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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Systematic Theology

TRANSCRIPT

“The Problem of Unanswered Prayer, part II”

[Prayer] Father we are grateful to Thee for the opportunity to study the Scriptures again. We thank Thee for the ministry, which has come to us in the Holy Spirit concerning our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And may our time together contribute to our learning and may it be used by the spirit to stir us to more obedience in our Christian life. We commit the hour to Thee and look to Thee for Thy blessing upon us.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

[Message] This is the next to the last in our series of studies on prayer, the theology of prayer. And the subject is “Is the Answer No a Divine Cop-out? or the Problem of Unanswered Prayer.” Now this is the second of the two in this series, “The Problem of Unanswered Prayer.” And first a few words of introduction and I have the outline which we will be continuing tonight, “The Problem of Unanswered Prayer.”

And first I want to say a few words by way of introduction. We have sought to analyze the problem of prayer and the attributes in the earlier messages in the series, trying to resolve the attribute of infinity with the New Testament and the Old Testament exhortations to prayer, the attribute of love, the attribute of omniscience, the attribute of immutability. Each of these attributes do pose problems when we consider the matter of prayer. For example, if God is of an infinite being, is it possible that he should desire to

be concerned with the little things of our daily life? If he is a God of love, does he not already do for us what is best for us without our requesting it? If he is an omniscient God, is it not also true that he knows all of the needs that we have long before we try to bring them to his attention, so why should we pray? And if he is an immutable God, how can we expect to by our prayers change him?

So the attributes of God pose problems for us when we consider the question “Should we pray?” Not only do the attributes pose problems for us, but the decrees of God pose problems. For example, the decree which covers God’s foreordination of everything, that takes place. If everything is decreed, and everything is decreed according to the New Testament teaching, then what effect can prayer possibly have?

We also considered the related problems of natural law and man’s freedom. These problems, as I mentioned last time, arise out of questions that are based upon unsanctified human reason, but these are not the only problems that we have in connection with prayer. In the first of our present series last Tuesday night, we sought to handle the question of unanswered prayer, which is also a problem for us. Now that is a problem that arises not so much out of unsanctified human reason as it does out of human experience and feeling. To state it as I stated it last week, it was this, the word has promised us answers but they do not seem to have come to us. Thus, God is either unrighteous in not answering the prayers that he has promised to answer or God’s will was contrary to the request, and he did not answer it for that reason in which case our prayers seem unwarranted and uncalled for.

Now we suggested that there were three ways by which we were liable to error in prayer and if we kept these things in mind we should not be troubled too much by these questions. We said that we were liable to error in the manner of our prayer. We may come to God not in submission as we should come, but rather come to him dictating what he should do. In that case, what we are saying with our mouths or in our hearts is

not supplication, prayer, it is dictation and consequently it is not surprising that God does not answer such a prayer.

Then we said that we could err in the matter of our prayer; that is its content. We pointed out that there were two classes of petitions. There are those that are clearly within the will of God. Now we should expect an answer for those petitions. But often we confuse what is doubtfully within his will with what is clearly within his will. And we assume that because we have prayed it, analyzing the situation that surely our request is within his will. And we tried to point out that that is not necessarily so, and thus many of the apparent non-answers that we get are not failures on the part of God, but are failures on our part in that we have not interpreted his will correctly.

And finally I suggested that we may err in the response to his answers that he gives us. Our judgment is most likely to err here, I pointed out. And I do think that most Christians when they claim that God has not answered their prayer, this is where they have erred. They have not properly interpreted the answer that he has given. His decretive will -- I suggested -- is too vast for us to hope to understand and we should leave the question of the answer to the prayer with God if it involves something like that.

Furthermore I tried to point out that post-ponement may be helpful in disciplining of us. And consequently, God does not answer our prayers at the time that we wish them often, in order that we ourselves may be benefited by that delay of the answer. And further, I tried to point out and illustrate that even a denial of a request may be the means of securing the thing that we wish, for we do not really sometimes understand what we are praying and what may be involved in the obtaining of the request.

And finally, I suggested the answer may come in substance, although not in the form requested. And here again we are inclined to misinterpret the answer that God gives us. And I illustrated that one by the petition that the dying thief gave when he hung upon the cross when he said, "Jesus remember me when Thou comest in thy kingdom." And our Lord answered his request by topping it in each of its parts. And though his

prayer was answered in substance it was not answered in the precise form in which he had requested it. As a matter of fact, the answer was far better than he could ever have imagined.

