perfect peace in my heart about it. Colossians 3, verse 15 says, *"Let the peace of God rule in your hearts."* (Colossians 3:15)

Now, suppose you don't get the answer in your hand, and you don't get the answer in your heart? Check. Continue. Number three: Just conform. Just say, "All right, Lord, maybe what I'm asking for is not your will. Maybe you have something better. I want your will. Not my will, but yours."

Well, let me give you the passage of Scripture here and we'll be finished—2 Corinthians 12, verses 7 through 10. Paul has a thorn in the flesh, and he's asking God to remove it. And the Bible says, *"And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure."* Paul had such a glorious vision that God had to somehow humble him lest he be super-exalted because of the revelations that God had given him. *"For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me."* Now that doesn't mean he said, "Take it away! Take it away! Take it away!" That means for three extended periods of agonizing prayer he came to the Lord and asked God to take it from him. *"And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness…"*—now Paul didn't say what can't be cured must be endured; he said—*"he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."* (2 Corinthians 12:7–9)

If you come to the realization, for whatever reason, that God has another plan, you just conform to it. You just say, "Lord, I glory in it"—*"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him."* (Job 13:15)

Conclusion

So sometimes prayer is sinfully neglected. Sometimes prayer is simply denied, because we're asking wrongly. Sometimes prayer is strategically delayed. Sometimes prayer is significantly different. But God is a God that answers prayer. And if you have a need, you go to God and you pray and you pray, and you keep on praying until God gives you what you ask, or God lovingly says, "No, you're asking for the wrong thing," and you just

Copyright ©2018 Love Worth Finding Ministries, Inc. | Used by permission from the Rogers Family Trust. | www.LWF.org/ARTreasury

conform to the will of God.

Copyright ©2018 Love Worth Finding Ministries, Inc. | Used by permission from the Rogers Family Trust. | www.LWF.org/ARTreasury