

Unanswered Prayer

'Your will be done'

Peter Durman

Psalm 13

Psalm 13:1

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

So, we're resuming this sermon series on how to pray, and we're starting back with this quite tricky topic of unanswered prayer. We're often, I think, in church very good at sharing the good news of answered prayer, and it's always - so for me personally, I always find it so affirming to hear that good news, you know, of a prayer answered, someone healed, some conflict resolved. But the part that's a lot more tricky is what we do with those prayers that we consider unanswered. There are few experiences, I think, in Christian life that are perhaps more difficult, more confusing, more deeply personal than unanswered prayer, you know, because we're encouraged - we're taught to pray, we're encouraged to pray - and we are told that God listens to our prayers.

And yet, if we're honest, I'm sure many of us carry prayers that seem to have gone unanswered. And so naturally we're left asking, or sort of quietly desperately thinking, why isn't God answering me? Why is it - why are these prayers for healing that did not come? Why are there prayers for reconciliation that never happened? Or even: is God listening at all? And I don't necessarily have all the answers, but I will share a few reflections and a little bit of testimony.

And I start this talk with a bit of trepidation, because I'll share some things that are personally a little bit sad, but I think will hopefully be helpful - and stick with it, there are some more hopeful messages in there as well. So I'll start with a story about something from my own life. It goes back to - it was actually when we gathered as a family to celebrate my dad's birthday. This is about thirteen or so years ago now. It was - we had a lovely weekend, it was one of those really joyous sort of May weekends, the sun was shining, we were outside, it was lovely - and we all kind of then went back to our homes and so on. And we got that call you never really ever want to have, which was: "Mum, you know, she'd gone into hospital suddenly." Mum had been pretty fit and well, and so it was a bit of a surprise that she'd gone into hospital. They thought initially she might have had a heart attack, and then they thought it was gallstones, and we thought, okay, well, Mum improved and she came out of hospital. And they said to her, "Yeah, you have to have an operation to remove the gallbladder, but all kind of should be well." And I prayed - I prayed, naturally. I've been a Christian since I was a teenager at school, so I prayed that Mum would get the treatment that she needed. And I'm sure many of you have experienced something similar: a dear relative or friend who's ill and you just want God to help them, help them and restore them. And you know that God can do miracles, so why not here? Why not now, when it really matters?

Anyway, eventually she went for a scan, and they said she had a shadow on her liver. And it sounded ominous - the word "shadow" is quite an ominous word. So, I then sort of stepped up the prayers. And she then had to go for another scan, and by this time we were kind of just before Christmas. And I remember it very distinctly. It was literally Christmas Eve. I went and she had the scan - I picked her up, my Dad and Mum, from the hospital in London - and it wasn't good news. So, cancer was confirmed. It had spread quite widely across her body, and there wasn't really much they could do. So, we had this Christmas together. It was quite a hard Christmas, if I'm honest. I carried on praying for healing, but by New Year's Eve, Mum was back in hospital again. And it became clear it was now really about palliative care. And my prayers, if I'm honest, shifted to be more about easing her pain and suffering than necessarily about healing. Some might argue that I should have carried on praying for a miracle, but something told me this was Mum's time. And then Mum died basically a month later, at the end of January.

And I've reflected so many times, trying to make sense of it - why prayers are seemingly unanswered. And I've shared it because it was a time when I desperately wanted God to intervene. And I suspect many of you have experienced a similar pain of - God, you just want God to do something. However, as we all know, for those left behind, life goes on. And I'll come back to that story a little bit later.

But I think one of the most important things to say at the outset of all of this is that unanswered prayer is not a sign of weak faith. Sometimes I think that's kind of how we're made to feel a little bit - oh, we just didn't have quite enough faith, or I just didn't believe enough. And prayer is not an exercise in positive mental attitude - oh, if I just will it enough it will happen. It's not like one of those fairground strength machines that test your strength: if I could just hit it harder, then the bell rings and the prayer will be answered. It doesn't kind of work like that. We're told to pray in faith, yes, but this is a faith that is about a trust or dependence in God; it's not about wishful thinking. And Hebrews 11 tells us that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Prayer is never, I think, wishful thinking - it springs from a trust in a personal God.