Now I do hope one thing we do not err in as a result of our study of prayer. I do hope that the series on these problems -- and by the way I have not considered a number of problems -- such as defective ideas of prayer itself which modern psychology and modern contemporary theology have suggested such as, for example, prayer is simply a projection, a kind of wish that we wish God would answer our prayer but he does not and so on. But I do hope that this has not meant that you are discouraged from praying. It would seem to me that if we could possibly answer these questions that concern us, it should lead us to pray more and so if the result of our studies together is not a deeper and more consistent prayer life, I think we shall have failed even though we understand all that we may understand about the theology of prayer.

The church, and I mean the Christian church, the true church, exhorts people to pray. Now often they do not give Christians specific guidance. It is not the purpose of this series by the way to give guidance in prayer. We are dealing with the theology of prayer. But also the church, not only does not give specific guidance but it apparently does not follow its own instructions. And it seems to me that one of the reasons that we are weak individually and as local churches and as the church of Jesus Christ is that we do not follow our own exhortations to prayer.

There is a very cruel story about a bishop which you may have heard who resolved that he was going to practice what he had so often preached. And so, he wanted, he said, to speak to God in direct simplicity. And so one day he got up the nerve to speak to God in direct simplicity and he spoke. And a voice, so the story goes, gentle but holy, answered him, “Yes what is it?” And the bishop was found dead on the chancel steps. Now I’ve often wondered about that story. I’m sure it’s not true because I don’t know how one could have all of the details of it, but you know surprisingly we are

going to see that there is something in the word of God that is very, very close to this. And sometimes I wonder if the Lord really were to answer our prayer, possibly the most surprised people would really be we who pray.

Now then tonight we want to turn to Roman III in our outline, some samples of answered prayer. And I want to give five types of answered prayer, illustrate them, and then try to discuss the significance of them, so some samples of answered prayer. It is important -- it seems to me -- to remember that the problem of prayer finds its solution in the divine viewpoint. It helps us always in the study of the Scriptures to approach them from the divine standpoint and it surely helps us here. From this standpoint it can be said there are always answers to prayer, but the answers differ.

Now let's look at some of them that are found in the Bible and I believe that we are going to find some interesting things about them. And let's particularly notice not only the answers themselves, but notice that these answers are designed by God to promote and increase our faith. And so we are going to begin with the simplest of answers and then those that are more difficult and I think these more difficult answers to prayer, these more difficult to understand answers to prayer, are the types of answers that are designed to strengthen us in our Christian faith.

Now the first type of answered prayer is the type of prayer in which the answer is definite and obvious. This is a yes answer, definite and obvious. Little faith is demanded in response to it. For if we pray and God quickly answers our prayer in the affirmative, well we may be very pleased but our prayer has not had the opportunity of stretching us as it would have if there were other things involved in the answer. Most Christians -- it seems to me -- are more pleased with this type of answer than any other. And, as far as I can tell, they would be happy if there was only one type of answered prayer, that was definite and obvious yes answer. Now we are not really interested in strengthening our faith and stretching ourselves by waiting upon God. We want what we want and we want it now.

Well let’s turn over to Acts chapter 12, which is one of the shining examples of the definite yes answer to prayer and see what Luke has described for us here. Now this is the chapter in which Peter was arrested after James, the brother of John, had been put to death with a sword. And we read in verse 4 of Acts chapter 12, “And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him.” Now these four squads of soldiers were probably guarding him in series, that is not four at once but usually each of the squads had at least four men and so we have four squads of soldiers guarding him -- intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church of God.

Now I want you to notice here very simply Peter has been taken prisoner and four relays of soldiers in turn guard him. Four guards at a time one on either side, one at his cell door, so that four men are there to take care of this one man. Now four squads of men and the iron gate mentioned in verse 10 are no problem to prayer and the Lord. The odds were four to one, but that does not really make a great deal of difference to God. Was it not Tennyson’s *Galabad* who said, “My strength is as the strength of ten because my heart is pure.” And if that seems too priggish for the 20th Century, remember the Old Testament says one shall put a thousand to flight.

Well let’s read on. Verse 6, “And on the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison.” Sleeping -- I wonder what Peter was dreaming about. No doubt he had thought about John chapter 21, verse 18 where Jesus had told him the time was coming when someone was going to gird him and he was going to be taken away where he did not wish to go. And perhaps he was thinking, “Well this is the time that it is going to happen.” But he seemed very happy about it all. The Old Testament has a text in Psalm 34 that goes something like this, “The angel of the Lord and campeth round about that fear him.” And now Peter is going to

learn the rest of the verse, “and deliver them.” So he’s sleeping that -- it seems to me -- exhibits a great deal of dependence upon God for after all James had already been put to death and Peter is in prison.

