

# Where Are You God?

The Rev. Dr. Robert  
L. Griffin

Psalm 22:1-11; 40:1-5

**Sermon Series:**

**Pray Daily: Igniting  
Our Passion for God**

*...when we look  
at the entirety  
of Psalm 22, we  
see that there is  
a clear rhythm  
between  
anguish and  
hope, desola-  
tion and  
deliverance.*

*I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.*

- Psalm 40:1-5

For the last several weeks, we have been studying The Lord's Prayer and the specific petitions contained within those famous words. Now, for the remainder of the summer, we're going to deal with some particular questions about prayer, beginning this week with a great theological conundrum, "What do I do with unanswered prayers?". I know that many of us would prefer that our prayers NOT be unanswered. We would like to echo the words of the psalmist that I just read. We would LIKE to know that God both hears and answers. Many years ago, noted Christian author F.B. Meyer was asked to speak to some first-class cruise passengers on a transatlantic voyage. His topic was Answered Prayer. An agnostic chose to attend the presentation just to hear "what the babbler had to say." He happened to have two oranges in his pocket, and on his way to the presentation, just for fun, he pulled them out of his pocket and placed them in the hands of an elderly woman who was sleeping in a deck chair. After

the presentation, he came back and happened to see the woman eating the fruit. Just for fun he asked her if she liked it, and she remarked that God had been very good to her. "God?" the agnostic asked. "Yes," she said, "I have been seasick for days and I must have fallen asleep while I was praying to God for someone to send me an orange. When I awoke I found that He had sent me not one, but two. Praise God!"

We love to hear those stories, but we know that answered prayers are only PART of life's reality. Perhaps most of us here today have struggled or are struggling with prayers that seemingly go unanswered, unheeded, unheard. We cry out, but the response is silent—deafeningly silent! If that is you, rest assured, you are not alone. This message is for you.

Our text today, from Psalm 22, includes one of the most agonizing prayers in all of Scripture. Let us listen for God's Word to us.

"<sup>1</sup>My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? <sup>2</sup>O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. <sup>3</sup>Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. <sup>4</sup>In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. <sup>5</sup>To you they cried, and were saved; in you they

***Paul prayed repeatedly for God to remove what he called a “thorn in the flesh” and, yet, God offered no deliverance.***

***I believe God not only ALLOWS our emotional outbursts, but God cherishes them as an example of honesty.***

trusted, and were not put to shame. <sup>6</sup>But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. <sup>7</sup>All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; <sup>8</sup>Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver let him rescue the one in whom he delights! <sup>9</sup>Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. <sup>10</sup>On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. <sup>11</sup>Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.”

Many of you may recognize the opening verse from Psalm 22 as the one cried by Jesus as he hung on the cross. Mark 15:34 says that Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi lema sabachthani”—my God, my God, WHY have you forsaken me? You can just hear the anguish in those words. The writers left the words in the original Aramaic—perhaps just for that purpose. To capture the anguish of the moment. The words of Psalm 22:1 are gripping and powerful.

We know, however, that it was common practice to recite just the opening verse of a Psalm as a way of making reference to the entire text. For example, if I would say the phrase, “O Say Can You See” you would know, instantly, that I was referring to the Star Spangled Banner. And, when we look at the entirety of Psalm 22, we see that there is a clear rhythm between anguish and hope, desolation and deliverance. Scholars have long

proposed that Jesus knew that God would ultimately deliver him. But that, in no way, diminished the anguish of the moment. We, too, know that there is a sense of ultimate deliverance—of eternal peace and rest—but many of us live in the midst of anguish, fear, distress and suffering. The apostle Paul prayed repeatedly for God to remove what he called a “thorn in the flesh” and, yet, God offered no deliverance. Perhaps you, too, are praying for some relief from the trials of life and are seeing no hope. Maybe you have totally given up on praying—after experiencing repeated disappointment. Maybe you have echoed those words—my God, WHY have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from me?

