



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Systematic Theology

“The Problem of Unanswered Prayer - I”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee, again, for the privilege of a study of the Scriptures. We thank Thee for the teaching of the word. At times, Father, we feel that it is very difficult to come to understand precisely what Thou art attempting to say to us. But we do thank Thee that as we persevere in the study of the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit does enlighten us and lead us into all truth as Jesus promised that he would.

And we pray tonight, as we turn again to the problems of prayer, that we may be able to understand them and, above all, that we may find incentive to come to Thee in prayer, bringing Thee the petitions that are upon our hearts and, even better, the petitions that Thou wouldst have us to pray.

So we commit this hour to Thee and we pray for each one. May our own needs be met through the word.

For Jesus' sake, Amen.

[Message] We're turning, again, for a two-verse Scripture reading to the Book of James. And will you listen as I read verses 2 and 3 of chapter 4. James chapter 4, verses 2 and 3, James writes:

“You ask and do not receive because you ask with wrong motives. So that you may spend it on your pleasures. (Now, I read the third verse before I read the second one... I think I must need glasses. So let’s be different tonight... Now, let’s read the second verse.) You lust and do not have. So you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask.”

Our problem -- our subject tonight is: “Does God really Answer Prayer? Or The Problem of Unanswered Prayer.” And, first of all, a few words of introduction.

After consideration of the problems of prayer, the subject that we have been dealing with in our last few times together, our subject for consideration tonight is the possibility of unanswered prayer. We have considered the problem of the attributes and prayer. We have considered the problem of the decrees and prayer. Now, the problem of unanswered prayer. Is there such a thing as unanswered prayer?

The Psalmist seems disturbed by the possibility, for he writes: “How long wilt Thou forget me, O Lord? Forever? How long wilt though hide Thy face from me?” And so, apparently, the Psalmist, himself, felt at times that God was not hearing his petitions and not answering them. On the other hand, he often speaks of answered prayer. For example, the Psalmist also writes in Psalm 116, “I love the Lord because he hath heard my voice and my supplications.”

Most of us are convinced, somehow, if we are Christians/ that the poem is true in spite of this puzzle. He answered prayer not in the way I sought, nor in the way I had thought he ought, but in his own good way. And I could see he answered in the fashion best for me.

That, probably, is the average Christian’s sentiment. At least, I think it was mine and has been mine off and on as I’ve considered the problems of addressing God with a petition and finding that it appears that the answer has not come. And so, I find myself, at least, falling back upon the promises of God and saying, well, I do think he does

answer prayer. He, undoubtedly, has answered my prayer, but I do not at the present time understand in what way. But I feel sure that he is answering it.

Well, let’s consider the problem. And, first of all, I think we need to state the problem; what it is. And so, in our outline, Roman I, The statement of the problem. There are some things to keep in mind in stating the problem. And the first is capital A, the problem does not concern un-scriptural prayer.

We’re not asking the question, is there unanswered prayer in connection with un-scriptural prayer. God has not promised to answer requests that involve things contrary to his word. Now, if we were to ask ourselves, what do we mean by this, I think we would say, well, from the Godward side, or objectively, it should be obvious that God will not answer prayer that is contrary to his decretive will.

Now, remember, by decretive will we mean his will by which he has determined everything that is going to come to pass. And so if he has determined everything that is going to come to pass, then it should be obvious to us that he is not going to answer a prayer that is contrary to his decretive will.

And so if you or I should pray something that is contrary to his decretive will, it is not going to be answered. That is, God is not going to do what you have asked him to do. Now, he will answer it as we shall see, but he will not answer it in the sense that he will do it. He is not going to change his mind about his eternal counsel.

Now, in the 1 John, chapter 5 in verse 14, we have a text, which bears on this topic, a text with which we are all familiar and probably you could cite it, many of you, without turning to it. 1 John 5:14, one of the great passages on prayer. My text has, “And this is the confidence which we have before him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he hears us.”