That reminds me of the story of a father who had three little girls and they slept together in the same bed. They were small. And the father asked one of the three little girls who had just gone to bed if she had said her prayers. She said she had not. He said, “Well aren’t you afraid going to bed without saying your prayers.” She answered, “Not tonight for it’s my turn to sleep in the middle.” [Laughter]

Verse 7, “And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell: and he struck Peter’s side, and roused him, saying, ‘get up quickly.’ And his chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, ‘it has, I think, always surprised me a little bit he didn’t say something like cut out or take it on the lamb to go back two or three generations [laughter]. But omnipotence is really in no great hurry it’s true he does say get up quickly but you’ll notice he doesn’t flee out without making all of the proper preparations. “Gird yourself, put on your sandals.” That means put on your clothes and put on your shoes. Don’t hold them in your hand and run. “And he did so. And he said to him, wrap your coat around you, and follow me. And he went out, and continued to follow; and he did not know that what was being done by the angels was real but thought he was seeing a vision. And when they had past the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate.” I think there are some Christians who are always troubled about his iron gate. It’s the one thing that seems to stand between us and the deliverance that we desire and it seems to be utterly impossible for us to overcome it.

And so Peter is not only between the soldiers, he not only is in the prison but he knew himself that there was that iron gate out there too, but when God takes the apostle in hand, the iron gate is no problem either. “Which opened for them by itself.” The Greek says automatically, that is the word that is used there, is the word from which we get our English word automatically. “And they went out and went along one street; and

immediately the angel departed from him. And then when Peter came to himself,” that is when he realized that all of this was really for real. “Now I know for sure, he said that the Lord has sent forth His angel, and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting. And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose was called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.” So here they were praying at the very time that God was answering their prayer.

And when he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer and she did not say what you might expect her to say, after all they believed in prayer. They had prayed constantly. They were even praying at the moment. She didn’t say I know that’s Peter let’s go and open the door for him. But she went to the door and Peter said open, open up. She said, “Who is it?” Open up. And then it dawned upon her; it was Peter. And so she was so excited over the fact that it was Peter, she forgot to open the door. [Laughter] Now I’m sure that wasn’t a very encouraging thing for the apostle, but she raced back and she announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. Now notice unbelief, alloys, even the most golden of expressions of faith, for she had said, “It’s Peter,” in faith that it was and also she had heard his voice. And so the first thing they appeal to is rationalism. They say you are out of your mind, you’re mad. You’re crazy. It’s not reasonable that Peter should be here. Isn’t that striking? When God answers our prayers, this often is our response to them.

Now this is why we do not recognize our answers, too. We often say simply the same thing, “You are out of your mind.” That could not be the time for the answer to the prayer. And when she kept insisting, it’s Peter, it’s Peter, then they kept saying, it’s his angel. And so now we appeal to superstition. They say it is just a ghost. Well, I don’t know Rhoda, of course, it may well have been that even this scared her because we read in verse 16, “But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened they saw him, they were amazed.” And it just may be that she thought, you know, if it’s a ghost well I don’t

think I’ll be going back. [Laughter] But anyway, it’s obvious the last thing that they thought of was its God’s answer to our prayer. That seems to be the last thing that they thought about. Happily God’s answer kept on knocking at the door. And so finally they opened it. Now it seems to me that we also find illustrated here the fact that there is a time to pray and there is a time to act. And when they had finally gathered their senses together enough to respond to the evidence before them they did go and they opened that door.

That too reminds me of a story of a little girl. She had a brother and her brother loved to catch animals in traps. Now I know exactly what that means because this afternoon at about four thirty, I went in after I’d finished the work that I had been doing today. I flopped down on my bed to take a nap and about ten after five I was suddenly awakened by somebody pounding on the house right behind my head. And it has happened before and so I got up and after three or four more poundings I thought, “Well somebody is throwing a rock against the house or a large ball of mud or dirt,” and so I finally went out around the door very quietly I wanted to catch this person in the act and I did. It was a little boy about ten or eleven years of age and he was over against the house and he had a piece of rain pipe in his hand and I said, “What in the world are you doing?” He said, “I’m trying to catch a horsefly.” [Laughter]

And I said, “Catch a horsefly?” He said yes, and I was incredulous, of course, but finally he said, “Ah, there it is,” and so he reached down among the leaves and he picked it up and he stuffed it in this pipe and played with it for a little while and then walked off. I just stood there amazed. [Laughter] And furthermore, I had walked around the corner in a hurry and I looked and had stepped in a big puddle of mud myself, [laughter] so I was a little unhappy over what had happened.

