

When Prayers Seem Unanswered and God's Promises Untrue

Sometimes when we pray it feels like we knock on the gate to God's compound but we get no reply from inside. We call out over the mud wall, but there is only silence from the other side. Our prayers seem—that is, they appear to the mind or the eye to be—unanswered. The impression we get is that there is no response from God.

I had been ill for several years since leaving Sudan in 2003. In 2006 aggressive cancer was discovered in my throat. I had been praying to get well. Many Christian friends had been praying with me and fasting for me. I had been anointed with oil and prayed over by church leaders. Suddenly my situation was a lot worse!

I thought: "Doesn't the Bible promise healing for God's servants? Why is God breaking His promise to make me better?" I desperately wanted to be back where God had called me, pastoring Khartoum International Church. I wanted to obey God and to serve Him wholeheartedly.

On the surface of things, prayer was bouncing back off the sky like a child's kicked football rebounds from a wall. Prayer was not getting through to God—or, worse still, God was not listening to prayer. Or, dare I even think it, God was unable to do what I wanted to happen!

At the end of 2006 my voice-box was surgically removed. Since then I have only been able to speak a little, and quietly, using an artificial valve inserted in my throat. A terrifying happening for a man who was used to preaching or teaching at least 200 times per year. Now, twenty-four months on, I am still puzzled by what God has done (or, perhaps, what He has not done) in my life.

On a similar theme I remember as if it was yesterday (although it was 2001) a student from my Theology class at Banat, Omdurman. He read from his Bible Psalm 37:25:

"I was young and now I am old, yet I have never

seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread”.

Joseph looked me in the eye and said: “King David may not have seen this, but I have! My children, and others in my church congregation, do not have enough to eat”.

Like many others at that time of hardship in Sudan, Joseph was trying to live for Jesus and God's Kingdom, yet the necessities of life were not being provided for him or his family. Does this mean Jesus' own words are not true?

Please read Matthew 6:31-34.

Over 38 years of Christian ministry I have learned that **when experience disagrees with good theology** (the study of God and His relationship with man and his world), **good theology is always right! When you feel the opposite of what you know to be true, keep on trusting God.** God's purpose will always be achieved, even if it takes a long time.

Please read Isaiah 46:9-10

2 Corinthians 4:16-18.

Do you remember the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Adebnego? Daniel chapters 1-3. They feared God much more than the hot fire of King Nebuchadnezzar. They refused to bow and worship the king's golden image. They knew God would do what was right in His sight, *whether He chose to save them from the fire or allow them to die and go into heaven from the flames.* What they believed about God kept them true, even in extreme life and death circumstances.

Please read Daniel 1:3-20; 2:17-23; 3:12-18.

Think about the following statement and questions before doing the next Bible study:

“I do not believe in the power of prayer. I do believe in the person of God, in the presence of God and in the power of God. Therefore, I pray to God”.

- Are your prayers self-centred or God-centred?
- Are you trying to win God over to do your will?

- Are you willing for God to work a work within you, or are you merely asking God to do something for you?
- Is your prayer two-way or one-way communication with God?

God's answers are always wiser than our prayers.

Jesus' own prayer life is described in Hebrews 5:7-10.

Focused reading through any gospel will show Jesus' habits of prayer, and will illustrate Hebrews 5:7-10.

For example in Luke:

- 3:21 a time of new beginnings
- 5:16 alone with the Father
- 6:12 before choosing His team
- 9:16 before sharing food
- 9:18 privately
- 9:28-9 with a few close friends
- 10:21-22 praise after success
- 11:1 an example to follow
- 18:1 an encouragement to continue
- 19:45-46 examine your motives!
- 22:17,19 before going to the cross
- 22:31-32 for a tested brother
- 22:39-46 willingly, but for God's will
- 23:34 forgiveness for others
- 23:46 confident trust through death

It is no accident that the glory of who Jesus really was, was revealed to others when He was praying! Luke 9:29.

