

Unanswered Prayer 4. Passiontide. April 3rd 2022.
Ephesians 6:1-18, John 11:55 – chapter 12:11.

Why does God not answer prayer? (2)

We are exploring the possible reasons why our prayers may not be answered. The reasons we are exploring: God's world – the way it seems to work; God's will and how it interacts with our free will; God's war – the spiritual battle.

We continue with God's will.

Relationship

Some prayers may not be answered, because God delays an answer, as God Himself is a Greater Answer than the thing we are asking for, and He wants to use our sense of need to draw us into a deeper relationship with Him.

In our Gospel, Jesus knows his death and burial approaches. It has been said that the whole Bible can be summed up in John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." God seeks for us to be in relationship with Him, eternally, and not to perish – to be eternally separated from him. And God will do this through the death of Jesus.

We need to remember "In God's kingdom, happiness is not marked out primarily by popularity, fat bank accounts, or clean bills of health but rather proximity to the Father, (Greig, God on Mute).

So God may use various means to deepen our relationship with him. Jesus taught persistence in prayer – eg in Matthew 6, the sense of the Greek is 'ask and keep on asking, knock and keep on knocking etc'. Now we return to persistence later. I remember autumn 2020, I was praying about the following year for what to focus upon in our life groups, and I knew that the first Prayer Course was, something I thought it was good for us to do. But I was not sure. My logic suggested yes. But I wanted to know the Father's Heart. The idea had not settled in me, it did not click, I did not have a fullness of peace.

But I wanted to press on, until I got a clear answer. 'In short I was drawing nearer to God precisely because of my unanswered prayer.'" (Greig, God on Mute).

It was a couple of months later – I continued to praying about it from time to time – and then one day I had the peace, I knew it was right course to do. In delaying, looking back, my relationship with God has deepened. I saw proof – to persevere, that he would speak in time, and so now regarding guidance I approach God in a deeper way. So in our delay, is he using this to draw us closer to him, or deeper in our walk with him?

A biblical example may be David. David was God's anointed person. David knew that. Saul knew he was being replaced. Yet for, a few years, David is chased all over the place, and we hear his prayers in the psalms. God delayed the action to make David King. In that delay, was God forming David's relationship with him, drawing him closer, taking him deeper?

God's aim is relationship with him. Yet it is more than fire insurance – or to join a Jesus club – he wants a *personal* relationship with you. So sometimes he may *deprive us* or *delay us* of something, in order to *draw us* to Someone, Him.

Some prayers may not be answered, because God delays a response, an answer, as God Himself is a Greater Answer than the thing we are asking for, and He wants to use our sense of need to draw us into a deeper relationship with Him.

God's will vs free will

Some prayers are not answered because God will not force a person to do something that he or she does not want to do.

Jesus will be killed, buried. We heard about the plotting to arrest Jesus, and to kill him. Yet God is determined to respect humanity's free will.

We see that in the Garden of Eden, humanity has to choose over a tree. "God created for them the dangerous possibility of disobedience in order to create the higher possibility of voluntary submission." Greig, God on Mute. They took the possibility of disobedience and the consequences were cataclysmic. The following chapter, with Cain and Abel, God warns Cain about how sin wants to master him, but it is left to his free will what he will do next.

A prayer of Jesus has remained unanswered for 2000 years now. John 17 'I pray that those who will believe in me ... that all of them may be one. ... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them.' The plan of the Father is for the world to know. Yet this prayer of Jesus remains unfulfilled. The Body is divided. This prayer depends on voluntary human obedience. Greig 'in our determination to divide and our refusal to forgive one another, we (mere humans) deny Jesus an answer to His cherished prayer for unity.' God on Mute.

"Earth shattering sin came into the world, through the simple choice of our forefathers, Adam and Eve, and as we see, and know, it took another simple yet cataclysmic choice – this time from Jesus, praying: not my will but yours be done – to bring about salvation." Greig. God on Mute.