Well this little boy loved to catch animals in traps and his sister didn’t like it. And so, she complained to her mother and her mother said, “Well why don’t you pray about it?” And so later on she was heard to say, “Now he’ll never catch anymore of those

harmless little animals." Her mother said, "Did you pray about it?" The little girl said, "Yes I did." Her mother said, "Well how can you know that he'll never catch anymore?" I think if she had been a theologian she might have said, "How do you know that it's the decretive will of God that he not catch anymore?" And she replied, "I smashed all his traps." [Laughter] And so, at times it pays to pray and it pays to do.

And so they prayed and then they went and they opened the door and there was Peter. Well this -- I think -- is one of the most obvious illustrations in the Bible of a prayer that was made to the Lord that Peter escaped. They were actually in the act of praying when the answer was given by God and although they did not recognize it when it came, it was a definite and obvious yes answer to their prayer and Peter was there before them.

Before we pass on you'll notice that Peter in verse 17 says, "Report these things to James and the brethren." Translating that into the twentieth century, that means write it up in a prayer letter, it may help the treasury of the local church in the city of Jerusalem. And in case you are not able to do it, get yourself a P.R. man or an agent so that you will be able to do a good job in doing it. So the saints, because they are gullible, they will listen to everything you say and they will really cough up if you make it good and interesting. And we also read in verse 17 -- now that was not in the text you understand - - "And he departed and went to another place." I think prudence is an element of courage and Peter knew that if he stayed around he might find himself in prison again. And so there are times when even an apostle finds it prudent to run and get out of danger.

Now the second type of answer is the answer denied, literally. The answer denied speaking literally. This is a no answer. Many of our prayers do have a no answer from God. Now I am not at all unhappy to have a no answer. There are many times when my prayers are answered no, I think my prayers are answered no almost more than almost anyone else. But there are many prayers that demand a no answer and it is the greatest

thing in the world that we have a Father in heaven who does not mind saying no. I’m grateful that I had an earthly father who did not hesitate to say no to me. He said it far too often in my opinion. But he said no. And he was right enough of the times so that I benefited from it. And God says no.

Now this kind of an answer demands more faith in response to it. It does not take a great deal of faith to be thankful for God because he has answered us yes. But now when we get a no answer, then more faith is required to respond to this in a way that is pleasing to God. Now I think the no that God gives us often may be related to either his decreative or his perceptive will. Or he may say no because he has already determined that something else is going to happen or he may say no because we are in such a state or our request is such that it is contrary to his perceptive will, his law. Now I think in the reading of the Bible recently, and I’m working hard and I’m going to finish Lord willing this Bible by July the first. I’m now in the Gospel of Luke in the New Testament. When I was reading through Jeremiah thinking about prayer, I noticed in the 15th chapter of the Book of Jeremiah, an amazing statement in which God said that he wouldn’t answer people’s prayers even if there were holy men standing before him.

Jeremiah chapter 15, verse 1, you needn’t try to find it because that would delay the class tonight. Verse 1, I will read it, “Then the Lord said to me even though Moses and Samuel were to stand before me,” that is stand before me in prayer, “my heart would not be with this people, send them away from my presence and let them go.” Now to show you that this is not something unusual with God I’m going to also turn to Ezekiel chapter 14, verses 14 and 20 because here I noticed the same thing as I was reading through. And in Ezekiel chapter 14, verse 14 Ezekiel writes, “Even though these three men Noah, Daniel, and Job were in its midst,” that is in Israel’s midst, “by their own righteousness they could only deliver themselves declares the Lord God.” They could not deliver Israel. Verse 20, “Even though Noah, Daniel, and Job were in its midst as I live declares the Lord God, they could not deliver either their son or their daughter, they

would deliver only themselves by their righteousness.” So there came a time in Israel’s history when because of their disobedience to God it was absolutely necessary that God just not deliver them, and so even though the holiest of men prayed the answer would still be no.

Now the Lord received no answers, too. He said Father if it be possible let this cup pass from me and nevertheless not my will, but Thine be done and the answer is no. It’s not possible. We sometimes fail to remember that Jesus Christ found it necessary to find the will of God just as you and I need to find the will of God. And so he prayed if it be possible let this cup pass from me. The answer was no. Our Lord did not ask for something out of the will of God for he carefully guarded his request by saying nevertheless, not as I will but as Thou wilt. And so as a man, he had to find through experience the will of God for himself. I think that Jesus everyday had to find the will of God for himself -- that is that day.

