



Unanswered Prayer - February 23, 2020

OPEN

In the 18th Century the prolific hymnwriter Charles Wesley wrote, “Faith, mighty faith the promise sees / and looks to that alone / laughs at impossibilities / and cries it shall be done!” This is an inspiring! But what about when we do not see a promise fulfilled? What about unanswered prayer?!

In our current sermon series, “Lord Teach Us To Pray” we are learning from the “Lord’s Prayer”. How is this journey going? What are you learning about God and yourself through prayer?

The Lord’s Prayer is set in the context of “The Sermon on the Mount” in which we are instructed to live in the Kingdom of God. Last week we were challenged to intercede – to pray *for* others to God “Your Kingdom come!” Do you remember what David suggested last week? Kingdom living requires Kingdom praying!

Earlier in our series we were challenged to have our prayers recalibrated by Jesus’ model prayer. We must move...

- from duty to delight
- from desperate to dependent
- from asking to adoring
- from flailing to focusing

Today we are considering the short phrase in Matthew 6:10b – “Your will be done.” And we will wrestle with the fact that, by all appearances, God’s will is not always done...or is it?

DIG

Admittedly, we are dealing with prickly problem. *Theodicy* is the technical term we use to express the dilemma that at the same time God is omnipotent, omniscient, completely compassionate – yet, evil exists in the world.

To a degree, the problem of unanswered prayer resides within this greater challenge of theodicy.

However, is any prayer truly unanswered when viewed from God’s sovereign perspective? To say yes would suggest that God is insufficient in His rule and reign. Is it possible that the notion of a prayer remaining unanswered is actually a human construct? Hmm...good question!

In session five of [The Prayer Course](#) presenter Pete Greig suggests that even Jesus endures unanswered prayer. For example, Jesus prayed for the Church to be united, which appears unfulfilled. However, this is the viewpoint from our human perspective! Indeed, everyone could tell a personal story of a prayer unanswered.

Now James 4:2b-3 solve a most obvious point. If you request something inappropriate (incongruent to the Kingdom) God will certainly remain unresponsive...whether we are praying...

- Like the “*ball in the cup*” game, selfishly restricting God in our request to only what we have asked of Him
- Like the “*spinning top*” game, where we take little thought for our request, and just throw out some vague prayer for blessing or help

But when we do request appropriately, and it appears that God has not heard or acted, what then? Let’s look at three ways that God encourages our spiritual progress even when it appears that He has not answered our prayers.

First, consider the way of weakness - II Corinthians 12:7-10

In this account we learn that Paul prayed to be relieved of a physical infirmity. Did he put God into a one-option situation? Did he carelessly spin off prayers for help? No. Paul was specific, praying three times. But when God did not answer his prayer Paul submitted. As a result, Paul encountered the grace of God for the pathway of weakness and suffering.

In the epistle of James we have this apparent contradiction expressed throughout the whole letter. At the same time Christians should expect God to be powerful we should also expect to persevere. His ultimate faithfulness is realized in our growing faithfulness!

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” James 1:2-5

Second, consider the delight of diversion - Acts 16:6-7

The second way that unanswered prayer encourages our spiritual progress is through diversion. Paul's heart was set on ministry in Asia – and this would have been reflected in many prayers. However, God diverted him from this path and sent Paul to Macedonia instead.

Looking back there was great joy and blessing that came from this. But in the moment, being diverted can be a painful, confusing unanswered prayer.

Do you remember Gideon? See his story in Judges 6 and 7. His fighting force God reduced from thousands to a few hundred. He was a reluctant general in the first place! God recalibrated his idea of success so that he would trust in God only (see Psalm 62:1-2). How might our small step of re-directed obedience be a “falling domino” that leads to great Kingdom blessing?

Have you heard of Bidy Chambers? You may know of her husband Oswald, the famous Scottish evangelist. Assigned to Egypt as a WWI chaplain, Chambers struggled with bringing his family. But he obeyed God and as a result Bidy was there at his services, taking copious notes.

After Oswald Chambers died in Egypt, his wife Bidy compiled her notes into the beloved devotional classic ***My Utmost For His Highest*** which has blessed and helped so many people!

Third, consider the resource of resilience - Isaiah 40:27-31

We should never question God's capability or compassion – verses 10-11 tells us He “rules with a mighty arm” AND “tends his flock like a shepherd”. That is why we are challenged in verse 27 to not question if God will answer.

This does not mean that we do not bring our agony and confusion to God in humble dependence. But as Pete Grieg puts it, “God's silence does not equal God's absence!” (from [The Prayer Course](#) , **Session 5**)

This is the message that Isaiah delivers – even when it appears that God is absent from our circumstance, we must believe that He is present. Further, we must trust His promise that He will produce resilience in our lives.

On a practical note, let's be very careful how we encourage eagle's flight in one another. For example, did Job need a reminder that God would provide grace to be resilient through his suffering? Certainly.

But consider what Karl Barth wrote, “Job's friends...were in their way excellent men. They had only one fault, that they wanted to be his teachers, not his friends, and once behind their desks they never climbed down.” (***The Only Way***, 93)

REFLECT

It is important when thinking about unanswered prayer that there be submission to God's sovereignty. Why not take a few minutes to listen to Laura Story's powerful praise song “[Majesty](#)”.

Especially take note of the phrase “may all I am be lost in the depths of who You are”. What a great phrase! It is something essential to express to God if we are truly going to let Him rule and reign in our lives, even when we don't understand everything going on in our experience.

We can also turn our hearts to the certainties which communion commemorates. All our deepest longings and prayers are fundamentally and fully answered in Christ because of...

His Agony – the loving, self-less sacrifice on the cross

His Victory – His powerful, life-transforming resurrection

Take some time to reflect on the certainty of our salvation as Paul expressed it in I Corinthians 15:1-4 and 55-58.

You are invited to listen to [session five of the Prayer Course](#).