I know many of you have heard it said that there are NO unanswered prayers—that God simply says “yes,” “no,” or “not now.” But I think there is a little more to it than that. One of the beautiful things about this Psalm is that it shows us the raw emotion of life. I think sometimes we’re a bit afraid to be THAT honest with God. I love what it says in Mark, that Jesus cried with a loud voice. This was not something muttered under his breath. Jesus shouted out his emotional cry. And I think that sometimes we just need to SHOUT OUT our frustration to God. I believe God not only ALLOWS our emotional outbursts, but God cherishes them as an example of honesty. A colleague of mine, Mark Roberts, has written a great book entitled *No Holds Barred – Wrestling with God in Prayer*,

***If you feel as if your prayers are unanswered, ask yourself if you're REALLY being honest. Secondly, ask yourself if what you're praying for is in accordance with God's WILL.***

***I do believe that God cares about our needs and our lives, but I don't believe God cares equally about EVERYTHING in our lives. There are matters of divine concern and matters of human concern—and sometimes we mistake the latter for the former.***

which we have in the bookstore. In this book, he talks about how the Psalms, in particular, invite us to be brazenly honest with God. And being honest sometimes is the first step in getting our prayers answered. Our capacity for self-deception is almost limitless. Friends, God is not in the business of granting the petitions to those who aren't being honest not only with God but especially with themselves!

If you feel as if your prayers are unanswered, ask yourself if you're REALLY being honest. Secondly, ask yourself if what you're praying for is in accordance with God's WILL. Now, this gets us into a very LONG discussion about discerning God's will. Unfortunately, that needs to wait for a future time and date. But let me suggest this simple formula for discerning God's will for your life. I believe that God's will for us is that we make prayerful, faith-centered decisions in every aspect of our lives. I do NOT believe that God has one, singular pre-ordained path for each of our lives. God entrusts us with free will and a mind to use, but there are guiding principles that set the parameters of God's will for our lives. For example, God desires that parents nurture and care for their children. If you are praying for a job that will have you constantly on the road and away from your family, it could be that prayer is not in accordance with God's will. God may not have a SPECIFIC job in mind for you, but God would want you to work in a vocation that

allows you to care for your family—not just provide for them. God's will for us is to make FAITHFUL decisions. Are the things you are praying for in accordance with God's will?

My third (but not final) question is this: "Is what you're praying for something God cares about?" Now, don't misunderstand me. I do believe that God cares about our needs and our lives, but I don't believe God cares equally about EVERYTHING in our lives. There are matters of divine concern and matters of human concern—and sometimes we mistake the latter for the former. Yes, I know it's tempting to pray for a parking space at Tyson's on the day after Thanksgiving, but if we are struggling with genocide in Darfur, don't expect a miracle at Macy's. Be honest, seeks God's will, and pray for what matters to God.

Martin Luther once said, "Pray as if everything depends on God and work as if everything depends on you." Many of God's answers to our prayers are going to be contingent upon what WE do to facilitate the process. Many of us are familiar with the man who passed on two rowboats who offered to rescue him from the rising flood waters, saying that the Lord would provide. He did the same with the helicopter that tried to rescue him from the roof. Finally, the man drowned, and when he got to the pearly gates, he asked God why God let him drown, and God simply responded that He had sent two boats and a helicopter, what more did you expect? God loves us

***Many of God's answers to our prayers are going to be contingent upon what WE do to facilitate the process.***

***God loves us too much to do FOR US what we ought to do for ourselves.***

too much to do FOR US what we ought to do for ourselves. It's the same principle that many of us have exercised with our children. If your prayers seem to be unanswered, are you doing your part of the equation?

Finally, I would like to suggest that in many, perhaps most circumstances, the answers to prayer are ultimately internal not external. I deeply believe that the REAL power of prayer is not that God changes our circumstances but that God changes US in the midst of our circumstances. Just a few weeks ago, you heard Maria Abdullah say exactly that as she talked about how she had been praying for her son and how God answered the prayer by ultimately changing her. I'm sure some of you can echo her words. Prayer is about putting ourselves in a place where God can work in our lives. One of the things that God really DOES CARE about is that we grow in our faith and in our life so that we might be more like Jesus.

Prayers that WE might think are going unanswered are quite often vehicles through which God is really trying to work to change US. Some of you may remember that slogan which said, "Be patient. God isn't through with me yet." The same goes for our prayers. Be patient. God isn't through with YOU yet. And the good news is that God doesn't give up. God NEVER gives up on you or me! Thanks be to God. Amen.

***I deeply believe that the REAL power of prayer is not that God changes our circumstances but that God changes US in the midst of our circumstances.***

