

## **Questions Jesus Asked, Part Three**

### ***John 12:20-33***

**1. The stage is set.**

- *Isaiah 42:4, 49:6, 52:15; John 2:4, 7:30, 8:20, 13:1, 17:1, 10:16, 11:52; 12:23-26, 17:21, 5:21, 26*

**2. The question is asked.**

- *John 12:27, 11:33, 13:21; Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:40-46*

- **The true request.**

- *John 12:27a*

- **The demonstration of devotion.**

- *John 12:27*

**3. The power of unanswered prayer.**

- *John 12:28*

- **The power of salvation.**

- *John 12:32-33*

- **The defeat of Satan.**

- *John 12:31; Ephesians 2:1-3; 1 John 4:4b; 1 Corinthians 15:55-57*

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## Questions Jesus Asked, Part Three *John 12:20-33*

Jerry Sittser is on faculty as a sitting fellow, and professor of religion and philosophy at Whitworth University in Spokane. On September 27, 1991, as was his custom, Dr. Sittser prayed, asking God to protect and bless his family. Something went terribly wrong. Later that afternoon, returning from a family outing, a drunk driver lost control of his car and smashed into the Sittsers' minivan. Sittser's wife, Lynda; his daughter, Diana Jane; and his mother, who was visiting for the weekend, were all killed in the collision.

Sittser writes: "To this day I have been unable to understand what made that day different. What prevented my prayers from getting through to God? Did I commit some unpardonable sin? Did I fail to say the right words? Did God suddenly turn against me? Why, I have asked myself a thousand times, did my prayer go unanswered?"<sup>1</sup> By the way, he still does not have an answer.

How do you deal with unanswered prayer? Is there some formula to ensure that God always answers our prayers? If God doesn't answer my prayer, does that mean there is something wrong – either with the request, or worse yet, with me? Did I sin or something? Is God a temperamental father who is inconsistent in his desire or ability to answer prayer regularly, sometimes answering and sometimes not? Let me say that those thoughts are wrong. So how *do* we deal with unanswered prayer? That is a question that Jesus asks in the passage we are going to look at today. Since it is Father's Day, this is a good question to consider because it has everything to do with our relationship with God our Father – the one we pray to. What do we do when the Father doesn't answer our prayers?

We are in a summer sermon series called, "Questions Jesus Asked." *Every* time Jesus taught, spoke, or did something, his message and methods were always on purpose. That means his questions are important.

*Any* interaction Jesus had with anyone in the Gospels is an interaction he can and will have with *each of us*.<sup>2</sup> And our answers to Jesus' questions will determine the depth of our relationship with Jesus, will determine the success of our Christian life, the fruit of our Christian life, and the impact of our Christian life. We must answer Jesus' questions well if we are going to accomplish a life of purpose in this world that God has for us.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald L. Sittser from Discipleship Journal, Jan/Feb 2001, p. 26

<sup>2</sup> Bible Study Series: Best Questions in the Bible <https://jesusplusnothing.com/series/post/JesusQuestions>

The question that Jesus asked that we are looking at today is a probing question that deals with a prayer that Jesus had that went unanswered. We find it in the Gospel of John.

Now as I read it, please do your best to imagine yourself in the scene as it plays out – as if you are one of the disciples watching and listening. That’s important because remember, if we are going to be changed by God’s Word, then we should never read Scripture as a *spectator*; always read Scripture as a *participant*. *We are in the narrative.* (repeat) Okay? I’d like to ask you to honor the Father by standing as I read his Word today:

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

“Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!”

Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.” The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

Jesus said, “This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. (John 12:20-33, niv)

Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God – thanks be to God! Thank you for standing; you can be seated.

In the context of this passage today the stage is set for the question, and then the question is asked, and then we see the power of unanswered prayer. Let’s take a look at those, starting with...

## 1. The *stage* is set.

As always, context is...everything, so we need to see that the context of the question Jesus asked is going to tell us what we need to know about the question and how to answer it. All of what we read in that narrative serves to lead up to, and helps us answer, the question that Jesus asks, which will also help us know what to do with unanswered prayer.

What's interesting about how this story starts out, is that it involves some spiritual seekers that are introduced, have a *vital* role to play in the story, but then they just disappear with their story unfinished and we never hear from them again.