The free will give to Adam, Eve, the Jewish chief priests, to Mary and Judas, still goes on today. Pirelli Tyre Company had an advertising slogan. 'Power is nothing without control.' Is it possible that some of our questions about unanswered prayer, is that we mistakenly expect it to work like that slogan – power exerted, like a remote. Click the button, the change happens.

God respects free will. Our prayers he may use to influence. Prayer can be like going to a restaurant. Prayer presents them with the menu – the ideas, the options, it may make them even hungry or trigger taste buds for a particular meal. God is at work supernaturally in people. Yet as Greig says – we cannot force the food into their mouths.

Some prayers are not answered because God will not force a person to do something that he or she does not want to do.

We move to God's War.

Satanic Opposition

Some prayers are not answered because God's will is being directly contested by 'the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms'.

Perseverance in prayer become vital.

It is possible to say that God answers every prayer in one of three ways: yes, no, or not yet (which can mean wait or persevere). But at times, it can be a fourth. God says 'yes' but Satan says 'no'.

I remember a preacher saying – if God is closing the door, we stop praying. But if Satan is, we persevere. You may wonder – well where is that idea in the bible. Paul writes to the Thessalonians 'For we wanted to come to you – certainly I Paul did, again and again – but Satan stopped us.' Now on other occasions, such as Acts 16 Paul's second missionary journey, it was the Holy Spirit preventing Paul etc going into parts of Turkey. What could have been Satan's hindrance? Was it health? Was it opposition? How did Paul know?

One way may be that Paul was given spiritual insight, at the time, into what was going on. Or was it in hindsight, as he looked back?

When Paul teaches the Ephesians, he covers many practical topics of discipleship. Then at the end, his final topic : spiritual warfare – "finally be strong in the Lord and in mighty power. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, the authorities against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." We heard Judas complain. In John 13 'the evening meal was being served and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus.' It isn't all about Judas. Our war is not just against flesh and blood.

An important passage is Daniel 10. Daniel has been praying for 3 weeks. Then an angel. "Do not be afraid Daniel. Since the first day that you set

your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me 21 days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me because I was detained there.”

We see something about the battle that can go on when we pray. And the time delay which may mean we need to persevere. Yet we cannot attribute everything to the demonic. CS Lewis reminds us: ‘there are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors.’”

We see in the events of Holy WeThe war is won – Satan is defeated. Christ’s shout – it is finished, the resurrection –our adversary is defeated. Satan has read the end of the great book – but he going to cause as much damage as he can to God’s world, his people and to thwart God’s will where he can.

Some prayers are not answered because God’s will is being directly contested by ‘the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms’. Perseverance in prayer become vital.

Faith

Some prayers are not answered because we just do not believe they will be – but faith grows in us as we get to know God.

This is the one, perhaps we have all wondered about. Maybe we have been told this. I met one Christian who told me, that they had been told that they had not been healed due to their lack of faith. It was totally their fault.

I feel this can be a very damaging comment to share with people. Also I believe often such comments may come from a faulty theology that says, God only wants and allows good things, therefore when we have problems it is due to our lack of faith or our sin.

But Jesus did point to the importance of faith. After the Transfiguration, Jesus comes down the mountain, and finds the disciples who could not cast a demon out of a young boy. They ask him why – ‘Why could we not drive it out?’ Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as mustard seed ...”

So how can we grow in faith? We get to know God, we grow in faith. We get to know his faithfulness.

Some practices are: Prayer and worship, Bible Study, Journalling, but two more to focus a little on:

Fellowship. In community, we get to further know God’s character through others. Their experiences of God, their thanksgivings. It is one of the ways we form each other – over our coffees, our burgers to talk about things of God, how we are discovering him, how he has been faithful. Hebrews 11 describes a tremendous cloud of witness; since we are surrounded by such a cloud. It is their testimonies. What are your testimonies. Can you share it? We can be a cloud of witnesses to each other.

