

Lake Cities Community Church  
May 9, 2010  
Series: Prayer / Mission Impossible  
Pastor Craig Schill

### **“Looking for Answers”**

What do the following have in common: A birthday candle, a well and a star? They are all objects of our wishes. “Blow out the candles and make a wish,” we tell our kids. That is a common phrase in our culture.

I read a children’s book recently that imagined a wish factory that granted birthday wishes of children – if they followed the right wish rules. There was a movie out recently called “When in Rome” – I didn’t see it, but I read that the plot is about a lonely woman takes five coins out of a fountain, and the wishes attached to those coins follow her resulting in true love. The great Walt Disney used the star-wish as the foundation of his entertainment empire. Do you remember Disney’s most popular song? “When you wish upon a star. Makes no difference who you are. Anything your heart desires will come to you. If your heart is in your dream - No request is too extreme - When you wish upon a star- as dreamers do.”

Birthday candles, wishing wells and shooting stars are perhaps the last vestiges of our once superstitious culture.

But isn’t it interesting to observe that *rooted deep in humanity* is a desire to believe that there is a higher power who might grant our wishes and fulfill our dreams? Maybe that is why that - even though Christianity is quickly falling out of fashion in America - prayer is more popular than ever. In conjunction with the National Day of Prayer last Thursday, a USA Today / Gallup poll of 1,000 adults found that 92% of American say there is a God, and

83% believe that this God (whoever he is) answers prayers. “Like a bolt out of the blue Fate steps in and sees you through. When you wish upon a star - Your dreams come true.”

**And maybe this is why prayer is so disappointing to many Christians.** Because even when we move from Disneyland to the Church. When we move from a generic “higher-power” to the personal Yahweh – many Christians find their prayers to have about the same effect as a four inch wax candle on a birthday cake.

I shared before the words of a favorite seminary professor and pastor who told us future ministers that, “The dirty little secret in the church is that your people really don’t believe in prayer.” Over the past three week I have talked with several of you who have shared with me your own personal struggles and doubts about prayer. For many of us prayer just doesn’t seem to work. We struggle with the seemingly inconsistent way in which God responds to our petitions.

You might remember my friend Howard who shared his story a few months ago here at LCCC. He prayed diligently that his wife would survive cancer long enough to see her first grandchild. This family sacrificed so much so Howard could go to seminary – they are a good, godly family. But she died. Why? God would have received great glory in answering this prayer. It was not a selfish prayer! Why didn’t God answer that prayer? My friend Dave posted on Facebook that his daughter wanted a toy ballerina bar, but they were too expensive. Then he, by coincidence, found one on the curb waiting for trash pick up. He asked His Facebook friends: “Does God provide pink toy ballet bars?” And the ten responses were unanimous. “Yes He does! How wonderful for your little girl.” Yet what

kind of God says yes a child's toy and no to a suffering mother with cancer? Is God really so capricious and random?

Many people say: "You want to praise God in prayer – great. You want to listen to God in prayer – super; seek peace through prayer, wonderful. But if you actually ask Him to do something for you – don't get your hopes up."

And to be honest, statistics are on the skeptic's side. In 2005 Boston cardiologist Dr. Herbert Benson oversaw a \$2.4 million dollar study on the power of prayer funded by the Templeton foundation. They tracked 1,802 patients at six hospitals all of which had coronary bypass surgery. There were three groups. Group 1 received prayer but didn't know it. Group 2 received no prayers and didn't know it. Group 3 received prayer and did know it. The comparison was between groups one and two. In this double blind study - would the group being prayed for result in greater healing? The results of the study were published in the American Heart Journal in April of 2006, and the results were clear that there was no difference between those patients who were prayed for and those who were not. In fact the group that knew they were being prayed for they suffered the most complications because of what researches call "performance anxiety." The fact they knew they were being prayed for - and were expected to improve - created stress, which hindered and did not help their recovery.

How do you handle that?

Phillip Yancey wrote a terrific book on prayer and he tells the story of a time when he was asked to share about what he has learned about suffering. He brought over 1,000 letters people had sent to him telling of their tragedies. One example came from a couple

who were leaders in their church. In 1991 their 21 year old son, a scholarship athlete and youth leader in the church fell asleep at the wheel while driving a green Datsun pickup truck. The accident severed his aorta and causes paralysis from the waist down. 30,000 people in the close-knit community prayed for divine healing, elders anointed him with oil, and a national television minister prayed over him. 15 years later, the young man is still paralyzed. The mother wrote: "Where was the answered prayer that I longed to share with my friends? Where was my Father in heaven who sees the sparrow that falls and loves my son even more than I?" The father minced no words, "What is the value of prayer?" he asked.

