

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## When Prayer Doesn't Seem to Work

Sunday, February 9

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I have been a follower of Christ since I was old enough to understand what that meant. For over forty years, I have sought to walk with Christ by praying, reading scripture, observing spiritual disciplines and serving others.

Like many of you, I have experienced the highs and lows of faith. There have been times in my life that God felt as real as my breath. And there have been other times I've felt like God was as far away as the planet Jupiter.

Through my journey with Christ there is one struggle that reigns supreme for me and most Christians. Today, I am going to address it. It is a problem every follower of God has experienced. I don't know of any problem in the Christian life that causes more confusion, discouragement, frustration and anger than this problem

Here is the problem: Why is it sometimes prayer seems to work and sometimes it doesn't?

Prayer is a lot like golf. Sometimes it can be the most exhilarating thing in the world and sometimes it can be the most disappointing thing in the world.

One of the reasons I am addressing this issue today is because of some of the responses I received after preaching on prayer and worry the last couple of weeks. Some folks asked that I speak to those times when prayer doesn't seem to work.

I have prayed for marriages to be restored, but they weren't. I have prayed for children to be healed of sickness, but they died. I have prayed for God to open doors of ministry, but they were slammed in my face. Sometimes my prayers feel like rubber balls bouncing off the doors of heaven.

How about you? Maybe you prayed for a promotion and didn't get it. Maybe you prayed for a job and didn't get it? You prayed to pass a test and failed. You prayed for God to hold your marriage together but your spouse left anyway. You prayed for a loved one to recover from an illness and they died.

It can be extremely frustrating and discouraging.

Before I go any further, I need to say there are times when God wants to answer our prayers but rebellion prevents it from being answered. If you have prayed for God to hold your marriage together, but your spouse cheated on you and left anyway, don't blame God, blame the spouse. If you prayed for a relative to heal from lung cancer and they never do because they continue to smoke like a chimney, don't blame God, blame the smoker.

God never goes against free will, no matter how hard we pray. If someone makes a bad choice, it's not God's fault.

There are also times when God answers prayer but we are too stubborn to see it. Like the old story about the man on top of his roof during a flood who prayed to be rescued. A raft, a boat and a helicopter each came by and to each one he said, "I am fine. God is going to rescue me." Well, the man died and asked God why he wasn't rescued. God said, "Don't blame me. I sent you a raft, a boat and a helicopter."

If you prayed for God to help you get in shape, but you never used the free gym membership you were given, don't blame God when you don't lose weight. If you prayed for God to help you heal from an ear infection, but never take the antibiotics prescribed to you, don't blame God when your ear still hurts.

Answered prayers are not always esoteric or mystical in nature. Sometime God's answers are obvious and practical, and we simply overlook them.

But those disclaimers aside, it is painfully true that some prayers are not answered, at least not in the way we want. And this hard truth gives more problems to more people than I know. Especially when we read the words of Jesus recorded in the gospel of Mark. Jesus says, **"I tell you this: if anyone says to this mountain, 'Be lifted from your place and hurled into the sea' and has no inward doubts but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. I tell you**

**then, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that that you have received it, and it will be yours.” –Mark 11:23**

That’s what it says. And I believe in the power of prayer. I have seen amazing things happen as a result of prayer. I preach about prayer and it’s transforming impact. Prayer can make all the difference in the world.

Yet, our experience tells us not every mountain is moved, not even when we believe and pray with all of our heart. Perhaps this has you stuck spiritually.

So, how do we deal with that? What do we do when it seems that our most desperate prayers are not answered?

Here is the issue: God does answer prayer, but God does not always answer prayer the way we expect him to. Sometimes God’s answers are not immediate, and sometimes God’s answers don’t align with our wishes, but that does not mean that God does not answer prayer.

This morning I am going to share with you the different ways God typically answers prayer. I encourage you take notes, especially if this has been a struggle for you. I have reflected a great deal on my faith, done a great deal of research and listened to some of my favorite preachers on this subject. What you learn today just might get you unstuck from your struggle with your prayers that don’t seem to work.

**Sometimes God says, "Go!"** Sometimes God says what you are asking for is a go. In other words, “Yes, I am with you and I will help you with it. Go for it!”

There are times you ask God for a job one day and the phone rings and you've got a job the next day. There are times that you ask God for surgery to be successful and the surgery is successful. There are times when God says yes and we are thrilled.

Now, by a show of hands, how many of you wish this is how prayer worked all the time? Of course we do! The only answer we want from God is "Yes." What child likes to hear, "No" from his parents? Children always want to hear, "Yes." My son Paul always wants me to say “yes.”

But let me ask you, do you think it is a good idea for a parent to always say yes to their child? We all know the answer to that one.

Too often we think that if God does not give us what we want when we want it then God has not answered our prayers, but that is not true.

**Sometimes God says, "Whoa!"** Sometimes God says, "Yes, but not now." James Merritt says that “God not only wants to give us what is best for us God wants to give it to us *when* it is best for us.”

Football coaches understand this. Most of the time, high school and college coaches are very reluctant to play quarterbacks who are extremely inexperienced. It doesn't matter that they have great talent, great speed or a great arm. It is best to bring them along slowly and not give them everything they may want. If they do, it could either go to their head if they are successful or destroy their spirit if they are not. Sometimes they are not mature enough yet to handle where they are destined to be.

