

12 November 2023
St George's Epsom 10am

The Problem of Unanswered Prayer (Psalm 22: 24, Psalm 22: 1-4, Matthew 26: 36 – 44)

Introduction

Have you ever had those experiences where you volunteer to do something reasoning how “hard could it be”, or “I am up for a challenge”, only to find there are lots of jolly good reasons why it is not quite as simple as first appears, and that your answers pose even more questions.

Well today is one of those days – the topic is ‘Unanswered Prayer’ and as tempting as it is to reach for the cliches and half-truths, it would only trivialise the very real pain, self-doubt and at times despair we feel when it seems our prayers have been rebuffed or disregarded. So the audience for this sermon is all of us who having claimed the promise of Jesus:

“My Father will give you whatever you ask for in my name ... Ask and you will receive.” (John 16)

Only to find it felt like you were praying to a silent, enigmatic, inscrutable, seemingly unmoved God.

But like the start of *The Chase* on TV – I want to quickly dispatch some early easy questions. Seat belts on, 2 minutes, 6 questions and then we’ll get into the problematic stuff.

First Question: Why do some prayers go unanswered?

Answer: – some prayers are not answered because they are simply bonkers - it pains me to say it, as an All Black supporter, but God was not remotely interested in the rugby world cup. The Trinity were not wearing All Black jerseys two Sundays ago, so do not waste your, or

God's time, praying for All Black victories, carparks, or extensions for your overdue essay.

Second Question: Why do some prayers go unanswered?

Answer - some prayers are answered, but we don't even notice. This is because we are so set on a particular outcome that we don't notice God has answered our prayers, realised our dreams, surprised, and delighted us, but not in the ways we expected.

Third Question: Why do some prayers go unanswered?

Answer: some prayers go unanswered because the solutions already lie in our hands. We are the answer to our own prayers. So once again don't waste your time bothering God to sort problems that are yours to sort. You have the mind of Christ. You have hands and feet – make it happen.

Fourth Question: Why do some prayers go unanswered?

Answer – some prayers are answered, and the answer is “No”. It happens quite a lot as it turns out. But we struggle to accept the answer and rather like children who continue to pester our parents for an ice-cream when the original answer was no, we similarly pester God with repeated petitions in the belief that somehow, we will wear him down and he will give us the answer we wanted. I've tried it, quite a few times – it doesn't work. It doesn't get you the ice-cream.

Fifth question: Why do some prayers go unanswered?

Answer – Some prayers are unanswered because God is not an algorithm. We may have done good, we may have been obedient, we may have made great sacrifices, our prayers may be fervent – but that is no guarantee that God will answer our prayers. God never claims to be fair. He never promises that because he miraculously intervened in one situation that he will intervene in similar situations. Jesus never explains why he heals one blind beggar from a crowd but

not all. God does, however, promised to be just, to be gracious, to walk with us, and to work all things for good.

Sixth and final question: Why do some prayers go unanswered?

Answer – Some prayers go unanswered because God is deeply respectful of human autonomy and agency. So whilst he shares, for example, our desire that friends and family come to faith, and/or step away from self-destructive practices, siblings are reconciled, he never forces his will on others, even when it is in their own best interests.

Well wouldn't that be a nice place to end this sermon. But here is the real problem. Much of what we pray for is good prayer, for good things, for good people:

- Prayers that someone we love is healed or at least spared ongoing pain.
- Prayers that we might find a partner, someone we can journey through life with
- Prayers that we too might be able to have a child.
- Prayers that we might overcome some destructive habit, find a job, pay the bills.