Now, I think when it says that he hears us, the implication is that he hears us and does what we ask, in this case. But notice that little limitation, “If we ask any thing according to his will, he hears us.” So from the Godward side, or objectively, it should be

obvious that God is not going to answer prayer that is contrary to his decretive will.

Now, from the manward side, it should also be obvious that it is wrong to expect God to answer prayer that arises from a disobedient heart. For example, the Bible states that prayers are hindered by various types of sin. And I want to look at a few passages. You will notice each one of these specifies some type of human sin, and it is stated in them that God does not answer prayers that arise out of disobedient hearts. We’ll talk in a moment about why that is so.

But, let’s turn to Psalm 68 in verse 18, Psalm 68 in verse 18 -- Did I say 68? 66, verse 18, 66, verse 18. (I will also confess that tonight there is no flies on me because there is one fly, right up here. [Laughter] Psalm 66 in verse 18. And I want to be careful how I open my mouth, too.)

Psalm 66 in verse 18, we read. “If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear.” “If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear.”

Isaiah chapter 59, verses 1 and 2, Isaiah 59, verses 1 and 2, the prophet writes, “Behold, the LORD's hand is not so short, that it cannot save; neither is his ear so dull, that it cannot hear: ‘But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, so that he does not hear.’”

And so, here, we have Isaiah stating that our iniquities separate us from God. Our sins cause his face to be hidden from us so that he does not hear. So, iniquity. The prayer that arises from the iniquitous heart, God does not hear.

James chapter 1, verses 6, 7 and 8, turn there for a moment. James 1, verses 6, 7, and 8. James writes, (Now, while you’re finding the 6th verse, I will read the 5th verse.) “But, if any one of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously, and without reproach; and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, without any doubting. For the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive any thing from the Lord. Being a double-minded man; unstable in all his ways.”

So, here, the writer of this little epistle says that, “Let him ask in faith without any doubting.” And that such a man is, as he is describing, is a double-minded man, and, consequently, that man cannot expect to receive the petitions that he asks of God. We could call that an attitude of instability. That is a form of sin.

Now, in the 4th chapter, we read in verse 3, “You ask, and you do not receive because you ask with wrong motive, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.” And there, a form of selfishness is said to be the reason why one does not receive. Faithlessness was referred also -- was referred to, too, in chapter 1, verses 6 through 8. That also is a form of sin. As a matter of fact, it is the root of all sin. For the root of all sin is unbelief.

The Bible also states that lethargy, or disobedience, is the cause for unanswered prayer. Turn back to the Book of Joshua. Joshua, chapter 7, verses 10 through 12. Joshua 7, verses 10 through 12. This is the story of how Israel was defeated at Ai. And in verse 1, Joshua writes,

“But the sons of Israel acted unfaithfully in regard to the things under the ban: for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the things under the ban, therefore the anger of the LORD burned against the sons of Israel.” Now, in the 7th verse we read, and Joshua said, “Alas, O Lord GOD, why didst Thou ever bring this people over the Jordan, only to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? If only we had been willing to dwell beyond the Jordan!

"O Lord, what can I say since Israel has turned their back before their enemies?

"For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it, and they will surround us and cut off our name from the earth. And what will Thou do for Thy great name?"

(Now, notice, Joshua is praying, and he’s down on his face praying to God.) And the LORD said to Joshua, “Rise up! Why is it that you have fallen on your face?

“Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. And they have even taken some of the things under the ban and have stolen and deceived. Moreover, they have also put them among their own things.”

Now, the thing that I want you to notice here is that God tells Joshua, in effect, don’t ask me about what I’m going to do because the thing you need to do is to get up off of your face and do what has to be done before I answer your prayers.

So then, from the standpoint of man, God does not answer the prayer that arises from the heart that is out of fellowship with him. Now, I do not mean by this, of course, that God does not hear that prayer. It is obvious he does hear every prayer. But he does not answer them.

We must never, I think, think that our prayers are levers by which we can move God to do things that we want him to do, as if this is a kind of way for us to get our own will. Now, that is not really the proper approach to prayer.

