

# Sermon

## Sunday, August 12, 2018

Charleston, SC

Sermon ~ Isaiah 59:1-8, Luke 13:1-9

*When God Doesn't Answer*

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What does it mean when God doesn't answer prayer? You ever been in this situation? You pray and you pray and you pray...and nothing happens? It could be a small prayer or it could be a desperate one. Your marriage is falling apart. A loved one is dying. Your business is collapsing, your teenager is on drugs. And you pray and you pray...to no avail.

What are we supposed to do with this? How do we interpret the silence? The great unanswered prayer in my life was the death of my grandfather. He was a hero to me. A Lutheran Pastor, Navy Chaplain, Missionary.

Eight years ago he was misdiagnosed by his doctor, went septic, and died on a helicopter on the way to the Mayo Clinic. All the while his family praying fervently for healing. Why would God allow this faithful man to die in such a lonely way? Why were our prayers not answered?

In our passage from Isaiah God's people are wrestling with the same question. It's about the year 700 BC. Judah is beset by enemies. Many of its cities have been burned to the ground. And Isaiah is prophesying doom and gloom. He's prophesying the unthinkable. He's prophesying exile.

In today's world it would be like someone saying—the United States will be conquered by China. They'll destroy New York and DC and LA. And they'll deport millions of people to Mongolia. Again, it's unthinkable.

But the really strange thing about this scenario is that the people of Judah *are praying*. They're praying fervently. They're fasting. And so they raise the question in chapter 58, *'Why have we fasted [God] and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves and you take no knowledge of it?'* What's the deal God, why are you not answering our prayers?

And in the face of this silence, the people begin to wonder about God's character. Maybe God is *not* all-powerful. Maybe he's not *able* to rescue us. OR maybe God is not all-good. Maybe he doesn't really care? You ever heard questions like this? You ever raised questions like this? They're as old as the hills.

But finally, in chapter 59 Isaiah provides an answer. Directly and forcefully. Verse 1: *'Behold the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he does not hear.'*

Why is God not answering their prayers? Because of sin. Sin is a barrier between them and God. Sin has separated them from God's presence. It's like a magnetic field. Sin and God don't go together. It's like cramming two magnets together the wrong way. It doesn't work. They repel each other.

Of course it was sin that forced Adam and Eve out of the garden. And sin will now force God's people out of the promised land. This is what sin does - it alienates us from the life of God and blocks our prayers. As the psalmist said, *'If I cherish sin in my heart, the Lord will not listen to me.'*

Now this is not what the people of Judah want to hear. And you can imagine their response. *'Surely not me. I go to church every Sunday. I tithe. I read my Bible. My theology is solid. You've got to be kidding, Isaiah.'*

But Isaiah is not kidding and he gives them a litany of their sins - your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies; your tongue mutters wickedness...you conceive mischief, you

commit violence, you run to evil, your ways are crooked, etc.

Basically, you guys are sinners. Yeah, you may go to church on Sundays. You may enjoy worshipping God. You pray and fast. But the rest of the week you're living like the World. You're selfish. You gossip. You manipulate. You don't help the poor. You don't stand for justice. You say you love God, but you don't live like him. You're hypocrites and your sins are blocking your prayers.

I once heard Tim Keller tell the story of having a bunch of high school students go off to college. And they'd go off possessing a strong faith. But something would happen to their faith in college. And after their first year they'd come home and they'd visit with pastor Tim and they'd share how suddenly they're having all of these doubts about their faith, their prayer life is dry, etc.

And Pastor Tim, instead of getting into a theological debate, would simply ask one question, *'Who are you sleeping with?'* And it would turn out that the doubts arose as the sin crept in. Yes, sin separates us from the presence of God.

Now this is not the kind of stuff I like to read in my Bible. And it's not the kind of stuff I like to preach. It's profoundly disturbing. And it actually gets worse. In verse 15 Isaiah writes, *'The Lord saw [this] and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede.'*

Basically, there's no one who can save the day. There's no one who can make it better. No Chuck Norris. No McGyver. No knight in shining armor.

The apostle Paul actually quotes this passage in Romans 3 when he declares that there is no one who is righteous. Paul is writing to the most morally scrupulous society in history. And yet he says, *'there's no one who is*

righteous.' The point is, we're lost. We're blind. We're helpless. We can't simply try harder to do better.