These are not selfish prayers for individual advancement, fame, or fortune. They are undoubtedly prayers from the heart and Scripture seems to offer cast iron guarantees that God will grant us these good prayers eg:

*May he give you the desire of your heart
And make all your plans succeed
We will shout for joy when you are victorious
... May the Lord grant all your requests (Ps 20: 4-5)*

So what happens when God seemingly does not answer our good prayers. Typically we respond in one of two ways:

- **It must be me** – our first instinct is to blame ourselves – maybe it's because of some sin in my life, maybe I am harbouring a demon that needs to be cast out. Maybe I am not spending enough time in prayer or in church or helping the poor;
- **Not praying correctly** – I need to be more assertive in my prayers, claim those promises, believe more, show God I am serious by fasting, pray more earnestly, enlist the support of others.

Now, undoubtedly there is value in being in right relationship with God, asking others to join us in prayer, and in fasting but it is at best a partial answer. Scripture is littered with prayer promises but it is also full of stories of unanswered prayers even from the superstars of faith:

- David praying for reconciliation within his family.
- Paul longing to go to Spain so he can share the gospel.
- And most notably of all Jesus praying this cup be taken from me, the night before his state sanctioned execution.

And so I want to turn to Psalm 22, the Psalm on Jesus lips as he calls out from the Cross:

“My God, My God why have you forsaken me?” (verse 1)

A few hours earlier in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus' agony had been so intense that “his sweat was like drips of blood falling to the ground.” (Luke 22:24) according to Dr Luke the physician and gospel writer. His distress is so extreme he tells the disciples:

“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Mark 14:34).

And so he prays to his father, using the most intimate of greetings:

“Abba father take this cup from me...”

We know, but Jesus is yet to learn that his heartfelt prayer will not be granted.

When our prayers go seemingly unanswered, we are tempted to draw two conclusions:

First that God is not all powerful
Secondly that God does not love me

Psalm 22, an agonising psalm of lament tackles both these issues head on.

First – that even in the silence God is all powerful

David the psalmist writes:

*My God, my God why have you forsaken me
Why are you so far from saving me
So far from the words of my groaning
Oh my God I cry out by day but you do not answer
By night and am not silent. (ps 22; 1-2)*

In the very next verse, however, he affirms God's power:

*Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One ... in you they trusted and
were not disappointed (v3,4)*

Jesus prays – take this cup from me, but not my will but yours be done.

God promises that all things work for good for those who love the Lord. He does not promise that will happen immediately or even in our lifetime.

Joseph – the dreamer, who is sold into slavery, falsely imprisoned, and abandoned – reflects later on his life to his brothers – “what you intended for harm the Lord used for good.”

Paul longing to get to Spain, the edge of the known world to share the gospel, never got there and instead was imprisoned and ultimately died in a Roman prison. And yet it was from prison that the sublime prison letters emerged and went on to reach the four corners of the earth, well beyond the limits of the then known world.

It appeared that hope died the morning **Christ was crucified** and left to die on a cross. The devil cackled, until Easter morning when the world was greeted with the empty tomb. The cup that Jesus prayed be taken from him, was instead taken from us.

Our tendency is to look at unanswered prayer through the wrong end of the telescope. We struggle to understand why God is seemingly unmoved, little realising that we are participants in God’s great redemptive story, which extends well beyond our short years on earth. He works all things for good.

However we do live in the now and not yet. The day is coming when: *He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who is seated on the throne said I am making everything new” Rev 21:4-6*

Until that time comes, however, our lives will be blessed by goodness and mercy running after us, but also by pain, tears, and lament. God does not promise to anaesthetise the pain, only to walk alongside in our pain.

2. He shows us his face:

The second temptation when God seemingly does not answer our prayers is that he does not love me. Once again, the despair of Psalm 22 is tempered by the Psalmist confidence in the love of God:

*“For he has not despised the suffering of the afflicted
He has not hidden his face from him” Psalm 22: 24*

CS Lewis grappled with the question of unanswered prayer in the Narnia series and later writing about the death of his wife in a *Grief Observed*. In the *Magician’s Nephew* which kick starts the Narnia stories, Lewis tells the story of a boy named Digory, whose mother is dying. When Digory first encounters Aslan the lion tremulously he asks:

“May I – please, will you let me have some magic fruit of this country to make Mother well?”