Now there were some things that were revealed to him regarding the future. But as a general thing he found the will of God just as you and I find the will of God. The difference between our Lord and me -- if I may use myself as an illustration -- is that when our Lord knew the will of God there was no question of his obedience. In my case, finding the will of God is only half the battle. The next half is obeying the will of God. But he had no problems with obedience. So he did receive no answers. The Apostle Paul received no answers. When he prayed that thorn in the flesh that he had might be removed, the answer was no. He prayed three times, remove the thorn. The answer is no.

Now, there are times when it is much better for the answer no to be given. To have the thorn removed was poor compared with having its presence sanctified. To have the messenger of Satan taken away was poor compared with having him transformed into a ministering spirit. Paul wanted the thorn away, whereas Jesus Christ wanted to show him how grapes may be gathered from thorns, and thus, out of the experience of the

thorn, which God refused to take away Paul learned that in weakness one may see God’s power in the life of a Christian.

Monica, the mother of Augustine, prayed that he might not go to Rome. For she said if he goes to Rome, he will surely be corrupted. Well he went to Rome, but it was there that he met Ambrose of Milano. And through Ambrose he came to know and understand facts about the gospel, which ultimately led him to faith in Christ, and probably no man since the time of the apostles to the time of Calvin and Luther so influenced the Christian church as Augustine. And it was in the no answer to a mother’s prayer that God’s will for him came to pass. So we can say true prayer, even though refused in terms, is always granted in effect, but the answer may involve a no to our specific request.

Third, the answer delayed. Now, this is a wait answer. Now, still more faith, it seems to me, is required in a wait answer, for we don’t really seem to have any answer at all. If we have a yes answer, the answer is obvious. If we have a no answer, the answer is pretty obvious. But when there is silence, wait; then that requires more faith. Now, we have an illustration for that in the passage that I wanted to read for you as Scripture reading, but forgot to tonight, 1 Kings chapter 18, verse 41 through verse 46 and it is the illustration of Elijah.

Now, in the 18th chapter of the Book of 1 Kings we have the great conflict between Elijah, the prophet of Jehovah, and Ahab, the great champion of Baal. In the one case, we have the man who is the upholder of true religion and the other the abettor of lies. In the one case we have light, in the other case we have darkness and they confront each other here. In the one case, we have truth; in the other case we have error. And someone has said, they meet in this chapter like two charged thunderclouds, and we watch with bated breath the bursting of the storm. Ahab, remember had been told by Elijah that there was not going to be any rain and there was not rain. And then after many days God had said to Elijah, “Go show yourself to Ahab and I’m going to send rain

on the face of the earth.” And finally the two confront each other and Ahab has some words for Elijah when he meets him.

In verse 16 of 1 Kings 18 we read, “So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him: and Ahab went to meet Elijah. And it came about, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said to him, ‘Is this you you troubler of Israel?’” Isn’t that an interesting thing? The man who is troubling Israel is, of course, King Ahab who is involved in the Baal worship. It is not Elijah who is troubling Israel, it is Ahab.

But that’s the way it always is with the world. It’s the Christian who is troubling the state. It’s the Christian who troubles the church. And in the churches which are supposed to believe the word of God, which in their doctrinal statements say we accept the great facts of the Christian faith, but they have departed long from them. And if someone stands up in the assembly of such churches and says now let’s go back to the word of God and let’s believe the great truths of the deity of Christ, the atonement of Christ, the bodily resurrection, the second coming and truths like that, then they say, “Art Thou he that troubleth Israel?” And it is the one who stands for the Scriptures who is regarded as the troubler of the flock, whereas it is always the reverse.

So he says, “Is this you, you troubler of Israel. And he said I have not troubled Israel; but you, and your father’s house, have because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord, and you have followed the baals. Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel together with four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table. So Ahab sent a message among all the sons of Israel and brought the prophets together at Mount Carmel.” He demanded that there be a gathering of all Israel.

