

## ***Living the Story of Unanswered Prayer***

Based on Mark 14:32-42, Mark 15:25-38, & John 17:20-23,  
A Message Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on 1/25/26

So far, in our journey in this exciting series on “Jumping INTO the Story of Jesus and his Love,” we’ve been examining stories of kingdom building and serving others that invite US into the very same kingdom-building activities. A few examples of what we’ve been invited into in the last three weeks include living the story of feeding the 5000 and the hungry – whether we’re talking about what Donn Start is doing in N. Phoenix or what our own army of volunteers are doing at the Charlevoix Area Food Pantry. We’ve considered how we can jump into the story of remembering those in prison as if we were in prison with them – whether it is the relationship we developed with John while he was incarcerated, or what we’re now doing with a small team of folks here in the Charlevoix County Jail. And we’ve also talked about jumping into the story of restorative justice rather than punitive or retributive justice. Talk to Bill Wadland about this one and his long history of working with the local drug court program crafting creative, alternative sentences for drug and alcohol offenders.

But today, we’re going to consider a different kind of story the Bible invites us to jump into. It’s not a particular positive or “feel good” kind of story, where we get to help a group of people in need like Jesus did and like we’ve seen in the last 3 weeks. But the story we get to enter today is equally profound and important. I’m talking about the story of unanswered prayer.

Let’s have a quick show of hands of how many of us have had experiences of unanswered prayer... Personally, I have had a huge number of these experiences, and professionally, as a pastor of 4 different churches and as a chaplain at a hospital, I can’t begin to count the experiences of unanswered prayer that I have witnessed.

Now, here is my next question... Did Jesus have any experiences of unanswered prayer...? Well, if you were paying attention to our 3 scripture lessons, you just heard three of them. Let’s take a closer look.

We’ll begin with perhaps the most famous instance of Jesus’s unanswered prayer. In the garden of Gethsemane. We all know the story.

Jesus has come to understand that a cross awaited him – the most painful, excruciating form of torture that the Romans doled out back then. He is terrified. He is, according to some accounts, sweating blood in this garden. And, let's not forget, he has also done everything – EVERYTHING – that his Father has asked him to do. But these three passionate, heartfelt petitions left him in the exact same position, situationally, that he was in before he uttered them. In that sense, Jesus knows unanswered prayer.

Turning to the second of Jesus's experiences of unanswered prayer, we move to the cross. Jesus has been whipped, beaten, scourged, and, after all that, nailed to a cross. And, if all that weren't enough, he hung upon it between 3 and 6 hours before dying. And his cry from up there is known as the "cry of dereliction:" "My God, my God...why have you forsaken me?" Some translations say, "Why have you abandoned me?"

Try to imagine what Jesus is feeling in this moment? Try to process what was going on in his heart, in his mind, in his body, and in his spirit. He wants an answer; he needs an answer; he deserves an answer...but he doesn't get one. Jesus – the Son of God...the Messiah – does not get an answer. This is another experience of unanswered prayer – Jesus's unanswered prayer.

Third and finally – and not in chronological order – we come to a third experience of unanswered prayer. And this one may actually have the most relevance and connection for us living in 2026 America. We turn to John 17 and the final prayer we have Jesus saying before he is arrested. He takes time out to pray for his disciples and those who will follow in their footsteps as kingdom-builders. Listen to Jesus's prayer, and this time I'll begin in verse 18: "*As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world...My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world will believe that you have sent me. I have given you the glory that you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity.*"

Jesus prayed that all his disciples, all his children – present and future – would be in complete unity. Jesus prayed for unity. Were his

disciples unified...? In just a few years after his death, half the followers followed Peter, while the other half followed John. A little later some of the followers believed that to be a true disciple of Jesus, Gentiles would have to become Jews first, while others disagreed and parted ways. And since that time, we have about 2000 years of evidence that what we Christians are best at is splitting off from each other, taking our ball and going home. We've got Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox Christians. We've got 2300 different, separate Christian denominations – and that's in America alone. And you don't need me to tell you the political form our religious division has taken in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is unarguable, folks, that Jesus's prayer for unity went unanswered then – back in 33 AD – and is still unanswered today in 2026.

But in the spirit of this sermon series on “Jumping Into the Story of Jesus and his love,” I would argue that even Jesus's experiences of unanswered prayer are portals for us, invitations for us to jump into his story. Of course, it's not that Jesus's 3 experiences here are wonderful and positive, and they're certainly not desirable. No, it's that they are human and universal. Jesus's experiences of unanswered prayer link us to him in an incredibly powerful way. To know and embrace that even Jesus cried out to God and heard and saw nothing in response is to find the ultimate, empathetic companion for our own human journey. And this is who Jesus is, right? The ultimate, empathetic companion who, as the great hymn “In the Garden” puts it, “He walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own...”

There is something incredibly heartening and pressure-relieving to me when I consider the fact that Jesus had experiences of unanswered prayer. That draws Jesus even closer to me than that watered-down, cultural Jesus who is out there, doing everything right, never having doubts, and always being positive and prosperous. The Jesus who prayed, “Father, take this cup from me” and “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me” is someone I will hitch my wagon to any day of the week. When Jesus said, in John 15, “I am the Vine and you are the branches. Apart from me you can do nothing,” I think that dealing with unanswered prayer is part of what he was talking about. It's almost like he was saying, “Listen, you're

*going* to have hardships and even crosses in your life too. And while I want you to cry out to God in those times just as I did, I can't promise that you're always going to get answers. There were times when I didn't get answers. But stay connected to the Vine – that's me – and I WILL walk with you through it – ALL of it.”

Folks, the stories of Jesus's unanswered prayers – and that's plural prayerS, not singular – are doorways for us, invitations for us to come as we are and to enter the not-always-wonderful story of Jesus and his love. Jesus's experiences of unanswered prayer invite us to bring our disappointments and heartbreaks and to lay them directly at Jesus's feet. He will be compassionate; he will be empathetic; and he will remind us that the story we're in – just like the Bible's story – *is not* over. He'll remind us that even after Gethsemane and the cross, his story wasn't over either – not even close. He'll remind us that he came back from the grave precisely so we would know that our experiences of unanswered prayer along the road of our lives are not the end.

When I left the congregation I was serving in Harbor Springs, Michigan in 2009, I thought that was the end of the road for me in ministry. My marriage had collapsed. I was losing 50% of my time with my one and only daughter. The start-up community I thought I was moving into crashed and burned before it ever got off the ground. My annual income plummeted from \$55,000 to about \$22,000, and that was going from one full-time job with health benefits in that church to 5 part-time jobs with zero benefits of any kind. My experiences of unanswered prayer during that time were innumerable.

And now, 17 years later, here I am, leading this vibrant church family...for the first time in my life fully engaged, utilizing all my gifts, and genuinely excited about what God is doing in and through me and in and through all of us. Like Jesus, I have had unanswered prayers. But he has been my vine. Through it all, he has “walked with me and talked with me and told me I am his own. And love we've shared as we tarried there...none other has ever known.” I thank you, Lord, for providing me the portal of Jesus's unanswered prayers and for inviting me to jump into the story right there. Amen.