



4<sup>th</sup> July | 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after

# Pentecost

## Discovering the Purpose of Unanswered Prayer



### Main Point:

All disciples of Christ will experience times when God seems silent and fails to answer our prayers. Thankfully the Apostle Paul recalled a time when God's answer to his prayers was 'No' and learnt that God has a reason for unanswered prayer.

*Three different times I begged the Lord to take [the thorn] away. Each time he said, 'My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness'.  
(2 Corinthians 12:8)*

### Intro | The problem we don't like to admit

There are two occasions in my life when I have a vivid memory of God failing to answer prayer.

The first was not my personal prayer, but the failure nevertheless impacted my prayer life in the years to come..

The second incident of unanswered prayer, I share shortly.

When I was about 10 or 11, my parents were members of a church community who faithfully prayed for the healing of one of their parishioners. What made it personal was that the parishioner was my uncle. Uncle Rod had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Week after week I watched a faithful group of saints pray for Uncle Rod's healing. We prayed on Sunday at church, and we prayed throughout the week, at our prayer meetings.

- We believed God had demonstrated his healing character when he called himself Jehovah Rapha – The God who heals (Exodus 15:26)
- We believed Jesus had demonstrated God's desire to heal – when he said to the leprous man, "I am willing. Be healed" (Matthew 8:3).
- We believed God had was still actively doing miracles in the world, and had promised to hear our requests (1 John 5:14)
- We believed that God responds to the prayer of faith, when we are obedient to pray according to the Apostle James' instructions (James 5:14)

And so, for months we prayed for Uncle Rod to be healed. But after several months of deteriorating health, he died.

*Why didn't God answer our prayers? Why had we failed? What had gone wrong?*

I'm not the only one who has faced these kinds of disappointing prayer failures.

And - despite what we may like to admit to ourselves and others - failures in prayer have a profound effect on how we regard prayer, and how we respond when the answer to our prayers are delayed.

This makes the Apostle Paul's admission so incredibly reassuring for us. For even the great Apostle Paul, the man who after Jesus, was the most effective missionary ever to have lived – even Paul faced the harsh reality of unanswered prayer.

But, thankfully, he learnt *why* God was holding out on answering his cries.

Thankfully, he learnt the lesson of unanswered prayer – and he wrote it down so that we could learn it as well.

**Point 1 | All believers struggle with unanswered prayer and many good and devout people secretly doubt that God answers prayer.**

Paul revealed that fourteen years earlier he had been caught up into heaven and had seen things that no person had ever seen before.

It was the greatest experience of his life, and he never forgot what it was like.

But when that great experience was over, something else happened to Paul that would change his whole perspective on life.

Let him tell the story in his own words:

**"... even though I received such wonderful revelations from God. So, to keep me from becoming proud, there was given to me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me"** (2 Corinthians 12:7).

Bible students are divided about what this verse really means. Some suggest that the 'thorn in the flesh' was the fierce opposition Paul received from his Jewish opponents. Others suggest it was some kind of demonic oppression. Still others think that the thorn was a physical ailment that crippled Paul in some way and limited his effectiveness.

In one sense it really doesn't matter.

The crucial point is that Paul prayed for God to remove the "thorn in his flesh" so that he could get on with his ministry.

In fact he prayed not once but three times. And each time God said 'No'.

**"Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me"** (v8).

Let's allow that reality to sit with us for a moment.

The apostle Paul, probably the greatest Christian who ever lived, the man who introduced Christianity to Europe, the man who wrote so much of the New Testament - that man, when he prayed about this need in his life, found that God did not, *would* not, answer his prayers.

### **Three times God told Paul "No."**

Three 'No's lead us to three 'lessons' we learn about unanswered prayer.

Firstly, notice that Paul kept on praying until God finally gave him an explanation.

**"But he said to me, 'My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.'" (v9)**

**Point 2 | Often our prayers are not answered because God can do more through us by not answering our prayers than He can by answering them.**

As hard as it may be for us to hear: Sometimes God's 'no' is better than his 'yes'.

Think of it this way. What would happen if God answered all your prayers all the time in the exact manner in which you prayed?

