

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Unanswered prayer

Presented by Leo Douma

Recently someone asked me “how do we handle unanswered prayer? That’s a question that comes from deep in the heart. It’s actually a question tinged with anguish and even anger. Doesn’t the Bible teach that God has promised to answer prayer? **Matthew 7.7**. So many of us, in faith have prayed about the health of someone we love, but they are still sick or have even died. We have prayed often about the things we struggle within our marriage, or that child who resists the faith, but nothing has changed. We asked God for a Christian partner, but still we are alone. We have asked God for guidance – what should I do with my life – but me get nothing but silence. I think all of us have struggled with this stuff, and probably still do. How do we respond to unanswered prayer?

Let’s look at how the apostle Paul dealt with in 2 Corinthians 12:7-9. Paul describes his incredible experience of seeing what heave was like. It was an experience beyond words, ecstatic, spine-tingling stuff. He speaks of it as a “surpassingly great revelation.” So he could say, “I have seen things no one else has, I have experienced heaven”. You can imagine how easy it would be for him to get on himself. So we understand when he says “To keep me from being conceited because of these revelations, there was give me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan, to torment me”

Paul goes through this terrible suffering, the thorn in the flesh. Imagine a large splinter stuck in your side, that goes deeper with every moment, leaving you in agony or unable to think straight. We don’t know what the thorn was. There are lots of theories, including that he struggled badly with sexual fantasy, he had a speech impediment, he had epilepsy, had constantly recurring attacks of malaria, he had terrible eyesight, and that he was forever being persecuted. You can imagine how hard it was to minister with any of these conditions.

Now what did Paul do about the torment? He prayed of course. He tells us “three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me”. He was in agony and pounded the doors of heaven. Saying he pleaded “three times” meant he kept it up, he was persistent. He was passionate. The word “pleaded” is the same Greek word used to describe the desperate Jairus whose daughter was dying. Paul pleaded for healing. Not just to ease the torment, but to do even better in his ministry. How can you do any ministry properly if you have whatever Paul struggled with? Lord, please, if not for me, for your own sake, for the sake of the gospel, heal me” but God said no to Paul. How did he deal with that?

How did Paul come to terms with God now answering his prayer? We learn six things from this passage. Number one, through it seems harsh at first, we need to see had times as a gift. Paul speaks of the thorn “given to me” the hard times can do us good, developing character and spiritual benefits that will last forever. Like Paul though, when we are in them, we want out. Things are just too tough and painful. But God loves us too much to give us what we ask for. Faith grows by stretching, as we stand on tiptoe, reaching to heaven, pleading with God. It is usually in the tough days, that faith grows best.

Second, if God is not answer your prayer, remember what he has already said. Paul had his revelation. Even though God didn't answer his please for release from torment, he would forever remember the awesome revelation of paradise. He know he could trust God and where it was all going. So for us, when God seems not be answering you, rest your confidence in what God has already.

Third, always continue praying. We have already noted that Paul says "three times I pleaded". The only reason Paul stopped praying about his thorn was because God gave him an answer, which was "no". Paul accepted the answer. We could say that we should follow the P.U.S.H. principle in prayer – Pray Until Something Happens.

Don't give up praying on the point you are pleaded form until something happens either to change your situation or to change you. It may well be that God is waiting till you are flat on your face before him, before he will give an answer to your prayer. Remember "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble". The point of prayer is not to get your will done in heaven, but God's will done on Earth. Prayer is not about getting God to do what you want, but for you to do what God wants. Let him be the master we trust and obey.

Fourth – listen for God's voice. My family often suggests that I am deaf. I had my ears tested, and they are fine. It's just that when there is a lot of noise going on around me, I find it hard to focus on the person speaking. I think that's how it often is in our spiritual lives. We are so busy, have so little time to "be still before the Lord" and listen to what he is saying. Sometimes God has to remove all the other noise for us to hear. Sometimes the only way he can do that is to knock the breath out of us. It's often when we are laying in bed sick, or have hit a brick wall in our lives, that we look up at God.

Fifth – trust in God's power. God said "my power is made perfect in weakness:. In other words, we should trust God and his power, not our own, even if it's for the best of motives. When we have it all together, a profession, money, power, we think we can make it happen. We give ourselves the credit and forget God. But when we are flat on our faces, when pain or loneliness leaves us pleading,, that's when God steps in and says "my strength is made perfect in weakness"

Sixth – serve God right where you are, in the condition that you are in. As Paul says "I delight in weaknesses – for when I am weak, I am strong". Like Paul, you plead to change the situation. But don't you think that God has put you in that situation to use you right in the middle of it? It is precisely when we are at our lowest, when it hurts the most, that our witness for Jesus is the most powerful. It is when we are really battling that our faith is being stretched the most, that it brings us closer to God. Unanswered prayer can be a very, very difficult thing. But it can also be a gift from the Father. Remember, if God suffered deeply in giving His own Son for us, don't you think he loves us, and does what is best?

I asked God for strength that I might achieve;
I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for help that I might do greater things;
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy;
I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of men;
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all the things that I might enjoy life;
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I asked for, but everything that I hoped for;
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
I among all people am most richly blessed.

God always answers our prayers with a yes, a no, or a wait a while, or something better.
But our requests and his answers may be worlds apart.