To pray means to ask earnestly for, to address adoration, thanksgiving and requests to God. The most common New Testament word for praying has a legal background to it. It pictures a lawyer before a judge. It is like going to the Ministry of Justice and arguing for a particular course of action to be taken. The lawyer argues on the basis of what has already been said and done by the people involved. Similarly, we pray.

In praying:

1. We bring the situation to God *when we speak*.
2. We bring God into the situation *when we listen and when we think*.

The tearful shouts of Jesus were heard—not because of their volume, but because Jesus obediently submitted His own will to the will of the Father, Hebrews 5:7-8.

Jesus' experiences in Gethsemane and on the cross of Calvary challenge us to learn obedience as we pray.

Three prayers of Jesus stand out:

1. *"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done"*,
Luke 22:42.

Please read the three accounts in Matthew 26:36-46, Mark 14:32-42, and Luke 22:39-46.

In this Gethsemane prayer time Jesus felt deep sadness and mental pain. He was extremely disturbed over His immediate future. Although He felt these emotions, He did not sin. His suffering severely tested the humanity of God the Son, but He remained holy, set apart to God's way.

After His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus the God-man (the human face of God), would become High Priest (the human face before God). He would prayerfully mediate between God and humanity. He represented both parties. He WAS both parties!

1 Timothy 2:5-6.

Hebrews 2:17-18

Hebrews 4:14-16

Hebrews 7:26-28

Jesus did not get to where His Father wanted Him to be without a struggle. He had to give Himself up. And so will we. In this prayer Jesus went through an immense and challenging battle with Himself. He wanted Father to say, “Yes”, but He was willing for Father to say, “No”. He knew that if Father God said, “No”, then “No” was the best answer. We *must* come to this point.

We must remember that God always answers prayer, even when the answer is not what we want it to be. Father God has always carefully thought out His response.

Paul learned this. Three times he begged God to remove the painful irritation and annoyance from his life. But God had a bigger and a better idea, so He left it there! God also gave Paul abundant grace and power to live with the weakness.

I have 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 and 1 Corinthians 2:9 especially marked in my Bible, and dated 16th November 2006. That is the date I entered hospital to surrender my voice-box back to God, who originally gave it to me, and whose property it is.

Nothing in this world is intended to mean more to me than God and His will. God could have chosen to cure me of cancer. He did not—at least, not in the way I really wanted Him to!

The Bible has many examples of God delivering His people in surprising ways. God is the God of the unexpected. When *Gentile* king Cyrus was God's chosen deliverer of Israel, Isaiah the prophet was so puzzled he exclaimed: “Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Saviour of Israel”, Isaiah 45:15.

It was as if Satan said to God: “You take K.I.C. from Pastor Colin, and he will curse you to your face”. With God’s grace my answer has always been:, “No I will not”. Job 1:9-11;2:4-6.

In Gethsemane’s prayer we note things that helped Jesus:

- Jesus had a close relationship with God, “My Father” (twice), Matthew 26:39, 42.
- Jesus intimately believed without any doubt, “everything is possible for you, Abba”, Mark 14:36.
- Jesus’ theology never faltered. He knew God *could* have eased things, but He also knew God *would* not.
- Jesus willingly embraced God’s will, Luke 22:42. The cup (meaning this “experience in life”) could only be taken away by being fully drunk. So Jesus drank it.

When you drink any drink, you are committed to it. When you swallow, liquid is inside you—even if it is something that will eventually take your life.

Praying Requires Abandoning Yourself.

Prayer in this way is an opportunity for our wills to align with God’s will. Listening in prayer I can line up with God. Prayer is the place that allows me to understand (or, at least, to accept) God’s way. In the prayer of faith, I believe in advance what may only make sense when I look back after a long time—even from heavenly eternity.

2. *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34.*

In this Calvary prayer Jesus asks the question, “Why?”

How often I ask it! My student friend Joseph was asking it from the class I mentioned earlier.

Of course, Psalm 37:25 is not a promise to claim. It is the actual experience of an older king David. Joseph’s experience was not wrong—but it was definitely different. Painfully different!

