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Coming to Grips with Unanswered Prayer

“**S**ince God didn’t answer all those prayers, I’m not going to bother Him with another request again. What’s the use? I don’t want to be hurt one more time!” The woman was bitter, and whether justified or not, her attitude was certainly understandable.

Her young pastor had been diagnosed with cancer. His congregation took their responsibility to pray for him seriously. They signed up for round-the-clock prayer so that at least one person was praying for him twenty-four hours a day. Additional prayer meetings were scheduled. The deacons anointed him with oil and prayed. Some fasted and prayed for days on end, beseeching God to heal him.

When he went into the hospital for treatment, some believers came to him with the assurance that he would be healed. God had shown

them that this miracle was His will, they said, and He had confirmed it by giving the same assurance to several people independently.

Even when he collapsed into a coma, his wife and small children were assured that this sickness was not unto death. Though God would allow him to come unto the jaws of death, he would be delivered in the end.

But that was not to be.

He died, with his friends and family still full of faith that God would intervene and restore him to health. But unlike Lazarus, there was no earthly resurrection for this man.

Perhaps you can understand the disillusionment and even betrayal these church members felt. Over in the nursing home lived older people who had long since lost touch with reality. They no longer recognized their children; they longed for death, but it eluded them. Yet God took a young man with a life of fruitful ministry ahead of him, leaving behind a grieving young family and a sorrowing church.

If God doesn't answer the concerted prayers of His people offered in the name of Christ and for His glory, why bother with prayer? Should we assume that prayer does not affect God?

When such prayers go unanswered, the easy response is to blame it on sin in the lives of the intercessors or on unbelief. Granted, there is no question that sin is a hindrance to prayer. David admitted, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear" (Psalm 66:18). But in the case of the pastor described above, that answer is too simplistic. He was a godly man who regularly asked God to search his heart to reveal any sin that needed to be confessed. Doubtless the congregation had its share of carnality, but no overt sin had gone unconfessed or unpunished. Hundreds who prayed for this man were Spirit-filled Christians who sought God for direction in their prayers.

What about unbelief? Christ could do no miracles in Capernaum because of the city's unbelief. Could that be the reason God did not answer the many prayers for that pastor? Perhaps, but it is unlikely. People actually believed—firmly believed—that he would be healed. God had given them this assurance, or so they thought. Far from being filled with unbelief, some of that young pastor's friends actually seemed to believe too much.

James wrote, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with

wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures” (4:3). Though in some cases self-interest is certainly a hindrance to prayer, those who prayed for this man knew that his healing would contribute to the glory of God. They yearned that the medical doctors be proved wrong in their pessimistic prognosis. What a witness his healing would have been to unbelievers, as well as to skeptical believers!

Where did the will of God fit into this scenario? John wrote, “And this is the confidence which we have before 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 the requests which we have asked from Him” (1 John 5:14-15). So the question arises, how do we know what the will of God is? In retrospect, it seems obvious that it was God’s will for that pastor to die. But how could the congregation have known that? In praying for his restoration were they actually praying contrary to the will of God?

We must tread carefully here, for the phrase “the will of God” is used in two different senses in Scripture. Sometimes it refers to the decree of God, by which God runs everything in His universe. Paul says God “works all things after the counsel of

His will" (Ephesians 1:11). In this general sense, virtually everything, even evil, is either directly or indirectly God's will.

The more popular use of the expression "the will of God" refers to the desires God has revealed regarding our conduct and choices in life. For example, Paul wrote, "In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Or again, "So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Ephesians 5:17).

When we speak of unanswered prayer we wrestle with this second understanding of the will of God. What we want to know is: what was God's plan for that pastor's life? Was it really God's desire for him to die, or was his death the result of spiritual negligence on his part? Was it because of the congregation's unbelief?

In my experience as a pastor I have come to believe that unanswered prayer is one of the most common stumbling blocks to spiritual growth. We've all begged and pleaded about situations that we know God could easily change; we have enlisted the prayer support of others and believed. But many times the heavens have remained silent. So the logical conclusion appears to be that God does not care.