**"Why doesn't God answer more of our prayers?"** At least I am phrasing the question in a positive direction - assuming that God does answer some prayers. Perhaps some of you are asking the question, "Does prayer make any difference at all?" Now I know in one sense God answers all prayers: "yes, no or wait." And I understand that - but *why does he say "no" so often?* If you are praying for the salvation of a family member and God desires all people to be saved and that person dies - what possible reason could God have for not answering that prayer?

At this point it may be that some of you may be troubled about the direction this morning's sermon is taking - because maybe you have never struggled with doubt in prayer. Maybe you have seen time and time again, God answering your prayers powerfully, specifically and even miraculously. That is wonderful. You are an inspiration to those who are struggling. But it is an important reminder that many people struggle deeply with

prayer and do so with good reasons. And if you are one of those who has nearly given up on prayer, stick with me a while longer. **My goal is not to affirm your doubts**, but to admit there are great challenges in prayer, and to try to work through those with you.

## **PROBLEM of EXPECTATIONS**

One thing to consider, first off, is that root of the problem we have with prayer is perhaps the problem of expectations. As I read my Bible, the promises to us concerning God's willingness to answer prayer are clear:

John 15:7 "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. Mark 11:23: "If you have faith and do not doubt, you can say to this mountain, "Go throw yourself into the sea," and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." John 14:14, "If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it." James 5:15-16. The prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up ... pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

Because of passage like these and many others, we rightly have high expectations for prayer; but it is for that same reason we are often disappointed. Sometimes I wish this passage was in the Bible from Jesus to his disciples: "Concerning your prayers, beloved, do not get too excited. Most of your prayers may seem to go unanswered, but do not be discouraged by this. The ways of the Father are mysterious and cannot be understood in this life. Be realistic in prayer, be patient in prayer, and know all your requests will be reviewed and acted upon accordingly." (...adapted from Philip Yancey):

Instead we have bold promises about prayer – which I believe and I exhort you to believe. Prayer does make the mission possible. Prayer does moves God to action. Prayer is how we talk to God. God invites us to bring our requests to Him. But then we get confused when we don't get the answers we want; disillusioned when our dreams do not come true.

So let me share with you some things that have been helpful to me to keep in mind when asking the question "Why God doesn't answer more prayers than he does"

### **WHY doesn't God answer prayers?**

(1) **I don't know.** The first thing we must admit is that we don't know. You don't have to be a Christian very long to come to the realization that you must be able to live with tension and uncertainty. This is not a cop-out but a theological answer. Isaiah said [Is. 55:9](#) "For *as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts.*" Why doesn't God heal more, save more? We don't know for sure. But we are called to live by faith and not by sight.

(2) **Fine print.** "I don't know" is a theological answer but not the only thing to consider. If God seems to not be answering your prayers you must consider what I call "the fine print." Remember the promises I read? They are full of "if, ands and buts." If you are abiding in Christ. If you have faith. If you are a righteous person. If you ask in Jesus' name – *then* God will answer your prayers. We cannot take prayer seriously until we have first taken obedience and discipleship seriously. Prayer is conditional on your spiritual life.

(3) **Requests.** Also consider this - when we pray we are making requests and not demands on God. Think about that the next time God says “no” to you. You have no entitlement that God should act a certain way. Even if you are obeying consistently and growing spiritually, answered prayers are not a right but they are grace. If prayer was a religious formula that resulted in a guaranteed outcome (like prayer studies are hoping for) – do you know what we’d call it? Magic. Wrap your brain around this - God the Son made requests of God the Father that were not answered. Paul, Moses and David – godly men, all made requests to God that were not answered. God has a free will, and he responds to our requests as he sees fit. I like to say prayer is anecdotal – it is a narrative, a story, with twists and unexpected endings. We make requests not demands.