The people I'm talking about are the Greeks who were there to worship and take part in the Passover celebration. The narrative begins by telling us that these worshipping Greeks are asking if they can see Jesus. They didn't approach Jesus directly, probably because they doubted Jesus was willing to meet with Gentiles, since he was Jewish. So they approached Philip – most likely because Philip was from Bethsaida – that means that both his name and where he was from indicated that he was very familiar with the Greek Gentiles (a Gentile was anyone who wasn't a Jew, whether they had converted to Judaism or not. These Greeks were converts to Judaism). They thought that maybe Philip would give them an inside track and let them meet Jesus.

But then, suddenly, they disappear from the story. Did you notice that? We aren't told if they were able to see Jesus, or if they did, what they wanted or what they talked about. But we know that they were celebrating Passover, and since they wanted to see Jesus, we know that they were genuine spiritual seekers. The Greek word that is used to describe their asking is an emphatic word – it means they really, really wanted and needed to meet Jesus. We know that Jesus would not have turned away people like that. But the reason we don't hear anything else about their meeting with Jesus was because what was most important to the story was what these Greeks *represent*, and what their arrival means to Jesus. You see, Jesus was watching for this to happen. We're told suddenly in the story that Jesus says, "Now the hour has come..." and he describes how he will be killed.

Here's the thing: the arrival of these Greeks seeking Jesus are a sign to Jesus – he was watching for it; it told him the time had come. The reason he knew it was the sign was because Isaiah the prophet of the Old Testament had said that this was going to happen. Isaiah foretold of a time when the nations – not just the Jews – would seek the Messiah (Isaiah 42:4; 49:6; 52:15).

One scholar says, "This in itself was sufficient to signal "the hour" which Jesus had anticipated all along, the hour of His glorification in suffering and dying (John 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 13:1; 17:1). On other occasions Jesus had taught that His mission included the whole world, not Israel alone. He had "other sheep" to be gathered into "one flock" (John 10:16) and would die for the "scattered children of God" (John 11:52). Now that (these Greeks were the) sheep from this other flock (and they) were seeking Jesus, the Shepherd knew the time had come to lay down His life."<sup>3</sup>

So now that Jesus knows that the time for his death is at hand, in verses 23-26 he tells his disciples very plainly what is going to happen, what his priority is, and what their, and our, priority needs to be.

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Dongell, *John: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1997), 156.

Jesus teaches this using the analogy of the seed; by itself it is only one seed. But if it is buried and “dies,” it then becomes a tree that bears fruit, and every fruit has multiple seeds. He’s referring to the Word of God, which is himself (John 1).

Jesus says that now is the time for him to be glorified. You might think Jesus is talking about his resurrection, but it’s really, really important to see that the glorification he’s talking about won’t take place *after* his death, but *IN* his death. He is not glorified *despite* the cross, but *in* and *through* the cross. It’s in the cross that we see the full and complete obedience that Jesus has for the Father.

Jesus loves the Father so much, that it is as if he “hates” his life in this world – such is his willingness to disregard this world in order to accomplish God’s purpose for the world.

“Jesus welcomed death ... because He had committed himself in obedience to the Father, the source of all life (John 5:21, 26). Everything Jesus would gain through death would come not from death, but from the hand of the Father. Yet the dying seed illustrated not only Jesus’ immediate future, but a requirement for *anyone* who would find true life: **The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life** (John 12:25).” There are several things to point out about this statement. First, this is not saying that human life or human beings or life in this world is worthless; in fact it says the opposite: human life is of the highest value. Jesus paid the price for it with his life. The final goal toward which everything aims is not self-destruction and self-contempt, but abundant, eternal, human life.

Second, Jesus typically spoke in hyperbole in order to make a point, so don’t misunderstand this. The contrast of hatred and love here serves as a figure of speech expressing the radical difference between two ways of life. Here’s the point: if someone “loves” their life in this world they will seek, at all costs, to preserve and protect himself or herself from risk and danger, especially scorn and rejection. In contrast, to “hate” one’s life means just the opposite: to run the risk of rejection and scorn, knowing full well the likelihood of loss. Make sense?

Third, the risks and losses were not about a cavalier approach to life, but come directly from identifying with Jesus, with following One who was hated by the world, One who would give His life for others. **Whoever serves me must follow me ...** (12:26).