Charles Blanchard has written a little book on prayer, called: *Getting Things from God*. And I’m not going to criticize in any way the contents of that book. It’s been so long since I looked at it, I don’t even know what’s in it. But I don’t like that title, *Getting Things from God*, because it suggests that prayer -- it is a book on prayer -- is a kind of lever by which we use God for our personal profit, and prayer is never designed scripturally to be that.

We have often heard of mothers who prayed for the salvation of their sons. They have thought that, perhaps, it would be a wonderful thing for their son to be saved, in order to be delivered from whatever may be the particular peril that mother feels son is in. It may keep her from some disgrace. It may make a nice man out of him. It may deliver him from the drug culture in which he’s -- of which he seems to be a part. So mother prays that the son might be delivered from drugs. But if God should say, yes, I will deliver him, and I will send him as a missionary to the jungles of South America,

some mothers throw up their hands immediately and say, oh, no, I’m not praying that. I’m just praying that he be delivered from this difficulty in which he is in now. And often our prayers do assume a kind of selfish tone to them. It is that kind of prayer that God does not desire.

Some years ago in Dallas, in fact, it’s about twenty now, I was preaching in a church here called The Independent Presbyterian Church. And a young lady in the church had been converted just a year or so before she began to attend. And since I played golf a lot at the time and her husband played golf, she thought that it would be a wonderful thing if I could get together with her husband so that in some way I might be the means of leading him to the Lord.

Well, she managed to get him to church, and we met. And we played golf. And through the preaching, not through the golf play, he did find Jesus Christ as his Savior. And she was really overjoyed over that. But almost immediately, instead of being the normal kind of Christian who gets saved and then just becomes a kind of person who attends church on Sunday, he suddenly became a Christian who was just totally all out for the Lord. He spent all of his time studying the Bible. He began to attend every Bible class possible. He got into difficulty at his office because he witnessed to everybody that he came in contact with. But he did, of course, what many young Christians do, and he got himself fired from one job. He’s a very successful businessman now in Memphis, Tennessee. But, nevertheless, he went through this pattern that a person often goes through. He was a little unwise, but he was just totally committed to the Lord, and to this present day he is totally committed to the Lord. He’s been the elder of the leading evangelical church in the city of Memphis. He has been a moderator of the board of elders. He’s been outstanding in Christian work all over the city, and he still is a traveling man and, wherever he goes, he is constantly witnessing concerning Jesus Christ.

But a few weeks after he was converted, his wife came and said to me that she was very disturbed over him, because he had been converted but now he wanted to be

totally all out for the Lord. And she said, “I’m just not prepared for what has happened to him.” [Laughter] Well, the Lord answered her prayer, of course, and she is just totally happy with it now. But at that time, she was not too happy about it.

So often we come to the Lord in our prayers, and we pray like someone has phrased a prayer: “Lord, bless me and my wife, my son, Tom and his wife, us four, no more. Amen.” [Laughter] So our prayers are totally selfish.

Now then, our problem then does not concern unscriptural prayer. We’re not asking the question, “Does God answer prayer that is contrary to his decretive will?” No, he does not answer prayer contrary to his decretive will. We aren’t asking, “Does God answer prayer that is unscriptural” in the sense that it arises from men whose hearts are not right with him. No, God does not answer that kind of prayer, of course.

Our problem concerns scriptural prayer, capital B. Our problem concerns the kind of prayer that seems to meet all of the conditions that are set forth in the word of God. It’s this type of prayer that poses a problem.

Now, what kind of prayer is prayer that is scriptural prayer? Well, from the Godward standpoint, from the objective standpoint, it is prayer that is in his will as we read in 1 John 5:14. It must be prayer in his will. Now, we’ll say a little bit about that in a moment, too.

And, second, it is prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Of course, if it is in his will, it obviously is in his name. But I spell that out, because a great deal of emphasis is laid upon that in Scripture. Now, that means that we come to him in and under the authority of Jesus Christ. We come “in Him.” We come recognizing that we do not have anything with which we may commend ourselves to God. We come by virtue of the Son, our access is “in Him.” And so we always pray in his name.

