

HOW DOES GOD ANSWER?  
THIRD SERMON IN SERIES ON QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK ABOUT PRAYER  
ACTS 16:6-10

SEPTEMBER 22, 1985

An overweight businessman decided it was time to shed some excess pounds. He took his new diet seriously, even changing his driving route to avoid his favorite bakery. One morning, however, he arrived at work carrying a gigantic coffee cake. With an angelic smile he explained, "This is a very special coffee cake. I accidently drove by the bakery this morning and there in the window were a host of goodies. So I prayed, 'Lord, if you want me to have one of those delicious coffee cakes, let me find a parking place directly in front of the bakery.' And sure enough, the eighth time around the block, there it was!"

How does God answer prayer? There are many creative ways to set up situations where rationalizations can be manufactured; but, how does God answer prayer? This is a question that many people ask about prayer.

There is also much concern about unanswered prayer. We ask: why is my prayer not answered? The third stanza of the hymn we just sang--"Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart"--asked God to "teach me the patience of unanswered prayer." But, perhaps the prior question is again: how does God answer prayer? If we are not looking in the place where God is answering, if we are not listening where God is speaking, we might very easily miss the answer and conclude that the prayer is unanswered. It must be quite frustrating for God to answer and not be heard! It's like a person waiting for a phone call from a friend, or perhaps an important business call. He stands by the phone waiting for it to ring. Day after day he waits nervously and impatiently by the phone, not realizing there is a letter in the mailbox! How does God answer?

In this sermon series on prayer, I have defined prayer as the act of communicating with God--talking and listening, expressing and receiving. Some call the receiving act "meditation." During the meditation act, when we are silent, God sometimes answers. Some people report they hear with the inner ear. Some hear a "still small voice" as did the prophet Elijah. Some get a sense of an inner direction or impulse. God sometimes communicates to us through and in the prayer experience.

God sometimes answers through the situation. We find circumstances changing. Some are healed physically or emotionally. Some find doors closing and other doors opening indicating the direction they should go. Sometimes God speaks to us through other people. Sometimes the "messenger" doesn't even realize that he/she is a prophet. A prophet, in the biblical sense, is one who speaks for God, one who communicates the Word of God. God often uses other people to be prophets and speak his word to you.

There are many vehicles God uses to communicate with you to answer your prayer, and one in particular has often been overlooked. This means of communication has been disregarded by Christians and the church for centuries; but, like prayer, it is experiencing a revival in our time. It was scoffed at for years, but many today are taking it seriously. One of our adult Sunday

School classes is currently studying it. We all experience this means of communication, but how often do we consider it a word from God, and by not doing so thereby miss an answer, a message God may have for us. I am talking about dreams. Does God use dreams as one means of communication?

Throughout the 3,000 years of history covered by the Bible, dreams were considered to be one of the means God uses to communicate with people. Joseph won the respect of the Pharaoh and received a high position in the government by interpreting the Pharaoh's dreams. Daniel became prime minister in Babylon by interpreting the dreams of King Nebuchadnezzar. Ancient people believed that dreams predicted the future. Dreams also announced events. An angel appeared to both Mary and Joseph in dreams to announce the birth of the Messiah.

Dreams gave instructions. Our lesson today from the book of Acts told of Paul's struggle with his missionary itinerary. Paul was industriously traveling throughout the region preaching the gospel and organizing churches. At one point he debated where to go next. Who knows what the future of Christianity would have been if Paul had not dreamed. Acts 16:9 "A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'" Because Paul took the dream seriously, he crossed over into Greece, and the church took firm root in the Roman Empire.

Following the period covered by the New Testament, the leaders of the church for the first several centuries believed that dreams were a means of revelation. Tertullian wrote at length about dreams, stating that nearly everyone on earth knows that God reveals himself to people most often in dreams. (Kelsey: The Other Side of Silence, pg. 168)

Even though we have a long history and tradition of taking dreams seriously, for centuries dreams have been held in disrepute. We have just passed through or, I should say, we are passing through an era in which sensory experience was hailed as the sole basis of knowledge. We have passed through an era in which the intellectual, or left side of the brain, was thought to be superior over the aesthetic or right side of the brain. Did you notice the second stanza of the hymn we just sang? "I ask no dream, no prophet ecstasies, no sudden rending of the veil of clay, no angel visitant, no opening skies." Why not? Why are these experiences downgraded by the hymn writer? Wouldn't you like the veil of clay suddenly rended? Wouldn't you like to be visited by an angel? Wouldn't you like the sky opened? Wouldn't you like an ecstatic experience? Wouldn't you like to hear God speak to you in a dream? Somehow we have become so academic, so intellectual and so barren that we distrust the mystical, suspect our own feelings, and ignore our dreams.