One of the greatest battles a parent has to fight is to make sure that he or she doesn't give his child too much, too soon. There is nothing wrong with teaching your kid, at the right age, how to drive a car, but it’s possible to teach them how to drive a car before they are old enough to know how to drive it.

I want to teach Paul how to swing a golf club, but he’s too little to put a real golf club in his hands. So, for now, he uses a plastic toy golf club. Otherwise he could hurt himself and others.

There are times that God answers our prayers and eventually gets around to saying, "Yes", but he does it **WHEN** is it best for us.

You and I can live with those types of answers, but it is the third one that gives us the most trouble. And it is the third one that most of us have problems with.

**Sometimes God says, "No!"** God can say "No" to any person and any prayer because God is God and we are not! God said, "No" to some of the greatest figures in the Bible.

Without question, outside of Jesus Christ, the hero of the entire New Testament was a man named, Paul. Nobody loved God more than Paul, served God better than Paul and was more devoted to God than Paul. Yet, Paul had what he called a "thorn in the flesh." We are not sure what that thorn was, but we do know that he asked God, not once, not twice, but three times to remove it from him.

Do you know what God's answer was?

**"My grace is sufficient for you for power is perfected in weakness." (2nd Corinthians 12:9, NASB)**

God lovingly said to Paul, "No, I am not going to take the thorn away from you, but I will give you the grace to handle it."

Now why? Why would God say no to Paul? And why would God say no to us?

### **God's Perspective is Bigger and Better Than Ours**

God has something that you and I don't have. The Big Picture. This is why the Bible says in Isaiah: **"This plan of mine is not what you would work out, neither are My thoughts the same as yours!... For My ways are higher than yours." (Isaiah 55:8, LB)**

So often when we pray we don't realize the consequences if God were to say "Yes" to that prayer.

Merritt puts it this way: "If we knew everything that God knew and we could see everything that God sees, then every time God says, "No" we would say "No" as well.

"All prayer has a ripple effect. Every time God answers "Yes" to a prayer, it will always affect somebody else. When I pray for something, I can't see how my prayers are going to affect my life down the road. I can't see how my prayers are going to affect my family. I can't see how my prayers are going to affect my church or you.

"Prayer is like a nuclear bomb. For a nuclear bomb to explode there must be a change reaction and that is exactly what prayer does. Prayer always sets off a chain reaction. And because God knows the end result of that change reaction many times has to say, 'No.'"

For example, take the Apostle Paul's desire and prayer to go to Spain to spread the gospel. God said, "No you are going to Rome." Shortly after Paul arrived in Rome he was thrown into prison and chained up. But do know you what happened? Paul wrote a large chunk of the New Testament in a prison cell. We might not have the New Testament if Paul had gone to Spain.

God sees things we can't see. God knows things that we don't know.

One author wisely stated that God's outlook always takes two things into consideration:

**What is for our good?**

**What is for God's glory?**

No matter how eloquent or profound the prayer may be it if doesn't meet those two criteria, God will say, "No." Why. God's Perspective is Bigger and Better Than Ours.

One of the most interesting chapters in the Bible is Hebrews 11 where it talks about so many heroes of the faith and some many people who stood strong for God in history. In one of the most interesting parts of that chapter we read these verses: **"These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better..." (Hebrews 11:39-40, NIV)**

There are some prayers that God said, "No" to in my life that I am still upset about, but there are a great deal more prayers I have prayed that I thank God that He did say "No" to.

James Merritt says that if you ever get to feeling angry or bitter because God didn't answer one of your prayers, go to a high school reunion. More than likely, you will find that man or woman you wanted to marry so badly went down an unexpected path, and they did not turn out the you expected!

When I look at the beautiful, sweet, precious wife that I married and think about some of the girls that I could have married, I am absolutely convinced, "When God says "No" it is always for my best."

It is so easy to trust God when he says, "Yes." It is a different story to trust God when he says "No."

Faith is not believing God when He says "Yes" to your prayers; faith is believing God even when He says "No" to your prayers. Faith is trusting that God is always looking out for what is best for you.

But maybe that is not good enough for you. You are hurting. You are disappointed. You don't understand why the mountain has not been moved in your life. Jesus said, "If I pray, if I believe, the mountain will be moved..."

Let's take another look at our scripture about moving mountains. In first century Jewish culture, "moving mountains" was a figure of speech which meant, "removing difficulty". So, in this text, I don't believe Jesus is saying, "Whatever you ask for, you will get." Instead, I believe Jesus is saying, "Through prayer, I can help you overcome difficulty with my strength."

There is a profound line by Maria in "The Sound of Music". She says, "When a door is closed, God always opens a window". Although it sounds cliché, I believe it. God hurts with us when we suffer, but God also goes to work helping us by opening a new door or window. God is in the business of bringing good out of evil.

But, as James McCormick wisely says, “The problem is that we cannot go through the new door that God opens if we are staring at the door that is closed. There are so many wounded people walking around who are not getting well because they keep picking at the scabs of past hurts. It’s a sad thing to be hurt, disappointed, wounded. We’ve all experienced that to some extent, because to be human is to be hurt. It’s always sad to see someone who has tripped and fallen in life. But I’ll tell you what is sadder still. The most tragic thing of all is for someone to trip and fall and then not get up again.”

Listen. God doesn’t want anything bad to happen to you, but because we live in a free world, bad things do happen. And when they do, be assured that God will always bring resurrection out of crucifixion. He can take what is ugly in your life and make it beautiful. And the new door or window God opens may well be even better than the old one we wanted so much.



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