By the way, as I said some weeks ago, a person may pray in the name of the Son without mentioning that little formula. And, on the other hand, a person may mention the formula a number of times in his prayer but not really be praying “in His Name.”

So when we say to pray “in His Name,” we do not mean that this is just a little formula that we attach to all of our requests. We mean that we really do come in the sense of being “in Him,” of having our acceptance only “in Him,” and being under his authority. We are dependent upon Him.

And, thirdly, prayer is in the Holy Spirit. Now, Jude makes special reference to that in the 20th verse of his little epistle. He speaks about praying in the Holy Spirit. I think that that means practically, very much what it means to pray “In the name of Christ.” Perhaps the reference is designed to emphasize the fact that our petition has been a petition that has been instigated by the Holy Spirit. That is, our petition is one that he has suggested to us. I do feel that all of our prayers should be prayers suggested by God, because it is those prayers that are answered.

So from the Godward standpoint, to pray in the will of God is to pray -- that is, to pray acceptably, is to pray in his will, it is to pray in his name, it is to pray in his Spirit, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit...

From the manward side, for a prayer to be scriptural, there are a number of things that are set forth in the word of God, but, essentially, they all boil down to the precise opposite of sin. Faith. And so men are to pray believing.

In Mark chapter 11, verses 22 through 24. I think we can, perhaps, read that one... Mark 11:22-24. This is a passage that stresses the fact that our prayer should be prayer in faith. Jesus says, Mark 11:22, “Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it shall be granted him.

“Therefore, I say to you, (Mark 11:24) all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they shall be granted you.”

Now, there are other types of things, which are outgrowths of this. For example, we are told that the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. So that, of

course, we should pray fervently, but I think a man who does pray believingly does pray fervently.

So from the divine standpoint, the Godward, objective side, scriptural prayer is prayer in his will, in his name, in his Spirit. From the human standpoint, prayer that is acceptable to God is prayer that arises out of a faithful, believing heart. It will be fervent, of course.

Now, secondly then, let’s come to the solution to our problem, for I have tried to show you up to this point that our problem concerns scriptural prayer. It is the scriptural prayer that seems to be unanswered that is our problem.

So Roman II, the solution of the problem. And before we look at capital A, let me suggest one or two points here. We should notice, I think, that while objections from the attributes and the decrees were based on unsanctified reason; that is, certain thoughts of our reasoning processes caused us to have difficulty with the problem of prayer. We thought, remember, in connection with the attributes if God is really all-powerful, what’s the point of praying? He’s going to bring to pass what he’s going to bring to pass, so our prayers are not going to affect the final conclusion of things in any way, so why pray. Now, that was an argument that arose out of human reason, and we sought to answer that.

Then, we dealt with the question of prayer and the decrees. Well, I really sort of put them all together. But, the point is, that those objections arose out of the fact that certain things are stated in Scripture. And as we logically consider them, it seems that prayer does not have any place in the divine program.

Now, when we talk about the problem of unanswered prayer, we are not talking about things that are founded on human reason. We are talking about things that are founded on human experience. Because, you see, what we really wrestle with here is we have God’s word that he answers our prayers. But we do not seem to have any answer.

In other words, our experience, as we look about us, does not seem to provide us with any indication that our prayers are being answered.

So we are now considering an objection that is based upon experience or feeling. His word has promised us answers, and we are disappointed because there does not seem to have been any divine interposition in our life at all. Therefore, we conclude one of two things: God was unrighteous in not answering. He said he was going to answer, but he didn’t answer me. He may answer Mr. McCray, but he does not answer me.

Or, on the other hand, God’s will was contrary to the request. I prayed something that was not in his will, consequently, my prayer was unwarranted, uncalled for. And so, why pray? Again. There are three ways we are liable to error in regard to unanswered prayer. Remembering these, I think, will help us to solve most of our problems. Capital A, we may err in the manner of the prayer.

Prayer has its boundaries within the divine will, due to the sovereignty of the Creator and the dependence of the creature. In other words, we have on the one hand, the sovereignty of God, and we have on the other hand the dependence of the creature. And prayer has its boundaries within these two things.