Start small

You may not have the faith to enter into a hospital to pray for the sick. You may want to start with praying for a faster recovery for an ankle injury, a bad back, a headache. We then grow further. We see Jesus do the same thing with the disciples – being with them, sending them out, first small steps for them; rather than they were dropped right into it when he ascended.

When chatting with folks, you need to be super careful before saying to any believer, you don’t have enough faith that is why that prayer has not been answered. But we do need to reflect if we do lack faith and seek to continue to grow in faith.

Some prayers are not answered because we just don’t believe they will be, but faith grows as we get to know God.

Perseverance

Some prayers just have not been answered yet –just don't give up.

Some prayers get answered the first time you ask, others take months, or years. Day by day you say the same thing to God and wonder if it will ever get a breakthrough. You pray, each day the same thing, then one day, it happens.

Luke 18 says to pray and not give up.

Imagine the angel who visited Daniel came to you and say – your next prayer will bring the breakthrough. You'd do it. What if the angel visited and said, if you pray every day for 365 days for this, then it will happen. We'd probably do that too. We have no idea how long it will take. But Jesus told us not to give up.

It is possible in the delay Jesus wants to teach or deal with other areas in our lives. Two examples. In the calming of the storm, they wake him up, he says 'you of little faith, why are you so afraid?' Only then, after teaching them, he got up and calmed the storm. When the paralysed man was laid before him via the hole in the roof, Jesus did not heal him. He saw their faith. Yet he says 'your sins are forgiven.' Then heals. He dealt with something first.

James Fraser was a missionary among the Lsiu people in China. He realized God's will was being resisted by Satan. So he persevered. He said: 'the opposition will not be overcome by reasoning or by pleading but by (chiefly) steady persistent prayer ... I am not setting my face like flint: if the work seems to fail, then pray; if services fall flat, then pray still more; if months slip by with little or no result, then pray still more and get others helping you.'

Some prayers just have not been answered yet –just don't give up.

Integrity.

Some prayers are not answered because areas of disobedience in our lives. Are there hidden sins we need to confess or action we need to take?

Again, we need to be careful with this topic as some of us will assume it is our fault why prayers are not answered.
But it is important to reflect prayerfully.

James 5: 'And the prayer in faith will make the sick person well: the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.' Sin can possibly be a role within a lack of healing. Possibly. James suggests that. Confess then pray for healing.

Psalm 66 shares: if I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.'

Isaiah 58:2-9.

Why have we fasted and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed? There are fasting for need for the nation.

God says: 'But on the day of your fasting you do as you please and exploit all your workers... You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen, to loosen the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set oppressed free and break every sin. ... Then your light will break like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear ... Then you will call and the LORD will answer, you will cry for help and he will say 'Here am I?'

The nation, individuals are sinning – injustice in this case – how they are treating others. And God says – you cannot expect to be heard...

A word for husbands in 1 Peter 3

Husbands, in the same way, be considerate as you live with your wives and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing hinders your prayers.' This is about the husband's personal prayers.

You may have attitudes towards your wife – emotional turmoil, conflict etc. Theologian Wayne Grudem, “No Christian husband should presume to think that any spiritual good will be accomplished by his life without an effective ministry of prayer. And no husband may expect an effective prayer life, unless he lives with his wife ‘in an understanding way, bestowing honour’ on her.

If husbands fail to give their wives honour, it affects their fellowship, their relationship with their wives and it affects the relationship with God. A writer said “the sighs of the injured wife come between the husband’s prayers and God’s hearing.”

Conclusion.

We have explored 13 reasons for unanswered prayer. 5 were derived from looking at God’s world, 4 from an understanding of God’s will, and form the consequences of God’s war – the spiritual battle.

The reason for unanswered prayer, may be one of the ones mentioned, or it may be a combination or none of the above. We return to the example of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

The God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us^[c] from Your Majesty’s hand.¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, that we will not serve your gods.’

God can answer what we ask and need but if he will not, we will remain faithful...

Shall we pray.