Seemingly Aslan ignores his request:

He had been desperately hoping that the Lion would say “Yes”; he had been horribly afraid he might say “No.” But he was taken aback when it did neither. A while later Digory dares to ask Aslan again:

“But please won’t you – can’t you give me something that will cure Mother? Up until then he had been looking at the Lion’s great feet and the huge claws on them; now, in despair he looked up at his face. What he saw surprised him as much as anything in his whole life. For the tawny face was bent down near his own and (wonder of wonders) great shiny tears stood in the Lion’s eyes. They were such big, bright tears compared with Digory’s own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be sorrier about his mother than he was himself.”

Everything changes when we realise God cares deeply.

*“Yet you brought me out of the womb
You made me trust in you
From my mother’s womb you have been my God” (Psalm 22:9)*

Just one Psalm later David writes:

*“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will
fear no evil for you are with me ...” (v4)*

There is a deeper comfort in knowing that rather than sparing us dark valleys, he, the creator of the world, who flung stars into space, who was, who is and who is to come, chooses to humble himself and walk through the dark valleys with us. And it is an active walk - **his rod** - a mace like short stick used by shepherds to ward off wild animals, he uses to ward off evil and to protect us. His **staff** he uses to guide us, to keep us on the narrow track and pull us back when we threaten to stray.

The promise is we will emerge from the dark valley. In the meantime he is the God who weeps for us and with us.

3. Waiting

So as we head towards the conclusion – one more thought from the psalmist:

“Oh Lord come quickly to help me” (19)

Many times our prayers are answered but not immediately. Like the psalmist we groan *“How long Lord.” “Come quickly Lord.”*

We think we are waiting for God to answer our prayer. My experience of unanswered prayer is that more often it is God who is doing the waiting. He is waiting on us to become more fully the

person we were destined to become. Desires are tempered, ambitions reshaped, expectations reframed, hopes fuelled.

It is in the waiting that we are shaped for more than in the rejoicing of answered prayer. Unanswered prayer is essential to our Christian walk for it shapes us profoundly and along with adversity is the best teacher in faithfulness and trust that I know.

Skimmed over the topic – strongly encourage you to get a copy of Peter Greig's book: *God on Mute: Engaging the Silence of Unanswered Prayer* if you want to explore this topic further.

In the face of unanswered prayer, we need not be passive. Instead refuse despair. As Brueggemann writes allow your response to be an act of resistance – conscious acts of remembering and hoping. As David does in Psalm 22 Sing songs of praise, even in your despair, recall moments of God's faithfulness even in his silence, lament the seeming absence, continue to pray without ceasing reminding yourself constantly that:

- God is all powerful
- God does loves you and will reveal his face to you as he walks through the dark valley with you
- God works all things for good for those who trust in him.

So to conclude

Today we witnessed the baptism of Jim and Janet Frater's grandchildren James (Jimmy) and Marigold into the family of Christ. We have uttered some big promises. We prayed they may come to know Jesus as their saviour and friend.

And here finally is the miracle of prayer. Yes, some prayers seemingly go unanswered but what is more remarkable is the power of prayer and how it transcends time and space. You see these two children have been bathed in prayer since before they were conceived.

Jimmy is the great grandson of Gentleman Sir Jack Marshall former politician and President of the NZ Bible Society. Marigold is the granddaughter of Peter Alpe a semi-retired pastor who is currently serving at Laingholm Baptist Church. Janet and Jim are much loved members of St George's.

Our puny, faltering, tentative prayers somehow or rather combine with the prayer of those who have gone before into an anthem of praise:

*That God is Good
That God is Just
That God will show his face to us
That God will walk with us through the darkest valley
That God uses all things for good.*

Our prayers, enfeebled, stumbling and confounding as they sometimes are – are contributing to the making of all things new and are ushering in the day when:

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who is seated on the throne said I am making everything new”.

What a wonderful prayer of assurance to offer these two young children and to claim as our own. That is the greatest answer to prayer that I know.