Therefore, filial submission in the Spirit is an essential to prayer. It is true, we recognize that God is sovereign. But at the same time when we come to God, we must recognize that we are dependent creatures of this great creator.

Now, if we do not have filial submission, then what are we doing? Well, we are not praying. Someone has said, if there is no filial submission, it ceases to be prayer and degenerates into a wild foray upon the divine prerogatives. We are, in a sense, moving in, in God’s property, and we are demanding that he do certain things if we do not come with a sense of submission. In other words, our prayer has become dictation. It is not supplication at all.

So we may err in the way in which we come to God. We may come dictating to God what he must do. That kind of prayer is as presumptuous as Cain’s approach to God

with his offering that was bloodless. Only this is the Christian who approaches in much the same unscriptural manner. And just as God refused to respond to the offering of Cain, so he will refuse to respond to the request of the man who comes dictating to him. So, let’s remember, God is sovereign, and we are creatures. And our attitude is dependence, total dependence. His is total sovereignty.

Well, that is one reason why we have prayed a prayer that we may even know is scriptural. We may say, “O God, give me this day my daily bread.” But in praying a scriptural petition, we may pray it in such a way that we have caused God to refuse that request. So our prayers may be as presumptuous as Cain’s approach to God. They may be as selfish and impertinent as the request that a person might make to his own earthly father.

Second, we may err in the matter of the prayer, the content of the prayer. Men often assume that their petitions are right. And if God does not answer their petitions, then God is either unjust or unable to answer. But we have not sufficiently considered our problem if we feel that every prayer that we offer to God is a just, righteous petition. I think we fail to remember that there are at least two classes of petitions.

There are petitions that are clearly within his will. For example, the one I just quoted, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Now, that is a petition which is found in the Lord’s -- so-called Lord’s Prayer. It surely is said in the spirit of the whole of the Bible and a Christian can expect his heavenly Father to meet all of his needs.

And, consequently, when we pray, “O Father, give me this day my daily bread,” we are praying something that is imminently scriptural. And if our petition depended only upon that, that petition would surely be answered. That is a petition clearly within his will.

If, for example, we were praying to God as Paul prayed to God in Ephesians 1, and we prayed to him that the God -- I’m reading Verse 17 of Ephesians 1) “That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and

of revelation in the knowledge of Him.” And we should get down upon our knees and we should pray, “O God, give me a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him.” Well, we would know that that was a scriptural petition. So we are not erring in the matter of our request when we pray a scriptural petition.

By the way, I know it has always helped me in my prayer life, when I get down upon my knees, to pay a great deal of attention to the prayers of the Bible. It should be obvious that the prayers of the Bible are given, not only to tell us what men prayed but to guide us in our own prayers. And, for example, to take Paul’s many prayers which are recorded for us. It seems to me that a young Christian should make it one of his practices as a young Christian to pray the petitions, praying them in the spirit, in the will of God, in the name of Christ, should make it a practice to pray those petitions for himself. Because, at least you will know you are praying a scriptural prayer.

And I don’t think there are any of Paul’s prayers that I have not prayed for myself. I know what you’re thinking. Well, the Lord surely hasn’t answered a lot of them for you [Laughter] as far as I can tell. Well, that may be true so far as your evaluation is concerned. And I think, in my case, there are some of those things that I’m still looking for the Holy Spirit to do in my life, too. But many of them, he has brought into my life in measure. So I think it’s one of the most practical things that we can do to pray biblical prayers.

Now, we may err, however, in the second type of petition. Those are petitions that are doubtfully within his will. Now, that’s the only way I have of putting that. I, perhaps, will try to express to you what I’m talking about. What I’m saying is that if we pray things that we know are in Scripture, we have no question but that they are scriptural prayers. But often, we assume that our prayers are just; when they are not necessarily just. In other words, we do not antecedently, before we pray, know that they are in the will of God, these petitions that we ask of God.

For example, we have a dear friend who is very ill. And we may get down upon our knees and say, “O God, raise this person up. Heal him.” And he dies. Now, we’re inclined to think that, well now, God did not answer our prayer because we have presumed that that was a just, righteous petition for us to make. But it may not have, necessarily, been a petition within the will of God.