What are dreams? Some say they are jibberish. Some are so disdainful of their dreams they forget them as soon as they awaken. Some consider dreams merely nightmares.

Some see dreams as a means of problem resolution. They believe that the dreams are at work reconciling ourselves to ourselves. Dreams are ourselves talking to ourselves. All the characters in the dreams are parts of ourselves working out their relationships. Dreams are the way our unconscious minds work out problems and conflicts. I remember a recurring dream I once had. For

several nights in a row I dreamed I was losing my hearing. I couldn't hear what people were saying. I held my hand to my ear and said, "Eh?" Then I realized that my body was trying to communicate with me. I went to the doctor, had my ears washed out, and the dreams stopped!

Is there more to dreams? Psychologist Abraham Schmitt in his book, Before I Wake, writes: (pg. 24)

Dreams are built-in monitoring systems that keep constant track of the deepest parts of existence. They touch on the areas of life that we simply dismiss while awake. Dreams call us to ask ultimate questions about the meaning of our life as a whole, or of a very simple event that we passed over during the day.

Morton Kelsey in The Other Side of Silence goes further. Not only are we confronted with ultimate questions about the meaning of life, but dreams are a bridge to another level of reality--gateway to the inner world--where God can speak to us. Listen to his fascinating definition of dreams: (pg. 165)

Dreams offer the best evidence for the existence of another level of reality and the best introduction to its nature...Christians, for nearly 1500 years, considered dreams to be a natural way in which spiritual reality reaches out and touches us. With this understanding the dream can be seen as the most natural way for God to give his revelation to people today.

Kelsey says that dreams can be the entry to the inner world. Trying to communicate with God, trying to untap the resources of the inner world, trying to meditate, trying to walk around in the spiritual world can be frustrating experiences. How often I feel as if I'm flat against a brick wall. I just don't seem to get through. Do you have that experience? While my grandpa was dying from cancer, he asked me to pray with him because he felt that his prayers didn't leave the room. Do you sometimes feel that your prayers don't connect?

Getting in touch with the inner world can also be a frightening experience. We are venturing into the unknown. If getting in touch with the inner world makes you somewhat apprehensive, then consider dreams to be the least dangerous or mysterious form of entry. We already dream. The next step is to get in touch with our dreams.

But, dreams may even be more than a means of problem resolution, a monitoring system and a contact with the inner world. The biblical and early church leaders believed that God reveals himself through dreams. I have a long way to go in understanding and appreciating my dreams, but I have had several experiences of inspiration. I have fallen asleep with a question or problem and awakened in the middle of the night or in the morning with an answer. Many a sermon has come to me while asleep. I awaken with the main idea for a sermon; sometimes even the outline is there in my mind. Some of you may wish I had kept sleeping!

Dreams often use images and symbols that are like foreign languages. It is possible to remember dreams and describe them in detail; but have no clue as to their meaning. Dreams use their own language and it takes reflection and insight to understand the messages. Edgar Cayce suggested that God is not

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too interested in giving us ready-made solutions to immediate problems. What God really seems to want is relationship with us. God perhaps prefers to use the language of symbols and images so that as we work through their meaning, we come to know the One who is behind the images and symbols.

The bottom line is relationship. What we as humans desperately crave is a dynamic, living relationship with our Creator--the One who made us, the One who loves us as revealed through Jesus Christ. Prayer is the act of communicating and relating with God. There's a whole new world out there! There's an exciting adventure waiting for us! There's a spiritual world as there is a physical world. God is waiting for us; prodding us to relate to him.

Dreams may be one of the ways God answers, one of the ways God speaks to you. Brothers and sisters, dream on!