Some years ago, William Ward Aire came to Dallas Seminary to give us a series of messages and he rather sarcastically said concerning this, “If Elijah were a modern religious leader, he would not have demanded that they all meet on Mount Carmel but he would have suggested a dialogue. And in the meeting that followed Elijah would have

assigned a Baalist to lead in prayer and would have asked Jezebel to sing a solo and they would have taken up an offering and called upon all to tithe.” And then Dr. Aire went on to say that, “It is often suggested today that we must compromise on this point and compromise on that point and compromise on some other point because we have to stay in the mainstream religiously, otherwise we become totally ineffective.” And he suggested that that is not the Biblical truth and not true to Biblical experiences. And he illustrated it with Noah. He said, “Noah was not in the mainstream religiously nor even in the majority. But after the flood had been on the earth for forty days he was then in the majority. And furthermore he was in the mainstream and all the rest had gone down the drain.” [Laughter, Johnson laughs]

Now notice that when Elijah met Ahab he says to him, “How long will you hesitate,” the Authorized Version says “limp,” ‘How long will you limp between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him.’ But the people did not answer a word. Then Elijah said to the people, “I alone am left.” Now that book was, of course, in error. There were seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal. But they had failed to appear to help Elijah and Dr. William Ward Aire said “At this point, they were at an ecumenical conference working out a merger, plan for the merger of Baal with God. But they were genuine believers, nevertheless.”

I don’t know where the seven thousand were. I do know there were seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal. That is said in the New Testament, as well as, in the Old Testament. But they weren’t here. It was Elijah against the crowd. And I rather like this man. So he said, “I’ve got a little idea and I think it will settle the question. What I want you to do is all of you prophets of Baal and all of you servants of Jezebel, you get an ox and cut that ox up and lay it on some wood on an altar and I will do the same. And then we’ll just call on our God and then the god who answers with fire -- Well that is the God who sends fire down to burn the sacrifice, well then -- he is God.”

And my text says, "And the people answered and said, 'that's a good idea.'" And so that's what they did.

Now you know the story of the Baalists, got their ox. They laid their wood in order and they cut up their ox and they laid the pieces on the top of the wood and then they began to call on the name of their God. They began early in the morning and they began to pray, "O Baal answer us, O Baal answer us, O Baal answer us," but there was no voice. No one answered and they leaped about the altar, which they had made. They were getting a no answer from heaven. No answer and it was of course as the hours went on they began to leap on the altar which they had made and then they filled the air with their ravings and their prophesize and finally Elijah -- having nothing better to do -- begins to mock them a little bit. And he says, "Call out with a loud voice for after all he's a god remember. He's occupied, he's gone aside." I won't tell you what Elijah really said because it is rather crude. He really in effect said something like he's gone to the men's room perhaps, [laughter] or he's on a journey.

Now that's really what he said. It shows you that the prophets in the Old Testament did not mind getting right down to the things that would get right to the point of the matter. And so he says, "he's on a journey, perhaps he's asleep, he needs to be wakened." And so they cried with a loud voice, they began to cut themselves according to the custom, with swords and lances until the blood gushed out and with the ravings and the rantings and the cuttings and the loud prayers toward heaven and verse 29 said there was no voice, no one answered, no one paid attention.

Then Elijah took over and he said, "Now everybody gather round." So he took the twelve stones according to the number of the twelve tribes of Israel. And he then prepared a little altar and he made that altar in the name of Jehovah. And then he put a little trench around the altar and -- you'll notice that it was large enough to hold two measures of seed, -- two seahs -- eleven quarts. And he said after he had arranged the wood, cut the ox and laid it on the wood, he said now fill four pitchers with water and

pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood. No question about this, it’s going to be a work of God. No one’s going to say it was spontaneous combustion.

So he said, “do it a second time.” And so they poured out the water again soaking the animal and the wood and everything and he said, “Do it a third time.” And so as you looked at it, it was just dripping with water and the little trench around it contained nothing but water. And then at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice -- Now that is very significant, you see, because that is the time which is designed to be illustrative and typical of the saving work of Jesus Christ, for it was at the time of the evening sacrifice that our Lord died on Calvary.

And so even in the types -- I do not know whether this was done wittingly by Elijah or not -- that’s beside the point. It was the time of the evening sacrifice and so Elijah prayed a simple little prayer. He said, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob today let it be known that Thou art God in Israel and that I am thy servant and that I have done all these things at Thy word. Answer me O Lord, answer me that this people may know that Thou O Lord art God and that Thou hast turned their heart back again.” And the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the offering and the wood and the stones and the dust licked up the water that was in the trench and when the people saw it they fell on their faces and said, “Jehovah he’s God, Jehovah he’s God.”

And Elijah said, now let’s take the prophets of Baal and enroll them at Dallas Theological Seminary and give them a course in systematic theology so they will understand. Be nice to them now, treat them well because they were just simply misled sweet people. And, no the prophet said, “Let’s take the prophets of Baal don’t let a single one of them escape. Take them and Elijah slew them.”

