

SERMON TITLE: "He Was Heard"  
SERMON TEXT: Hebrews 4:14-5:10 (also read Mark 14:32-42)  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: March 18, 2018, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

A mother and father were aware that their 14-year old son was struggling with math, and they had been helping him with his homework as best they could. Being a religious family, the parents encouraged their son to pray for God's help. On the night before an important exam, they overheard their teenage son saying a variation on a childhood prayer: "Now I lay me down to rest, and hope to pass tomorrow's test. If I should die before I wake, that's one less test I have to take."

In a totally different context, some religious folks were debating the most effective way to pray.

"The proper way for [us] to pray," said Deacon Lemuel Keyes, "the only proper attitude is down upon [our] knees."  
"Nay, I should say, the way to pray," said Reverend Doctor Wise, "is standing straight with outstretched arms with rapt and upturned eyes."  
"Oh, no, no, no," said Elder Snow, "such posture is too proud. A man should pray with eyes fast-closed and head contritely bowed."  
"It seems to me his hands should be austerely clasped in front, with both thumbs pointing to the sky," said Reverend Doctor Blunt.  
"Last year I fell in Hodgkin's well, headfirst," said Cyril Brown.  
"With both my heels a stickin' up, my head a-pointin' down; and I done prayed right then and there; best prayer I ever said, the prayin'est prayer I ever prayed, a-standin' on my head."<sup>1</sup>

No matter who we are, hardened sinner or righteous saint, we all pray more actively in times of crisis. When situations arise that cause pain or fear, we hurl up "panic-button prayers," asking God to get us out of the mess in which we've landed. We want an escape plan, a divine rescue; we want a way out.

Jesus was no different. Hebrews 5:7 says that, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death." The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us that before Jesus' crucifixion, he went out to a garden and prayed that God might take the cup of death away from him. Luke even says that Jesus prayed so

hard that sweat fell off his head like drops of blood. Sensing that his crucifixion was near, Jesus was greatly troubled. If there was any way possible, he wanted God to rescue him.

### **1—THE PROBLEM**

Knowing that Jesus had hard times and prayed for God's intervention gives us a connecting bond with him. We can see that Jesus was like us in a very human way. Jesus certainly can understand our pains and frustrations, and even those emergency 911 prayers that we cry in the dark of night. That's what we like about Hebrews 5:7.

But there's a problem here, too. The problem comes in the words, "He was heard." Hebrews 5:7 says that when Jesus cried out in prayer, God heard him. Normally, we'd think of that as good news. We feel comforted and assured believing that God hears our prayers. But we have to keep on reading. Verses seven and eight say that Jesus "was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered."

The problem for us is that God heard Jesus' cry for help and still Jesus had to suffer. God didn't take away the cup of death. God didn't stop the Jewish leaders from accusing Jesus of blasphemy. God didn't prevent the Roman authorities from arresting Jesus and crucifying him. The problem for us is that God heard Jesus' prayers and allowed Jesus, the perfect Son, to suffer and die anyway. And that doesn't give us much hope for getting out of our troubles. If God hears us, but still doesn't rescue us from danger, what are we to do?

### **2—GOD'S ANSWERS MAY BE DIFFERENT THAN OURS**

The primary thing we must do is recognize that God may be answering our prayers, but in a different way than we expect. I'm sure you've heard this story before, but it's worth repeating.

There was a very religious man who had total faith in God. [The man] lived in a house by a great river. One night there was a terrible flood and the man had to climb up on the roof of his house to escape being drowned.

After a time, some men came by in a boat to rescue him, but [the man] refused. "I have faith that GOD will rescue me," he said. Soon after, another boat came to rescue him, and again he refused [to go, saying,] "I have faith in GOD." Considerably later, [when the flood waters had risen almost to the peak of the house,] a helicopter flew over and let down a rope ladder, but the man waved them away, shouting, "I have faith in GOD to rescue me!"

At last, the force of the water broke up the house and the man drowned. He went to heaven, and when he saw God, he asked, "Oh, God, God, I had such faith in you, and you let me drown. Why? Why?"

