

Unanswered Prayer

'Your will be done'

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Psalm 13

Psalm 13:1

**'How long, Lord? Will you forget me for ever?
How long will you hide your face from me?'**

Well, after all the joy and excitement of Easter, wonderful services, baptisms, egg hunts, family celebrations, we're returning today to our sermon series on prayer and how to do it. And it feels like we're coming back down to earth with a bit of a bump, because today we're thinking about that whole knotty subject of unanswered prayer, those times when silence prevails and we're left wondering what God is doing and what on earth is going on.

Now, today is often called Low Sunday in the church calendar. It's one of those couple of weeks either after Christmas or after Easter when things are a bit quiet and only the faithful few turn up on a Sunday. So well done, you are the faithful few! That is so good. I'm very grateful that you're here and listening. But in some ways I think it's actually really relevant to talk today about unanswered prayer, because after the extraordinary events of that first Easter and the resurrection, after Jesus had opened up a new and living way for people to get right with God, and the work of changing the world was about to begin for the disciples, you would have thought it would be all systems go, that there would be huge crowd appearances, healings happening left, right and centre as everything was unleashed, and queues forming to receive instant answers to prayer. But we know it wasn't like that.

Actually, what we find in the scriptures is that many of Jesus' post-resurrection experiences are still strangely mysterious. The disciples didn't always recognise him. They weren't always sure what was happening. For example, the pair on the road to Emmaus didn't really understand the significance of their encounter, what Jesus had been saying, or indeed whether it was him, this stranger, until after he had left them. It was only really in retrospect that they realised the significance of him breaking bread with them and explaining the scriptures. And they remembered and they felt that their hearts had been burning within them as he'd spoken. And similarly, the disciples on the beach weren't 100% sure that it really was the Lord who was cooking them breakfast. He was the same, and yet he was somehow different. Something was going on that was mysterious. Even at the ascension, after Jesus gave the Great Commission and he was taken up to heaven, the scripture says that some still doubted. Even at that most glorious moment, some still doubted. I think it's incredible that the Bible records that at this pivotal moment in the church's history, some still doubted.

And so I wish I could stand here and say to you that when you become a Christian all your prayers will be answered, you don't need to wrestle any longer with doubts and fears and uncertainty. But if I did, that would be a lie. Because the truth is, in this life, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:

1 Corinthians 13:12

¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a darkened mirror;

Clarity and understanding will only come on that day when we finally see God face to face. So in the meantime, even under this wonderful new covenant agreement that Christ bought for us and paid for us on the cross, we will still have to deal with the mystery of unanswered prayer. And that is hard, because it seems so unfair at times. It's a right pain, isn't it? It's so unfair.

Doesn't it seem so unfair that some people end up getting healed in a marvellous way through prayer, and yet others experience untimely deaths? Some people hear wonderful words of knowledge and receive extraordinary prophecies, whilst others of us seemingly peer into the silence. We only hear the static of everyday noise and anxieties. And so why do some people's children walk with the Lord every day of their lives, while others choose to walk away? Wider Christians in Iran and Lebanon and Ukraine get bombed even today, whilst others of us live in luxurious tranquillity.

The psalmist put it like this:

Psalm 13:1-2

**¹ How long, Lord? Will you forget me for ever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?**

So actually, what we find is that unanswered prayer is a painful thread that runs its way through the entirety of the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New. And around a third of the psalms are typically classed as laments, what they call laments, where we find prayers of anguish and sorrow and frustration. And if the Psalms are known as the prayer book of the Bible, then maybe we would expect to find ourselves wrestling with sorrow and frustration and anger too, actually.

But I think it's amazing that the Bible does not marginalise unanswered prayer. It doesn't gloss over it. Actually, it deals head on with it. Instead, it weaves it into the tapestry of what is normal faith. It is the experience of faith.

And Paul himself wrote these amazing words in 2 Corinthians 12:9. It's one of the most radically transformative statements in scripture, I think. And it comes after Paul has been wrestling with God in prayer to deliver him of this pain that he's experienced, what he called his thorn in the flesh. We don't know whether that was a physical ailment, we don't know whether that was mental anxiety, we don't know if that was somebody who was getting his goat and being a pain in his backside. But he writes this:

2 Corinthians 12:8-9

⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'

Whoa. It's an extraordinary moment, an extraordinary insight into some of the challenges which are a mark of mature discipleship. Paul didn't get an answer for his prayer for deliverance. I'm sure he prayed with great faith, but he didn't get the answer he was looking for. The answer wasn't at all what he expected, or I imagine what he would have wanted. And in this particular case, God's glory would be revealed in giving grace for the journey, not a simple shortcut to wholeness. So instead of the power to solve the problem, God's grace was poured out to be sufficient for us. And we need to hold on to him to steady us for the journey. It's not just about the destination.

Jesus also had to wrestle with unanswered prayer. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he fell to his knees and said, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup be taken away from me." In his humanity, he was so stressed that he was sweating blood over the prospect of an agonising death, and the burden of the world's sin and shame crushing his spirit. Any of us would have been the same. What a prospect, horrendous. And yet in the silence he went on to pray, "Yet not my will but yours be done." And every time we say the Lord's Prayer we say that line, "Your will be done, your will be done." And I just wonder how much we are willing to speak those words in that silent place of wrestling and anguish like Jesus.