But in asking God “Why?” we must not get hot with worry or anger. To his credit, Joseph never did. Fretting does not show faith, Psalm 37:1. It is better if we can quietly enjoy God’s company through the challenging times, verse 3 “Trust in God”, verse 4 “Delight in God”, verse 5 “Commit to God”, verse 7 “Be patiently still before God”. Jesus’ presence lightens the burden, Matthew 11:28-30. It may not take the burden away, but it *will* make you stronger.

Sin was the barrier that came between Jesus and the Father on the cross. It was human sinfulness that brought all suffering into God’s good world, Genesis 1:31; 3:17-19. **Let your hardships teach you the awful consequences of sin.** Then, turn your attention towards your ultimate destination: heaven. That’s what Jesus did on the cross (see the next prayer). Heaven will change your perspective, just like sitting on a high hilltop makes everything in the town below appear much smaller.

Some other Biblical reasons for “unanswered” prayer

2 Chronicles 7:13-16 pride instead of humility before God

Psalm 66:18 sin without repentance allowed in personal life

Proverbs 21:13 ignoring the desperate needs of others around you

Isaiah 64:4 impatience—not waiting for God

(to wait is to exercise patient, confident, expectant faith)

Zechariah 7:13 not listening to God when He speaks

Matthew 6:5 praying for human reward

Matthew 6:7 speaking long, and meaningless praying

Matthew 21:21-22 doubting God

Mark 11:24-25 holding an unforgiving spirit towards anyone

Romans 8:26 using words when we do not know what to pray for

James 1:6-8 double-minded praying

(a single-minded Christian *a/ways* wants God’s way)

James 4:2-3 praying with selfish motives

1 John 5:14-15 praying outside God's will

(we are sinful people praying—we are sometimes wrong!).

3. According to Luke 23:46 Jesus' final prayer was, "*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*".

In this prayer from Calvary it was as if Jesus was saying to God the Father, "I have asked you, Why? - but I will trust you *anyway*". Jesus' greatest wish was to glorify God, living in the centre of God's will, paying whatever the cost.

We surely pray: "God, please stop the war!" "God, bring peace, reconciliation and prosperity to our people". Whatever happens after we pray that, we must believe that at the heart of the universe, *God is working His purposes out.*

The timing is always in God's hands, not in ours. **Delays and denials from God are opportunities for Him to develop and deepen a trusting heart within us.**

Please read Galatians 6:9; Luke 11:5-13; 18:1-8.

All our suffering is intended to drive us to God. Never give in to self-pity! Do not waste what God gives you—experiences He intends for your Christian growth. *Wait* on God!

Life's injustices must be seen in the context of our eternal riches in Christ Jesus. The former are temporary, the latter go on for ever. As you plead with God for Him to act in a particular way, leave room for Him to say, "No", and "Not yet".

God lost His one and only Son. But God saved the world through that chosen course of action.

Read 1 Peter 2:21.

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart”. Hebrews 12:2-3 (emphasis mine).

There are questions for which there are no answers this side of heaven. In heaven, the Judge of all the earth will be seen to have *always* been right! Please read Romans 8:16-17.

Discussion guide

Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:

1. Share personal experiences of when your prayers were apparently not answered, or were certainly not answered in the way you wanted or expected.
2. Why is good theology always right even when it seems to go against what is happening?
Consider Romans 8:28
2 Corinthians 4:16-18
How do Daniel's three friends show their faith in God, Daniel 3:16-18?
3. What is the difference between “self-centred prayer” and “God-centred prayer”?
How does the description of *why* Jesus' prayers were heard help us to understand this?
Hebrews 5:7, “he was heard because of his reverent submission”.
4. Describe in your own words the inner battle Jesus expressed in Matthew 26:39,
and the similar inner battle Paul faced up to in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.
What lessons do you learn for yourself and your own praying from these examples?
5. “We must remember that God always answers prayer, even when the answer is not what we want it to be”. Is this true or false? Why?
6. Why is it so important that we listen to God in prayer, and not just talk to Him?
7. Of the other Biblical reasons for unanswered pray (listed above), which do you think are the most common today? Why do you think this is?
What should be done about it?