Finally, Jesus combined the demand to “hate” one’s life with the promise of great benefit. Those who follow Jesus will share in the fellowship Jesus himself enjoys with the Father: **... where I am, my servant also will be ...** (John 12:26). What does that mean, and where is that at? Again, you might think he’s talking about heaven, but what’s important here is that Jesus isn’t talking about where He *will* be (like in Heaven), but to where He already *is*. And where is Jesus? He is (already) *in the Father, and the Father is in Him* (John 17:21). So that means that all who follow

Jesus, then, *right now* enter into this incredible, abiding fellowship with the Father; – because *that's* where Jesus was and is.<sup>4</sup>

This is the example that Jesus set, and the command he gives his disciples, and us. And in this lies the solution to unanswered prayer. So now that we know all *that*, we are prepared to see...

## 2. The ***question*** is asked.

Through the circumstantial arrival of the Greeks who are truly seeking Jesus, God the Spirit confirms to God the Son that God the Father's plan has reached its time: Jesus will be put to death. With this realization comes a heaviness to Jesus, as you could imagine. Jesus says, "Now my soul is troubled..." in verse 27. The word that he uses describes the strong and deep emotional distress he is feeling. It's the same thing Jesus experienced at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:33), and as he anticipated Judas' betrayal (John 13:21). It is also shown when Jesus agonized in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:40-46). Jesus isn't using a figure of speech here; this is *real* agony and anxiety that Jesus is going through, just as any human would. So don't miss...

### – The ***true*** request.

Jesus is not asking a sarcastic question here; he is telling us what he desires and is desperately praying for:

"Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?'" (John 12:27a)

Basically Jesus is saying, "I am in so much agony and anxiety and distress, what else would you expect me to pray for? I'm asking the Father to save me from what I am about to face. I don't want to face; I don't want to go through it. I want the Father to find another way around this."

The question is in no way some kind of hypothetical, dispassionate, stoic statement. This is the real deal, and it is Jesus' real prayer. And you and I know from the story that this prayer goes unanswered. If you've ever wondered if Jesus, God's Son, prayed for something that God the Father didn't answer, well, here it is.

Have you had unanswered prayer? Especially over something that you felt deeply and desperately? Most of you know that for the last two years we've been trying to help my parents cope with my mom's terminal brain cancer diagnosis. It's a miracle she's lived this long, honestly. But then two months ago my dad had a stroke. He was already dealing with pretty advanced Alzheimer's. So for the last two months things have kicked into high gear. Some of you have noticed that I've been out because I've been in Salem, Oregon, putting in several weeks of 18-20 hour days, seven days a week, being the primary caregiver for them – in pretty much every way you can imagine, and in ways I bet you couldn't imagine. You don't want to imagine.

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Dongell, *John: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1997), 156-157.

How do I pray for them? Do I pray that God heals them? They are in their upper 80's. Shall I ask God to restore them to the health they had in their 70s? Or their 50s? As desperately as I want that to happen, I know it won't – not on this side of death, anyway. I agonize for them, but I know *that* prayer won't be answered.

If you've been through some kind of unanswered prayer like I have, then you and I can find the solution in Jesus' example. The answer is not to root out some hidden sin in your life, although that's always a good idea. The answer is not in "declaring and decreeing" in a way that God is forced to obey you (that's terrible theology!). The solution to unanswered prayer is not in saying some magical formula of prayer, or praying the prayer a hundred times or even a thousand times. The solution to unanswered prayer is seen in...

### - The demonstration of *devotion*

...that Jesus gives us. The groundwork for the solution to unanswered prayer comes in Jesus' teaching right before his question, and then his immediate response to his unanswered prayer. Let me show you all of verse 27 again:

"Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" (John 12:27)

Deeper than Jesus' desire to be delivered from crucifixion, even deeper than the agony, anxiety, and desperation he was feeling, was such a deep love for the Father that he would do anything in order for God to be glorified – even if it cost him his suffering and very life. Jesus came into this world to teach and heal, but don't be mistaken: *Jesus supremely came into this world to die* – a horrible, agonizing death that he didn't deserve, but he did it in obedience to the Father for you and me – for every human. *That* is what Jesus meant by the deeper devotion to God that said, "Father, glorify your name!" "Father, accomplish whatever you need to accomplish through my life in order to love and save this world, and do it by whatever means is necessary."

On the heels of Jesus' unanswered prayer is the deeper prayer: "Father God, I love you and I trust you so much that I will do anything to obey you and for the sake of others. *I won't love my life more than my love for you.*"

Is your ultimate prayer in all things, "Father, glorify your name!"? Because *that*, my friends, is the solution to every unanswered prayer, and that is the prayer God will always answer as we see in the very next part of that passage we read...