God replied, "What do you mean, let you drown? I sent you two boats and a helicopter, didn't I?"<sup>2</sup>

God's answers to our prayers may come in different forms than we expect. The problem isn't God's hearing or God's willingness to help, but our failure to recognize and appreciate the opportunities God provides. Too often we pray only for what **we** want, instead of what **God** wants us to have. We make the mistake of narrow thinking, assuming there's only one answer to our problem. We want God to answer, "Yes, right away, yes, sir!" when God knows that what's better for us is, "No," or "Not yet," or "Not that way." Sometimes we want God to do all the work, when God may be saying, "Whoa, there, Buster. Don't you think **you** need to apply a little effort to make this happen?"

It's easy for us adults to laugh at students who think they can pray instead of study. But what about when we adults pray for our health to improve instead of watching our diet and exercising? What about when we pray for help with our finances instead of getting a job or decreasing our spending? What about when we pray for our church to grow instead of inviting someone to worship? What about

when we pray for someone in our family to change their ways instead of taking steps to improve our own ways? Don't get me wrong. Of course, prayer is a good thing. We should pray often and with great conviction. But if we use prayer as a substitute for the obvious things God wants us to do and has already given us the ability to do, then we probably aren't going to get the answers we're looking for.

And even when we're doing the very best we can, we need to recognize that God's plan may be different from ours. Jesus clearly demonstrated that it's OK to plead for God's assistance when we're in need. But Jesus also clearly demonstrated that *our desire for God's will* must be even stronger than our own preferred outcomes. Jesus didn't want to die any more than any of us want to be tortured and killed. But Jesus' greatest desire was to follow God's direction and allow God's power to work even in his suffering.

Does that mean it's God's will for us to suffer? No, I don't believe so—at least not any more than good parents want their kids to suffer. We who are parents know that, if our kids are going to grow up to become responsible and decent human beings, they're going to have to suffer some of the important lessons of hard work, sacrifice, and endurance. We can't shield them from all that, or they'd never fully develop. Just like that, our Divine Parent sometimes allows us to suffer some hard life lessons for our betterment, as well. But generally speaking, I prefer to think that God does *not* make bad things happen to good people—or even to rotten people. Suffering occurs in the world as the result of human sin and the natural ebb and flow of life.

Sometimes God rescues us from that suffering, by transforming our hearts and turning people away from sin. In some miraculous circumstances, God intervenes in nature to alleviate human suffering. But other times, God doesn't interrupt the course of events. Drunk drivers kill innocent people. Abusive parents leave emotional scars on their children. Tornadoes knock over churches, schools, and homes. Floods and earthquakes leave devastation and death in their wake. Family

members get sick with cancer. In spite of our prayers for help—in spite of the fact that God hears those prayers—bad things still happen.

### **CONCLUSION**

So, what does it mean that God hears our prayers? It means that God is with us during the hard times, giving us comfort and encouragement. God goes with us through the suffering, so that when the crisis is over, God can help us put our lives back together. God is with us during our pain and fear, teaching us lessons which will make us and others better people for the experience.

This truth is illustrated in the words of an unnamed soldier, who observed:

I asked God for strength that I might achieve.  
     I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.  
 I asked God for health that I might do greater things.  
     I was given infirmity that I might do better things.  
 I asked for riches that I might be happy.  
     I was given poverty that I might be wise.  
 I asked for power that I might have the praise of [people].  
     I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.  
 I asked for all things that I might enjoy life.  
     I was given life that I might enjoy all things.  
 I got nothing that I asked for—but everything that I had hoped for . . .  
     Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.  
 I am among all [people] most richly blessed.<sup>3</sup>

God may not take away our physical pains or give us explanations why things have to happen. But God does promise to go with us through our sorrows and griefs, so that we will find our difficulties easier to bear and our results better than we could ever have dreamed.

With this our hearts' desire, O Lord, hear our prayers, as Jesus was heard. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> I retrieved this from sermonillustrations.com many years ago. I don't know if it's still there.

<sup>2</sup> Eric W. Johnson, ed., *A Treasury of Humor* (Ivy Books: New York, 1989), p. 121.

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