(4) **Free Will.** The next thing to seriously consider is that God very seldom violates our free will, even through prayer. Paul said “**Do not be deceived – God is not be mocked - whatever a man sows, he also reaps.**” In other words, God is not likely to change a circumstance or situation that we have brought on ourselves. King David asked for his child’s life to be spared and God said “no” – it was a consequence of his sin. Now God can do what He wants - and does at times (by his grace) override our free will or normal natural consequences, but He does not do so very often.

(5) **Hard hearts.** Related to that is the issue of hard hearts. You might be praying for someone to come to Christ; but that person, like Pharaoh in the Old Testament, has so strongly hardened their heart against God - that they are just about beyond the

reach of even prayer. Wouldn't it have been easier for God to save Pharaoh, rather than go through the 12 plagues? The theology of a hard heart is a scary thing in the Bible, but it is real. Again, God can save anyone at any time, but in His economy and with respect to prayer it may be that a reason God is not answering that prayer of yours.

(6) **Dots.** Here is another thing to think about. – we have a *very hard time* connecting the dots between our prayers and God's answers. In fact I think we are terrible at it. Be very, very careful before you conclude God has or has not responded to your prayer. Is it possible you missed God's answer? Or maybe made a spurious correlation between prayer and something else? This is a call to be very humble in addressing how God answers prayer. There may be multi-generational things going on with prayer. Prayers might be answered after your lifetime, or maybe not in this life at all, but in the next life. Might God wait to answer some of your prayers until you get to heaven? Have you ever considered that? It is not easy for us to connect the dots.

(7) And so we are reminded that **God's timing** is different than ours. That is critical to keep in mind with prayer. God works slowly and we want quick results. The Psalmist said: **Psa. 37:7 Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him; Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, Because of the man who carries out wicked schemes.** God says to us: "I know you have problems. I really do. But wait for me. Wait for my will and answer – maybe in this life, maybe in the next. Don't worry

about it – trust Me.” That is God’s pattern over and over in Scripture.

(8) **Suffering.** A huge problem we have in our prayers is the (mostly) American assumption that God wants all suffering to end right now. Is it always God’s will to heal? Is it always God’s will for you to be comfortable? Job said, “**Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?**” (Job 2:10). We pray – heal this person, fix this person without considering that perhaps God brought that affliction to get their attention in some way. God does not author evil, but he does use suffering to change hearts and establish His kingdom.

(9) **Enemy.** In talking about suffering, it also seems to me important to remember, that our conversation with God is not happening in a Thomas Kinkade type painting – but on a battlefield, with a seriously powerful enemy seeking to thwart all aspects of our Christian life. Satan and his demons are at work to stop us from praying and to corrupt our prayers. I do not know how much - but some percent of our prayers are not answered because of the spiritual battle raging unseen before us. That is a reason for perseverance in prayer.

(10) Last, and in some ways most importantly, remember what we learned last week that **God’s will** is ultimately what we pray for. At the end of the day – God is sovereign and God is good and He has the big picture. There is a country western song that says, “Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.” If you are praying for something you want but is against God’s will – God’s “no” is a gift and

grace. Like Jesus we seek to submit to God's will in prayer.

I do not understand all the reasons why God does not answer more of our prayers with an affirmative answer, but if we begin to think carefully and biblically, we may grow in faith and understanding. On one hand, prayer is simple – talking to God. But on the other hand, it is very complicated – it is the intersection of God's sovereignty and free will, it is the place we realize God's timing is different than ours, it is the place of spiritual battle, and so often we don't even know what is best for us. The very thing we are praying against may be God's will for us at the time. How we need His grace in the area of prayer! I would like to end with the following poem called "unanswered prayer." (Anonymous, *The World's Best Loved Poems*, 328)

### **Unanswered Prayer**

I thank Thee Lord for my unanswered prayers  
Unanswered except Your kindly "nay"  
Yet it seemed hard among my heavy cares  
On that bitter day.

I wanted joy; but Thou didst know for me  
That sorrow was the gift I needed most  
And in its mystic depth I learned  
To see the Holy Ghost

I wanted health; but Thou didst bid me sound  
The secret treasures of pain,  
And in the moans and groans my heart oft found  
Thy Christ again

I wanted wealth; 'twas not the better part  
There is a wealth in poverty is given  
And thou didst teach me of the gold of heart  
The best gift found in heaven.

I thank Thee Lord, for these unanswered prayers,  
And for Thy word, the quiet kind "nay"  
'Twas Thy withholding which lightened all my cares  
on that blessed day.