So we may err in the matter of our prayers. Petitions clearly within his will, we may expect God to answer if we are led to pray them. Petitions that are doubtfully within his will, we must not be so certain about them. Some petitions, then, that we pray God may be compelled to refuse. And he may be compelled to refuse to answer them even though they may be based upon his perfections, upon his attributes. It may not be the time.

We may say, for example, “O God, you are just. Why do you allow such injustice? Remove all of the injustice?” Well, that is a petition based upon a Scriptural truth; that God is just. But, nevertheless, it does not seem to have been a Scriptural prayer to this point. It is not in accordance with his will.

In other words, what I’m saying to you as a Christian and what I’m saying to myself as a Christian is we should allow for a large margin of error in what we think is the will of God. For we are limited by ignorance, we are warped by prejudices, we are seduced by our passions, and it’s not surprising that we, whose lives often seem to be one huge blunder, (that’s kind of the way I feel about my life often) -- shall we whose lives are, it often seems one huge blunder, intrude within the supernatural and interpret inerrantly the holy light of the will of God? No, we make mistakes.

And so when we pray and our prayers are not answered even though we have prayed a prayer that we think is based upon his perfections, it may not necessarily have been his will to answer that prayer. So our error then, the reason that our prayers are not answered, may be not only in the manner of our prayer, but in the matter of our pray.

And, third, our error may consist in our response to the answers that God gives. Human judgment is most likely to err here because we have to interpret God’s providence. We pray, and then we look about us and we look and we say, “O, God has not answered my prayer.” But it may be that we have misinterpreted God’s providence in our lives.

Now, these are some things that we must remember: God’s providence, his decretive will -- I’m not equating the two. They are different. God’s providence or his decretive will are too vast and complicated for us to think that we could ever understand all that is involved in them.

Someone has written, “Consider the vast numbers of petitioners whose personal histories are so many separate threads to be woven into the web of his general providence; each having its own position in the loom and matching with its own shade every other color necessary to fill out the requirements of the pattern.”

In other words, when we are praying and we ask God for something and we look about us and it does not seem to our experience that that has come to pass, let’s remember that God’s providence is so vast that we cannot expect to understand all that he is doing.

And if, in addition to that, you remember that our lives have to be interwoven into the lives of all the people who have ever lived up to this point and have to be fused into the lives of all of those who are still to come; and God has worked out one gigantic program involving all of the details of all of these countless millions of lives, well, be careful in interpreting the answer that God surely gives to your scriptural prayer prayed in a scriptural manner because you cannot understand all that God is doing.

His promise says, all these countless units make their single record under a sleepless providence, which watches over them with individual care. Yet, with a comprehensive wisdom must they be swept into the circle of one stupendous plan in which the history of all must embrace the story of each. And in this vast interblending of

destinies, God shall read only that his one eternal undivided thought. Now then, so when the answer comes, be careful how you respond.

Second, God may postpone the answer in order to discipline you. In other words, it may well be that God, since we are here, we who are Christians are here for discipline, it may well be that he does not answer our prayer at this time because he wishes us to engage in a little bit of disciplinary activity directed by him. After all, our lives are ordered here to fit the life to come. If you were not here for a purpose, why would God have you here? He would take you immediately to be with him. That is, undoubtedly, why some are converted and die early in life.

Robert Murray McCheyne, always think of him, that great Scotsman, tremendous servant of God, died (I’ve forgotten whether he was 29 or 31). But he was a very, very young man; very useful to the Lord, and it was a stunning blow to Scotland. But yet God took him. He had a purpose for him. He leaves the rest of us here for some purpose.

I have a friend who says, “As long as you’re alive, everything’s optimistic because God has some purpose for you.” Well, that is true. And he is disciplining us, and, consequently, if he does not give us immediately the answer to our petition, we have good to reason to think it might be for disciplinary purposes. He wants to develop patience, for one thing, confidence in him.