Now then, that was a direct answer wasn’t it? That was a yes answer. A yes with a flourish you might say. But now the prophet at this point hasn’t finished his task because you see he has been told to tell Ahab it’s going to rain. So in verse 41 Elijah said to Ahab, “Now go out eat and drink for there is the sound of the roar of a heavy shower.”

Ahab looked out toward the west, toward the east, toward the north, toward the south, the sun was shining. He said, “What in the world is this man talking about. I better pay attention to him.” So Ahab went up to eat and drink.

But Elijah went up to the top of Carmel and he crouched down on the earth and he put his face between his knees. You can see the prophet now, he is down with his head between his knees and the servant is standing by -- preachers in those days were better off than they are today. I don’t have any servants. I know that Mary says that she’s my servant and she’s a good one. But it’s not really like this. And he said to his servant, “Go up now, look toward the sea.” So he went up and looked and said there’s nothing. Now, you don’t grasp the force of this until you notice that in the Hebrew text and it’s rendered correctly in this New American Standard Bible, Elijah said go back seven times. He did not say now I want you to go over there seven times and come back. No he said go over and see what you see. And he went out and he looked out and he came back and he said there is nothing. So Elijah a second time said now go and look and tell me what you see. And so this went on seven times.

Now you’ll notice Elijah who has prayed, “Lord answer by fire,” and there has been an immediate answer, now is faced with delay in answer. And every time the servant came back and said there is nothing out there Elijah, not a sign of any rain. Elijah’s faith is being tested. For you see the delay in the answer is designed to strengthen the faith of the individual. So seven times and it came about at the seventh time that he came back and he said you know there is a little cloud out there, it’s the size of a man’s hand and it’s coming up from the sea.

And Elijah in the answer of faith said go up and tell Ahab, “Get in your chariot and get down because the heavy shower is going to come and it’s liable to stop you in you’ll get mired in the mud.” And of course it came. And Elijah has received his answer to prayer. It was delayed but nevertheless it came. I think the fact that he prayed seven times is designed to illustrate the fact that there are some answers to prayer that demand

patience on our part. And patience is one of the greatest virtues that a Christian can ever obtain. And so the answers that God gives us to our prayer are often wait, wait, wait. Now he doesn’t say wait. He just waits. And there is nothing, but that is designed to strengthen us. For remember in the writer to the epistle to the Hebrews, he says speaking of the Old Testament saints, it is they who through faith and patience endurance inherited the promises.

Take Hannah. Hannah prayed for a child for many years. If God had given Hannah, Samuel, when she first prayed, she never would have been the kind of mother to raise a man like Samuel, who was designed by God to be a prophet and a king and the leader of Israel. Why it was by means of that delay to the prayers that Hannah had prayed over and over again that God put iron in her soul and made her the kind of mother who could raise up a Samuel to be the means of judging Israel in the will of God. I think also we are to place here the types of prayer that the answers do not come because of satanic hindrance, such as in the Book of Daniel -- which many of you have been studying. That too is a delayed answer, delayed by satanic hindrance.

Now then for the answer disguised. This is another wait answer, yet even more faith is required because here we have the answer in substance but not in form and so we must interpret what we get. Let me give you a simple illustration of this. In the case of the Apostle Paul remember he had apparently been in prayer. He had received a vision from God about crossing the Aegean Sea into the continent of Europe. There the vision of a man of Macedonia had been given him and he put all of the guidance that God had been giving him together and he assuredly gathered with others that God had called him to preach the gospel in Europe.

And so he went to Europe and there he had some success around the little river outside of Philippi, for Lydia’s park was opened in that classic illustration of salvation in the New Testament. But shortly thereafter the apostle found himself in prison in Philippi, he and Silas and the others in prison. God had called him to preach the gospel in Europe

but now he found himself in prison. Now I’m quite sure that the apostle must have had the thought go through his mind, “Is this really the will of God.” Was it the will of God for me to cross the Aegean, come and preach to those women by the side of that little river? And now I find myself in prison. But it wasn’t long before Paul learned that it was the answer to his prayer. That he was there because it was out of the experience of the prison that the Philippian jailer came to know Jesus Christ as his Savior and he too became a classic illustration of the terms of salvation of the New Testament. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shall be saved. So the answer was disguised. Paul did not receive the answers that he had prayed about no doubt, but they came in a different way from that which he had anticipated.