So that's the first reflection I sort of share. And then the second point, which I found comforting, is that we should take comfort that unanswered prayer is woven through the very fabric of scripture. It is a theme that does come up quite a lot, and we heard it today in the two readings. So in Psalm 13 we hear that deep pain: the psalmist cries out, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts, and day after day have sorrow in my heart?" You can hear that pain and anguish - it's not a polite prayer, is it? It's not a sort of tidy theology. This is a raw, unfiltered anguish. And yet here it is in the Bible. In fact, there are many examples in the Bible just like this, and I think it tells us something important: God is not offended by those questions. God is not threatened by the honesty of that challenge. God, I think, invites it. And the psalmist does not stop praying when God seems to be silent - the psalmist is praying through that silence. And at the end of the psalm we have that: "But I trust in your unfailing love, and my heart rejoices in your salvation." So, he comes back to this trust that I think is so important.

And then we come to that second reading - we come to something very similar in that reading with Paul's words in 2 Corinthians: another unanswered prayer. As Paul speaks, in a very challenged way, about this thorn in his flesh - some struggle or suffering, we don't know exactly what it was - but we do know this: that Paul says three times he pleaded with the Lord to take it away from him. So Paul prayed - he prayed earnestly, repeatedly, faithfully - a man of great faith. And the answer? Well, it wasn't healing, and it wasn't a removal of that thorn, it wasn't an instant relief. Instead, Paul hears: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." In other words, Paul's prayer was answered, but not in the way he wanted.

And this forces us, I think, to confront a difficult truth. God sometimes answers our prayers by saying no, or not yet, or even: I'll do something different instead. And I think part of our struggle with unanswered prayer comes from a misunderstanding of what prayer is. And this is where we come on to "Your will be done," which is the other sort of theme of this evening. We often treat prayer - perhaps without realising it - as a way of getting God to act according to our plans. And those first three petitions we hear from the Lord's Prayer - "Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done" - these are all an invitation from God to unite ourselves with his purposes and his actions. And on these three petitions, I think, depend all the other petitions in the prayer. Without these, it's hard to pray for forgiveness, it's hard to pray for our daily bread, and we cannot live with God unless we are in agreement with his purposes, with his cause, with his will.

And so, therefore, our prayer is not a mechanism for control. Sure, I think we can ask for things - we should ask for things, we're encouraged to ask for things. For example, in John 14: "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son." But note the important phrase: in my name. And it is about a relationship. It is about aligning yourself with God's will, with God's intentions. And when Jesus teaches us to pray in the Lord's Prayer, he includes these words: "Your will be done."

And I've often reflected that so much depends on the tone with which those words are said. It can be said with a sort of shrug of resignation: "Your will be done." Or it can be said with resentment almost, like: "Oh, if I must, Lord, your will be done." There are different ways of saying that, "Your will be done." But prayer is not about bending God's will to ours - it's about aligning our hearts with his. And I think that prayer, "Your will be done," is not a prayer of resignation. It's in fact a rather risky, even quite a crazy, prayer of submission and even commission. It's about how we sign on for our work in the kingdom. And to be honest, that can be painful, because it does mean letting go of outcomes that perhaps we desperately want.

So thinking back to that time with my mum - and I have tried to make sense of it through that pain and suffering - what came out of it? Well, I can see a few things. It did draw my family closer together. And for me, it definitely drew me closer to God. I relied on God very heavily during this time. And that - I don't know whether it's coincidence, who knows - but that year was a bit of a watershed year for me. I decided to sell my house in Bristol, and actually, coincidentally, on the anniversary of my mother's death, I moved out. And actually I was on my way to North Stoke, where I found a very welcoming community and a very welcoming church. And then shortly after that, I changed jobs, and there were a few other changes that happened, but things were going relatively well. Naturally there are challenges, but things were going well. But perhaps most of all, I found myself on a kind of newly invigorated walk with God, which caused me to become more involved in the church in North Stoke, and other things then happened, which I'll come back to in a moment.

But before we get there, there's another notable unanswered prayer in the Bible - a most significant moment in time that looks on the surface like perhaps the ultimate unanswered prayer. Mark's Gospel tells us in chapter 14 about Jesus' heart-rending prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before he knows he's going to be crucified. And he says: "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you - take this cup from me." It is a sincere prayer, a faithful prayer, a prayer from the Son to the Father. "Abba, Father" - that deep expression of a loving Son to a loving Father for whom everything is possible.