Isaiah uses some brutal imagery in verse 9: *We grope for the wall like the blind; we grope like those who have no eyes...we are like dead men.*

We are like dead men. This is the human condition apart from God. All of these prayerful, worshipping, sincere people are being told they're spiritually dead. Because the truth is they don't even realize they're hypocrites. They honestly believe they're doing all the right things. *But they're blind*, so they can't see their own sin.

Now this is one of the darkest passages in the Bible. And you might ask the question: what is Isaiah trying to do? Why is he rubbing their faces in the dirt? Is he just trying to make them feel *really guilty*?

I don't think so. I don't think he's trying to make them feel condemnation or shame or guilt. Instead, I think he's simply trying to honestly show them their condition. That they're lost, blind, in bondage to sin, and cannot save themselves. Ultimately he's trying to prepare them for the savior.

And this leads us to verses 16 and 20: *'Then God's own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him...and a Redeemer will come to Zion.'* Yes, when things have gotten to the point of no return, God himself will intervene and will send a Redeemer.

In the following chapters Isaiah describes this Redeemer. He's the one bringing good news to the poor; binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives, and the year of the LORD's favor

And the astonishing thing about this Redeemer, is *how* he heals us and sets the prisoner free.

As we're floundering in our cesspool of sin, the redeemer doesn't simply throw us a rope to pull us out. But rather he dives headfirst into the filth to save us. Indeed he pushes us out as he himself drowns in our sin.

This Redeemer *fully* experiences the tragedy and travesty of our broken lives. *Including* unanswered prayer and separation from God. Did you ever notice that not all of Jesus' prayers were answered? What did He pray in the garden of Gethsemane? *'Father, let this cup pass from me!'* But the cup of suffering didn't pass. And in that moment of greatest agony on the cross, what did Jesus cry out?

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Yes, as Jesus bore our sins, he experienced our separation from God. And it destroyed him. And yet, by his stripes we are healed, by his agony we are comforted, by His separation from God, do we come home to the Father.

So how do we respond to this Redeemer? We run to him. We thank him. And we give him our sins. Verse 20: *A Redeemer will come to Zion...to those who turn from transgression.* And so we undertake a fearless moral inventory—in the words of AA. And we turn away from the garbage in our lives.

With fear and trembling, every Lent I ask God to expose sin in my life. And this is one prayer he *always* answers. Often he brings to mind sins I've long forgotten. And so I end up getting on the phone and calling people from high school, college, seminary. And the conversation usually goes, 'so I haven't seen you in 5, 10, 20 years, but I'm sorry I lied or was selfish, or unkind. Please forgive me.' And as embarrassing as this can feel, the freedom and forgiveness is a gift from God.

Because when we confess our sins, not only does God forgive us and wash away the filth...He also gives us the righteousness of Jesus. He takes away the rags of our sin, and clothes us with the righteous, spotless robes of his beloved son. And our lives our changed, often dramatically.

Chuck Dean tells the story of speaking to a room full of Vietnam vets in the 90's. And he was talking to them about forgiveness. And at the end of the talk he asked them to forgive their enemies. And in particular, he asked them to forgive Jane Fonda. Yes, the movie star who in 1972 visited the North Vietnamese army in Hanoi. She's been despised and hated by veterans for years. And yet Chuck Dean asked the vets to let go of their hatred.

One man was a marine who'd been wounded by a 50 caliber round and was paralyzed from the waist down and in a wheelchair. But when he let go of his hatred and forgave Jane Fonda, he stood up and walked for first time in 23 years. My friends, this is Jesus setting the prisoner free.

Now I want to be very clear on one point. The fact that sin hinders our prayers, does not mean sin is *always* the explanation. There are other possible reasons. It could be God's timing, it could be God has something better in store, it

could be spiritual warfare, or it could be a mystery as it was with my grandfather's death. The point is, we should always check and see if there's any sin to be addressed.

It's just like if you go to the hospital with chest pains, it doesn't always mean you're having a heart attack. It could be indigestion. But you sure want them to check and rule it out!

And so if we're struggling in prayer it's always good to stop and ask God, *'Search me and know my heart. Test me and see if there be any wickedness within.'* (Psalm 139). So that we can dump the junk and embrace the grace.

And at the end of the day, even as we wrestle with unanswered prayer, in light of the cross there's one thing we can know with *absolute certainty*. In light of the cross we can see that whatever the explanation might be, it is NOT that God doesn't care. By the cross we see that He is with us. He is for us. And he has died to make us His own.

Yes, a Redeemer has come to Zion. Today, let us lay down our sin and run into His arms.

For Jesus' sake.