The strange thing is, we know that Jesus knew he was headed for the cross, he knew that was his destiny, he knew that's what he had come to do. And yet he prayed and wrestled about it nevertheless. It's curious, actually. And wrestling through the silence is part of our discipleship journey. Jesus rebuked the disciples for not being able to tarry with him even for one hour. And so this series on prayer and how to do it must include this painful part, which is about wrestling in the silence, or, when God is on mute, as Pete Greig puts it in his book.

So sometimes prayer goes unanswered because God has a bigger purpose, a wider purpose beyond our human scope of understanding. And sometimes the answer is no, because God has a bigger plan. That was God's answer, really, when Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. But sometimes unanswered prayer may also be all about timing as well, God's timing. If my boys had said, "Daddy, can I drive the car?" when they were at primary school, I would have said no, not meaning no never, but meaning no, not yet, because you're not old enough yet. I think I can recall I stuck them on my lap and they steered the steering wheel a little bit, but only when the time was right were they granted that.

Now, one of the only times I've seen someone get up out of a wheelchair after prayer was at a Revival Fires meeting in Dudley. And it was all a bit intense as many, many people were praying earnestly around this fellow in a wheelchair. But eventually he was helped up, and by the end of the evening he was running circuits around the venue. It was extraordinary, and I will never forget a few telltale markers that showed to me that something miraculous had taken place. Firstly, his family were beside themselves, weeping and hugging, they didn't know what to do, what to feel. And then secondly, his trousers fell down as he was running around. He wasn't used to getting up and being vertical. I thought that was great. But I'll never forget what he said when he later shared about what had happened. And he said this: "I must have been prayed for over 2,000 times before today. But in the end, tonight was my night."

And so time and again, for repeated times, there was no answer to prayer, there was no answer. But then on this day, in God's perfect timing, the way was opened and the answer was yes. So why then, why on this day, why on that occasion? I don't know. We just don't know. God knows. But what did I learn? Well, keep praying. Keep praying. Because today might just be your day. It might just be your day when the Lord answers in a new way.

And Luke records particularly that Jesus taught the need for perseverance and persistence in prayer. He shared two parables: the widow who kept on nagging a judge for justice, so that's nagging prayer, Jesus thought was good, and then also there was the parable of the neighbour banging on the door asking for bread to set before an unexpected guest. In Matthew 7:7-8 it says this: "Ask and keep on asking, seek and keep on seeking, knock and keep on knocking, because the one who asks will receive, the one who seeks will find, and the one who knocks, the door will be opened."

Matthew 7:7-8

⁸ "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' "Ask and keep on asking, seek and keep on seeking, knock and keep on knocking, because the one who asks will receive, the one who seeks will find, and the one who knocks, the door will be opened."

So the psalms include unanswered prayers. Paul wrestled with unanswered prayer. Jesus wrestled with unanswered prayer. But he taught us to keep on praying nevertheless. Nevertheless, we keep praying.

And the Bible does also share one other insight into the mystery of unanswered prayer. And that's in the book of Daniel in the Old Testament. We read that Daniel prayed and fasted about the plight of the exiles under Cyrus, who was the new king of Persia. But it took three weeks for him to receive any sort of answer. And then in chapter 10, verses 12 to 14, we read that an angel came to him and said: "Don't be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to understanding and to humble yourself before God, your words were heard and I've come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me for 21 days, and then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me." We understand that as an angel called Michael. "Because I was detained there with the king of Persia. And now I have come to you to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come."

So in Daniel's case, the delay was due to spiritual battle in the heavenly places. And Paul writes in Ephesians 6: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." And just note again that Paul uses that word struggle, or wrestle. It's a wrestle. And often the life of faith, often the life of Christianity, is about wrestling through. We're not only dealing with natural cause and effect, but sometimes there are hidden forces at work in the unseen dimensions of the universe.

Now it's important to say that not all delayed or unanswered prayer is due to spiritual opposition. We just don't know. Paul's thorn was about his spiritual formation. Jesus wrestling in Gethsemane was about aligning with God's will. But the truth is, for many of us on this side of glory, we will never know the reason. We'll never know why it is our prayers aren't answered, and we'll just be carrying the weight, a growing weight of disappointment, around with us. But that is what Christian life is like sometimes. And that's why we need each other, we need each other to help carry those burdens. I picture it like wearing a big rucksack full of burdens, but actually when we're with each other you can lift each other's load and help bear that weight for each other.

Charlie Cleverly described the Christian life as twin tracks: the track of joy, with wonderful experiences of God's love and grace, alongside it the parallel track of sadness and pain and mystery. And in the end, sometimes all we can do is carry on, take one step forward and pray, "Oh Lord, over to you, let your will be done, your will be done."

But the thing is, we are never alone in this place of silent wrestling. God's silence is not the same as his absence, and the Bible makes that clear. Jesus promised to be with us always, even to the very end of the age. And he sent his Holy Spirit to help us, even when we don't know what to pray, or we don't think we can carry on. He is there right with us, even when all we can manage is a groan. Who's ever groaned in prayer?

Romans 8:26-28

²⁶The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for, but the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. ²⁷And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will. ²⁸And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God."

So even in the silence, even when we don't know what to pray for, even when all we can manage is a groan, God is right there with us. He is working, he is helping. And one day we will understand, one day we will know in full, even as we are fully known. And that is our promise.



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