### 3. The power of *unanswered* prayer.

Because Jesus' initial prayer went unanswered, and his prayer of surrender to God was his underlying prayer, we see the result of that unanswered prayer. Here's a simple formula for prayer: **Unanswered prayer + complete surrender = God is glorified** (and remember that means God's loving purposes to reach and save others is accomplished). We don't always know how God will do that, but we trust

him anyway because we know he always seeks the ultimate best for us, even if it is *after* this life.

And we see this in the rest of that passage. Immediately, the Father himself answers Jesus' prayer by saying in verse 28, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it." God is saying, "I will do exactly as you ask! Through your obedient self-sacrifice and trust in me, I will accomplish,"

### - The power of *salvation*.

Jesus talked about the way in which he would be "lifted up" – speaking both literally and metaphorically. First, he clearly spoke of this earlier when he was talking about the seed being buried in the ground. Then, in verse 32, he talks about being lifted up – not so much about his resurrection, even though he would definitely be lifted up through that, but, as verse 33 states, it's about how he will be lifted up on a cross, and by doing so, salvation will be available to everyone. The purpose of Jesus' death on the cross was to win the free gift of salvation for all people. That salvation could be purchased through no other means than through the ultimate, sinless, pure sacrifice of Jesus' life in our place of death. That unanswered prayer resulted in salvation for everyone who will accept it. That includes *you*.

Not only that, the power of that unanswered prayer meant...

### - The defeat of *Satan*.

In verse 31, Jesus talked about the other result of his unanswered prayer – that judgment would arrive in this world and the prince of this world – our real enemy, Satan – will be driven out. Let me explain what Jesus meant by that.

First, when he says that the time for judgment as come to the world, he is talking about humanity in its rebellion against God, and our evil, unjust, oppressive world systems that oppress people and destroys creation and stands in partnership with the prince of this world, Satan, against God. This means that the "kingdom of evil" functions in the realm of both the human and the suprahuman, (not super-human, but suprahuman, or that beyond human). Jesus makes it clear; there is an intelligent, suprahuman "prince" that stands at the helm, orchestrating all rebellion against God and God's purposes. On one hand, the world has been captured by Satan, unable to free itself from his program of hostility to God and destruction of God's creation (Ephesians 2:1–3). On the other hand, the world has given itself over to Satan's designs and serves as a willing slave and accomplice to God's archenemy. So Christ's death began the judgment. The clock is ticking; judgment has arrived and the world is awaiting the sound of the gavel and the pronouncement of the sentence upon Jesus' return.

But second, the death of Jesus signaled the decisive defeat of Satan and Satan's rule over the world. His authority was stripped, his fate sealed, his kingdom defenseless. Now obviously, the Cross did not end Satan's influence in the world, and it hasn't yet ended the world's hostility against God. But the Cross made Satan's kingdom a house of cards, only waiting the final wind of God's judgment. The Cross also



granted to believers the confidence of victory and freedom from fear,<sup>5</sup> as we read in the First Epistle of John:

“The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world”  
(1 John 4:4b).

Let me explain it with this illustration. Imagine that a Dad is driving the family car on a warm summer day with his window down, with his young grade school son and daughter in the back seat. As they are enjoying their drive, a large bumble bee flies in through the open window. The children begin to scream in terror, frightened that this large bee will sting them. But dad is very skilled – even while he’s driving, he manages to catch the bumble bee in the air with his hand. Then, to his children’s horror, he lets the bumblebee go again. It flies around inside the car, buzzing and frightening the children. But Dad tells his kids not to worry – the bee is harmless. The children don’t believe him, because it looks and sounds just as scary as it always did. But then Dad says, “Don’t worry kids. The bee can’t harm you because when I grabbed hold of him, he stung me.” Dad opened his hand and said, “Now he won’t sting you. See? The stinger is in my hand.” Dad showed his children the stinger, still lodged in the father’s palm.

Through Christ’s death on the Cross, God the Father took the full force of Satan’s deadly power. Now we can see the scars in the resurrected hands of Jesus. For the time being, Satan tries to frighten us and make a lot of noise as if he still has the power of death, but he’s been stripped of that. That’s why the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 15:55-57:

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”  
The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:55-57, niv)

Thanks to Jesus’ question, we realize how we can deal with unanswered prayer; by being surrendered to God, not loving our lives in this world but willing to sacrifice anything in order to accomplish God’s purposes in this world, so that he can be glorified. And as a result, great things can happen in this world for people through God’s Kingdom – even if our prayers go unanswered.

*Prayer*

Stand:

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think (or pray), according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21)

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Dongell, *John: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1997), 158.