Third, God may deny our prayers because his denial may be the means of securing the answer that we really wished in the future but which we were too ignorant to understand. In other words, the benefit that we may desire is in his will but it may come in God’s own way and in God’s own time.

I read a true story of a woman, who was a foreigner, who had come to this country to visit some friends. And she spent about a month in this country and she then went to New York City thinking she could surely get a place on a certain boat, which would take her back to Europe. And when she arrived in New York City, she was horrified to discover that every single place in that ship had been taken, and it was

necessary for her to wait another two weeks in order to get a boat back. She was a Christian woman, and she had prayed that she might be restored quickly to her home in order to see her family and children. And if she had analyzed her circumstances, she probably would have been saying, God has not answered my prayer.

And then a few days later, she read the newspapers and discovered that the ship, which she had hoped to go to Europe on, had been sunk in the middle of the Atlantic. And now she knew why God had not answered her petition at that particular time, because there were a number in that boat who by the decretive will of God were destined to be drowned. And her destiny was not with them. And so God had to arrange it so that she was not on that boat. And she discovered that her prayer really had been answered, and she was restored to her family, but it was answered in God’s way and in God’s time.

I take *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*. And about a month or so ago I read a little clipping. And this is what the clipping said, in effect. It was from a missionary in Liberia in Africa. He was a Southern Presbyterian missionary, apparently.

He said, “At this moment I imagine I am unique among your host of readers. Right now, the Journal is my devotional, my commentary, my newspaper, my reading entertainment, all wrapped up into one. Except for the Bible, it is the only reading material available. Reason? I am a Presbyterian U.S. Minister, serving as a missionary in Liberia, deep in the bush, and last month our bamboo house burned to the ground. Along with everything else, our entire library was destroyed. But God says, I will not leave you desolate. And he didn’t. In the very next mail, after the fire, came a large bundle with hundreds of back copies of *The Presbyterian Journal*, and in it is contained a lot of good scriptural material, the gift of a wonderful Presbyterian church in Northern Mississippi. As I write this letter, I face an empty bookcase. All, except the bottom shelf, and thereon is contained God’s provision; five neatly tied bundles of journals, (fifty-two a year) now acting as my devotional, my commentary, my newspaper, my reading

entertainment and very possibly my textbook. We have a college of evangelism here deep in the bush and all our teaching materials vanished in the fire. Presbyterian Journals might well be our textbooks for school year 1972... Reverend John Chinchin [phoenetic], Sinoe County, Liberia.”

Today, my *Journal* came for May the 24th, and there was this interesting little postscript. It’s a letter from Mrs. M. G. Johnson -- that’s not my wife, Mary Johnson [laughter] -- from Indianola, Mississippi. “May I add a postscript to the letter in the April 9th Journal from Reverend John Chinchin who wrote from the bush of Africa of his entire library by fire. He praised God for supplying the need for materials with the gift of hundreds of back issues of *The Presbyterian Journal* received in the first mail following the fire. Mr. Chinchin does not know that those packages were believed to be in use in Liberia when the notice was received that they were being held in customs for additional postage. We were extremely provoked, after having tried to follow shipping instructions implicitly, but sent additional postage immediately. Following the fire, we realized that the Lord does indeed work in mysterious ways, for had they been delivered, they would have been in the fire.” So, perhaps, this is an illustration of just what we are talking about, that God’s answers come but they don’t always come in precisely the way that we think they ought.

And, finally, the answer to our petitions may come in substance but not in the form of the request. The answer, in other words, may be a disguised one. And, usually, when the answer to such a petition comes to us in disguised form, it is ordinarily a request that brings with it -- an answer that brings with it even greater blessing than we had requested.

For example, David, remember, in 2 Samuel, chapter 7, had asked God that he might have the privilege of building a home for God. He wanted to build a temple. God refused to build him a temple -- or to allow David to build a temple for him. He said David was a man of war, and Solomon, the man of peace was going to build the temple.

