

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Why does prayer go unanswered? (2 of 2)

Presented by Margaret Hall

Introduction

Some years ago the results of a survey of Scripture students was published. Those who said they didn't believe in God had been asked why. The main reason that emerged was that they'd asked him for something and hadn't got what they'd asked for. They'd taken that as evidence that he's not there.

Perhaps they'd seen God as a kind of Santa Claus. You write your letter and what you ordered appears. Or as a kindly grandfather-figure who just wants to keep us happy. Or even as a wand-waving magician.

Jesus claimed to have come from God and he revealed him as a loving Father. He taught us to pray to him as our Father. Having made us in his image to be his children, God wants us to come to him openly and confidently to receive from him the good gifts he delights to shower on us. And we do enjoy his blessing and protection far more than we might be conscious of. Nevertheless when we're going through hard times, the age-old question will sometimes surface, *Why does prayer seem to go unanswered?*

I

There are two assumptions to avoid when prayer seems to go unanswered. The first, to which children are especially vulnerable, is that God isn't there, or doesn't care.

One thing about prayer is for sure: a request can never be a command. When we ask anyone for anything, they're always free to either give us what we want, or not. If God's bound to grant every request, he becomes a god we control or manipulate - in other words, not *God* at all. Imagine what kind of world it would be where God is like a puppet, with us pulling the strings. Or where God's like the genie in the bottle who we summon to do our bidding - so that innately self-focused people are calling all the shots. To quote C.S. Lewis, "*If an infinitely wise Being listens to the requests of creatures who are not all-wise, of course he will sometimes grant and sometimes refuse them.*" We don't find that easy, but it's how we develop the trust that's essential to the relationship God seeks with us.

As Philip Yancey points out in his very thoughtful book on prayer, the evidence is that trust is a plant that grows better in dry conditions, when the heat's on, that is, when we're not immediately given what we ask for. That's how the great heroes of faith learned to trust God. Many of them went through periods, sometimes quite long ones, where God remained silent and prayers seemed to go unanswered.

Abraham hung on to God's promise that he'd father a great nation, but he and his wife were still childless when he was ninety-nine and she was ninety. When a visitor told them they'd have a child within a year they laughed, and called him Laughter when he was born. Joseph was seventeen when he was sold by his brothers into slavery in a foreign land, then accused of a crime he didn't commit and thrown into prison. He was thirty when he was finally released. Moses longed for justice for his people, but then had to flee for his

life. He spent forty years in the desert before God revealed how the many prayers they'd prayed would be answered. David was told when he was still a boy that he'd be the next king, but in the prime of life he spent seven years as an outlaw with King Saul's army in hot pursuit. Surely he wondered whether life on the run would ever come to an end.

All of them must have wondered at some point what God was doing. He was, in fact, giving them his full attention as he worked out purposes too large for them to comprehend. When we stubbornly cling to God, and keep on praying in the face of his silence, more may be going on than we dream. The truth is that answered prayers aren't the evidence we depend on to keep us believing in God. That evidence is Jesus, and in the light of all he said and did, trusting God has to be a far better option than telling him what to do.

Philip Yancey quotes a woman who eventually recovered from the depression that led her to attempt suicide. She said, "I used to see prayer as a way of trying to get God to do what I wanted. Now I see it as a way of being in on what God is doing, and just hanging on."

II

The other assumption to avoid when prayer seems to go unanswered is that we're not praying hard enough. The truth is we don't have to strive for God's attention - we already have it. Jesus said, "Come to me and rest" - not come and wear yourselves out. He also said we're not to think we'll be heard because of our many words. The prayer he gave us for a model is very simple, very direct, and very short. It was Martin Luther who said, "The fewer the words, the better the prayer."

We might also think we should strive to have more faith. Sometimes when prayer doesn't seem to be answered, the inference might be made that we don't have enough faith. Perhaps it's made to spur us on to a greater effort to drum up faith, but the suggestion that you don't have enough isn't really helpful when you're struggling. Anyway, the benefit of faith isn't in the quantity of feeling we drum up. Its benefit lies in the character of the One we put faith *in*. Jesus said faith the size of a mustard seed will do.

It's unlikely Paul was lacking in faith when he prayed three times for God to take away his 'thorn in the flesh', whatever that was. God didn't take it away. All Paul received was the assurance that God's grace was enough for him, and that somehow, through the pain itself, God's power would be seen.