Even removing all the prayers that we recognise were foolish and short-sighted at the time, we will quickly realise that if God always answered all our prayers, our trust would be gradually become focused on the answers and not in the Lord alone.

When God says 'no', we are forced to decide whether we will still trust in God alone-without the benefit of an answered prayer to lean upon.

Don't get me wrong. Answered prayer is wonderful, and if *none* of our prayers were answered we would probably stop praying altogether. But if all of our prayers were answered we would end up taking God for granted.

*Unanswered prayer forces us to trust in God alone.* And when we do, he alone gets the glory, for it is at that point that his strength is made perfect in our weakness.

Illustration | This brings me to my second – and much more personal – instance of failure in prayer.

In the last few months as my marriage began to crumble all around me, I thrust myself into a frenzy of praying for God to heal my marriage. This period of fervent prayer continued despite having to leave my husband with my two sons, and fight an international custody battle which continued for three years. Even after as the reality of divorce loomed, I would not let go of God's promise to heal my marriage.

—After all, I knew marriage was a life-long commitment created by God – So, I knew God wanted my marriage to continue.

—I knew that God hated divorce (Malachi 2:16), so was extremely reluctant to walk down that road.

—I believed that God could turn my husband's heart toward desiring repentance and deliverance. After all, he'd made an apostle out of a terrorist, couldn't he turn a stubborn heart back to him?

But as time progressed, and the divorce became a passed event – it became obvious my prayers for my marriage were not being answered.

Slowly, very slowly, I began to realise God's 'no' to my marriage was actually the only way God could answer my deepest prayer.

Throughout the season of fervent prayer, I had been asking God to show me his plan for my life. I asked him, again and again, to come and transform my broken life and make it into something beautiful.

And that is a prayer that he definitely answered.

**Point 3 | Seasons of unanswered prayer, where the thorns of trials and testings sting, are usually the climate for the greatest spiritual growth.**

This seems to be exactly what Paul is saying.

Sometimes it is better for us if our prayers are not answered immediately.

Sometimes it is better if they are not answered at all.

The great question is not, "How can I get my prayers answered?" The great question is, "What will it take to draw me closer to God?"

Consider these words attributed to a Civil War soldier who died in battle.

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;  
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.  
I asked for health, 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 things, that I might enjoy life;  
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.  
I got nothing I asked for, but everything I had hoped for.  
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.  
I am, among men, most richly blessed.

It is a great advance in spiritual understanding to be able to say,  
"I got nothing I asked for, but everything I had hoped for."

### **Application |**

The reality of the Christian life is that sometimes our prayers will go unanswered.

Unless you acknowledge that truth you will probably give up prayer altogether.  
But there is another truth which is far more important to acknowledge.

God hears every prayer we utter, even the ones he chooses not to answer.

So, no prayer is wasted, for even unanswered prayer may be used by God to draw us closer to him.

There is a natural human tendency to focus more on the answers to our prayers than on God himself. But God wants us to focus on him. Whatever will help us do that is what we really need.

Sometimes that means our prayers will be answered in amazing and miraculous ways; other times our prayers will not be answered at all.

But the place God want to bring us, is the attitude that says, "I don't understand why this is happening, nor why my prayers are delayed, but I'm hanging on to you, Lord, and I'm not going to let you go."

Sometimes unanswered prayer is the only way to get us there.

### **Discussion and Reflection Questions**

1. You have probably already recalled a time when your prayers were not answered. Bring this to your attention now. Now, in hindsight, what was God teaching you through this season of unanswered prayer?
2. Is there a prayer that still has not been answered? Have you been tempted to give up? How has today's message encouraged you?
3. What is God's goal for trials and testings in prayer? What is God's purpose for not answering all our prayers the way we hope?
4. Has past unanswered prayer effected your faith to pray with perseverance?
5. Do you need to ask the Lord to increase your faith in a specific area of your prayer life?

### **Pentecost Devotional: The Rise of the Kings | 1 & 2 Samuel**

As we are giving attention to the New Testament series of Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth our devotional will focus on the Old Testament lectionary passages which journey through 1 and 2 Samuel.