And we hear that he's capable of doing anything. And yet the cup is not taken away, because Jesus also prays in the very next line: "Yet not what I will, but what you will." And of course Jesus goes to the cross. And if I suspect that if we were standing there at that moment in time, we might say that prayer was not answered. But we know the story doesn't end there. And through the cross comes the resurrection; through that suffering comes salvation; and through that apparent silence from God comes the greatest act of God's love.

So I think that means that God's "no" or "not yet" is not the same as God's absence. And even in that darkest moment, God was at work, bringing about something greater than anyone could see or imagine at that time. And in fact Jesus repeatedly talks about doing God's will, not his own. There are many examples in the Gospels - I'll just give a couple here. In John 4, when he's with the Samaritan woman by the well and he's offered food by the disciples, Jesus says: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." Or in John 6, after he said "I am the bread of life," he says: "I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me." Therefore it's no wonder that the Lord's Prayer has this line, "Your will be done," which carries so much meaning.

So how do we kind of live with unanswered prayer? That's probably the big question. But perhaps before I come back to that, let me come back to my own story. So there I am, I'm living in North Stoke, life is good - not completely without challenges, but that's life, isn't it? - but things are going well. However, there is a big unanswered prayer still lurking. A prayer that has gone unanswered for literally decades. It's lurking not just for me but for someone else as well. And many of you might have now guessed how this part of the story works out. And my wife Jo - she said it's okay to share this - throughout this part of my life I've been single. I've had girlfriends early in my life, but then sort of none of them had led to an enduring relationship, and I'd sort of realised I was probably going to be a bachelor. But I did carry on praying. I prayed that I would meet someone. And if I'm really honest, my prayers did fade over time as time went by - but I did keep praying. After literally decades of prayer - and I know Jo was also praying, and so many of our friends and family were praying persistently, faithfully, for an answer - many of you know that we got married last year. Yeah. So there was this answer to decades of unanswered prayer.

So there's one thing I've learned: it's that we need to be patient and persistent in prayer, and to listen to God. I think that's the other part. How can we know his will unless we listen? So often I find my daily prayers can end up being a list of requests, and I've been learning the discipline of dedicating time to listen more to God - to create a space where I can be on receive as well as transmit. And it's been so important as I've been trying to weigh up important questions in my life, as I retired and thought about what I was going to do next, and so on. It's been an important reflection. But then we come back to that question: so how do we live with unanswered prayer? I don't have easy answers, if I'm honest. I know it's not by pretending it doesn't hurt, it's not by offering easy explanations, and it's not by forcing ourselves into some sort of shallow optimism. I think there are probably four things I would hold on to, some of which I've covered already.

I think first of all, most importantly, we keep praying. Like the psalmist, we bring our real selves to God. We bring our questions, our doubts, our frustrations - all of it - and we pray through that silence, persistently. I think the second thing is to try to listen - to try to hear God's will. We look for God's presence, not just his intervention. And sometimes the answer is not a changed situation, but an assurance. Sometimes, as Paul heard: "My grace is sufficient for you."

And then the third thing I would reflect on is about trust. We trust God even when we don't understand his actions, even when he is quiet. "Your will be done" really is an act of trust, not defeat.

And finally, we hold on to hope. I think because the story is not yet finished - we don't really know when things will finish - we keep going, and there's always hope in that sense.

So four things: pray persistently, listen, trust, hope. And I think, reflecting on this - I think, like a prayer in Jesus' name, in trying to follow God's will - I think it's a bit like a lifelong training in taking God's will a little more seriously and our own will a little less so.

And then finally, perhaps a word of comfort. If you are carrying an unanswered prayer today, especially a painful one, you are not alone. You stand in the company of the psalmists, who cried out "How long, how long?" - and so many psalms have that same lament. You're in the company of Paul, who pleaded for relief. And you're in the company even of Jesus, who prayed in Gethsemane. I think more importantly, you are held by a God who hears even when he seems silent, a God who is present even when he can feel distant at times, and a God whose purposes are good even when they are sometimes hidden from us.

So I think there's no easy formula, no easy resolution. We hold on to something better than easy answers: we hold on to that honesty in the scripture, the fact that these examples of unanswered prayer are throughout the scripture; we hang on to that example of Christ; and we hang on to that assurance of grace - that grace from God. And so we dare to pray "Your will be done." And even in that silence, we hold on to this promise: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Amen.



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