And finally the answer disregarded apparently. This is a final kind of wait answer and it seems to me that faith rises to its highest ground when we receive an answer like this. In which the answer apparently is disregarded because we have to rest upon the faithful word of God and the faithful character of God. We have nothing else upon which to rest. Now we have illustrations of this in the New Testament. For example, John when he concluded the Book of Revelation, he prayed, “Even so come quickly Lord Jesus.” That prayer was not answered in John’s lifetime. We read of the souls of those who are in heaven itself saying, “How long O Lord, how long O Lord, how long O Lord,” and they have been saying this for years. They have been saying it for centuries. They’ve been saying, “How long?” They’ve been praying. Now that prayer is going to be answered, for our Lord shall come. But apparently it has been disregarded in the meantime.

Well I know we are not too encouraged by the fact that the angels don’t get answers to prayer, but godly men do not get answers to prayer during their lifetime, too. God doesn’t promise to answer our prayers during our lifetime necessarily. One of the most outstanding illustrations of that, so far as I remember, is the illustration of George Muller. He was a great man of God and a great prayer warrior. I think George Muller did God’s work in God’s way. That is he relied upon God. He fed thousands of orphans

without any appeal to men. Often the men who were associated with him in the work did not even know the needs of the Bristol Orphanage. He looked to God. He said he would not make his needs known to anyone but God. For it was his responsibility to do that work and so he prayed. And the answers to prayer that they received were remarkable. I suggest that every Christian read A. T. Pierson’s *“George Mueller of Bristol.”* It’s a remarkable testimony to a man’s faith.

Now Mr. Mueller was asked by Mr. Pierson a short time before he died if he had asked anything of God that he had not been granted. And he said to Mr. Pierson that he had prayed sixty-two years, three months and five days and two hours. Mr. Pierson said with his grammatical precision, “He answered me that way for two men to be converted and there were no signs of it.” And Mr. Pierson said to him, “Do you expect god to convert them?” He said, “Certainly do you suppose that God would put upon his child for sixty-two years the burden of two souls if he had no purpose of their salvation. I shall meet them in heaven certainly.” And Mr. Pierson said that shortly afterwards Mr. Mueller died and he was preaching in his pulpit in Bristol and he referred to this occurrence during the course of his message and as he was going out he said a lady said to him one of those men was my uncle.

And he was converted and died a few weeks ago. And my recollection is that I do not have the facts before me here that the other also was converted and the facts were ascertained. But it illustrates for us the fact that our prayers may seem to be totally disregarded by God, but my dear friend that does not mean that they are not answered.

Well now let me conclude for our time is up. What is the teaching of these five types? Well the teaching is very simple. All scriptural prayer is answered. In fact, all prayer is answered, but there are three kinds of answers. There is the answer yes. There is the answer no. There are different types of wait answers. But these three answers encompass all of the answers of God.

The problem then is wholly man-ward. The problem of unanswered prayer. God always answers prayer although his answers are not always affirmative to our requests. I think what I’ve been saying to you points up to needs. First, the need of patience. It’s well to remember that he always gives us what we ask or he gives us something better, which is an answer in substance though possibly not in form. Someone has said, “We want to pluck our mercies green but God waits until they are ripe.”

And the second need is the need of prayer itself. James said remember, “Ye have not because ye ask not.” The real problem is not unanswered prayer, but the real problem is unprayed prayer. That really is the only unanswered prayer, the prayer that you do not pray. Mary Queen of Scots said, “I fear John Knox’s prayer more than an army of ten thousand men.” That’s a testimony to the power of prayer. Christians have the greatest power at their disposal that it is possible for one to have. And they do not use it.

Remember the text I referred to a couple of weeks ago, John chapter 16, verse 23 and 24. Now three times in that little section, verses 22 through about 26, Jesus asks his disciples to pray in his name. Now he says that others up to that time have never prayed in his name, hither to hath thee asked nothing in my name. But here is a new revelation in the doctrine of prayer. Ask in my name, ask, ask believing, and ask in the name of Jesus. What does it mean to ask in the name of our Lord? I say it reverently, but it is true to Scripture. When we ask in the name of Jesus, our Lord is the suppliant. And those prayers are answered. May God help you to pray.

Let’s bow in prayer.

[Prayer] Father we are grateful that we have this marvelous opportunity and privilege to pray. Lord, teach us to pray and teach us to respond to the answers that we receive in a way that will bring glory to Thy name and growth to us in our Christian lives. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

“The Problem of Unanswered Prayer, part II” by S. Lewis Johnson
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