But, nevertheless, he went on to give David the great Davidic covenant in which he promised to bless David to have one who would be of David’s seed sit on his throne forever, to have a realm, and to have subjects in that kingdom. And David, after receiving the revelation from God, when his request was turned down it seems, says, “And yet this was insignificant in thine eyes, O Lord, God, for Thou hast spoken also of the house of thy servant concerning the distant future. And this is the custom of man, O Lord God?”

In other words, David said, you’ve answered my petition and given me requests that I have not even dreamed of asking. He had done exceeding, abundantly, above all that David had asked.

Solomon prayed that God would give him wisdom. But instead of wisdom and knowledge, God gave him not only wisdom and knowledge, but gave him riches and wealth and honor such as none of the kings had before him, Scripture says. And so he not only answered Solomon’s petition, but he answered it bountifully.

On Sunday, I was preaching in Northwest Bible Church on the dying thief, and I think we find illustrated in the prayer of the dying thief just what we are speaking of here; that is, God often answers our petitions in abundant ways. As Paul said, “He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.”

Now, the dying thief, who in many ways was the first of all Christian theologians, a man who at one point in his life, as he hung upon that cross, knew more than Peter, the first of the apostles, and actually had seen more good theology than John, who later became the Seer of Patmos. Remember, that the dying thief prayed, “Jesus, remember me when Thou comest in Thy kingdom.”

Now, that’s a magnificent request. I wish I had time to expound it. But I want you to notice that Jesus’ answer topped each of the parts of the request of the dying thief. He said, “Jesus, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.”

The Lord answered, “Today, thou shalt be with me.”

In other words, not only remembered, but actually in the presence of the Lord, he prayed, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He received this remarkable answer. “Today,” not then only but today, “you shall be with me in paradise.” He prayed, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.” In other words, when the far off day of the Messianic kingdom comes and you return in your kingdom, allow me to be there. He said, in answer to him, “Today, you shall be with me in paradise.”

Now, it is wonderful to be in the kingdom, and of course, all who are in Paradise with him shall be in his kingdom, ultimately. But a man might be in the kingdom and not necessarily have this experience. And so, again, he topped his request by saying, not only will I remember you when I am come in my kingdom but in the meantime you’re going to enjoy my presence in Paradise.

Now, I’m sure that the dying thief would not have wanted to the say to the Lord, now Lord, I did not ask you all of these things, I’d just be satisfied with those three requests that I made. Just remember me, let me be with you when you come in your kingdom. No, God topped every one of them and that is often the way he answers our petitions. And so when we see a set of circumstances which follows our petitioning and it is far greater than we have ever imagined, well, do not think God has not answered your prayer. He has.

B. M. Palmer, who was one of the great Southern preachers of a couple of generations ago, concluded the discussion of unanswered prayer by this paragraph. And, I’m going to conclude with it tonight.

“These specifications disclose the difficulty of interpreting divine providence, especially, when we are in the swell of the current. Until we shall have power to look through the entire scheme, in all of its adaptations, we are incompetent to assume the failure of any prayer offered in the faith of God’s goodness and power. The reasoning

then, that prayer is sometimes unanswered, from occasional disappointment in tracing the answer to prayer falls to the ground as inconsequent.”

Next Tuesday night, I want to consider some samples of unanswered prayers, and we shall deal with the practical side of the problem. Let’s bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the privilege of study of the theology of prayer. Lord, the privilege of approaching the throne of grace, as a suppliant is so magnificent that it is difficult for us to comprehend. And so we pray that as we consider what lies before us as possibility, at least to our human sight, may it so work in our hearts that our prayer lives may be deepened. Enable us, Lord, to come to Thee as the sovereign God of the universe.

And enable us also to come in humble dependence upon Thee, not seeking to dictate to Thee, not seeking to use the promises of God as a lever for personal pleasure, but seeking to be an instrumentality in the accomplishment of Thy perfect will. And, Father, if it should be within Thy decretive will that we should be used to accomplish Thy purposes, through prayer, bring it to pass in our lives to Thy glory. We shall express to Thee, as we do now, our gratitude and praise that Thou has deigned to stoop and use wicked, sinful, disobedient, failing men. Go with us as we part.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.