Even Jesus, as a human being, knew the pain of unanswered prayer. Surely at some point he'd prayed for Judas, who went on to betray him. He prayed that his followers would be united, but there've been many times when they weren't, and still aren't. And in his humanness, alone in the garden, he cried out, "Father, if it be possible, take this cup of suffering from me." Of course it was possible - God could have sent legions of angels to save him - but that would have left us with no one to bear the awfulness of the separation from God we've brought on ourselves. The gulf between us and God would have yawned as wide as ever, and our enemy death would have had the victory. Jesus knew all that, and so submitted to having his very human desire *not* granted.

The truth that we don't have to strive to get God's attention should nevertheless be balanced by the truth that perseverance is needed, because the forces of evil do all in their power to distract us from praying. They may be more aware than we are of the mighty power for good which prayer releases.

When we connect with our all-powerful Creator we open the door to the impossible becoming possible. For decades Christians around the world prayed for the Iron Curtain across Europe to come down, and for apartheid to end in South Africa, struggling to believe such miracles could ever take place. The part Christians played in both events is well-documented, but the most powerful instrument they had was prayer.

The great nineteenth century preacher, D.L. Moody wrote this, “I think that when this life is over, next to the wonder of seeing my Saviour will be the wonder that I made so little use of the power of prayer.”

III

The word of God itself is not silent on the subject of unanswered prayer. For example we read in the letter Jesus’ brother James wrote to his fellow-Christians:

You don’t have because you don’t ask God. When you ask you don’t receive because you ask with wrong motives in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Prayers with wrong motives are inappropriate, because we’re meant to be praying for what we need, rather than for what happens to suit us personally - like the five-year-old, off with his dad to McDonald’s when they saw a car accident. Usually when they passed an accident they would say a prayer for anyone who might be hurt. So the dad said to his son, “We should pray.” From the back seat his son piped up, “Please God, don’t let those cars block the entrance to McDonald’s.”

But the thought that some prayers aren’t acceptable to God goes back to hundreds of years before James’ letter was written. The prophet Isaiah wrote this to people who were outwardly very religious:

The Lord’s arm is not too short to save, not his ear too dull to hear. But your sins have hidden God’s face from you, so that he will not hear.... No one calls for justice...You turn your backs on God.

Isaiah was speaking to people who were meant to be reflecting God’s love to others, yet who did nothing about the injustices all around them. They simply ignored God’s command to love their neighbour, especially the oppressed.

In the television series of *Brideshead Revisited*, which came out in the eighties, Julia refuses to marry the man she loves and who loves her, because they’d both been divorced and the church forbade it. She seemed to think that by not breaking that one rule she’d keep in with God. She was seemingly unaware that the root of what separates us from God is not our failure to keep the church’s rules, but our innate self-centredness. And in spite of her religious upbringing it seemed she hadn’t really taken on board God’s amazing solution for that problem - a solution Isaiah foresaw long ago when he wrote:

Every one of us has turned to our own way, but the Lord has laid on[his suffering servant] the sinfulness of us all.....He was pierced for our transgressions, and bruised for our sins.

It’s through Jesus’ death on our behalf that we can know there’s one prayer God will always hear - the prayer the tax-collector in Jesus’ story prayed, “God be merciful to me, a sinner!” The tax-collector had earned his living by robbing people. But Jesus said his prayer for mercy was heard above the prayer of the uprightly religious Pharisee, whose prayer was all about himself - a reminder to God of what a good man he was. But the tax-collector’s prayer, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner”, is where each one of us must begin a *real* relationship with God.

Conclusion

We tend, in our human way, to think of how we speak to God and he appears not to be listening. But could it be that God is speaking to us, and we're not listening? Could it be that God is speaking to most people most of the time –

- through our consciences,
- through good and bad experiences,
- through a sunset or a bird taking flight,
- through something we hear on the news,
- through joy at the birth of a child or what we feel when someone dies,
- in the busy rush of life or in a moment of solitude?

A minister's wife I know told me she walked into the church and down the aisle to get married not even believing in God. She walked out an hour later believing in him. It wasn't that God needed a church building or a special occasion to speak to her, but that, given the occasion, she was actually listening.

God uses any means he chooses to attract our attention. If we listen, and receive by faith the love he's offering, he invites us to work with him in what he's doing in the world, first and foremost through prayer.