

Prayer Series: Unanswered prayer – Isaiah 58:1-4,59:1-2 / James 4:1-6

A couple of years ago I received 2 emails on the same day. In the first, I learned of the tragic death of a young boy, whose parents (and many others, including me) had prayed faithfully for many months for healing from cancer... and who had died. In the second, I read of the testimony of another young man, not yet a Christian, living on another continent, prayed for that week by his sister's Alpha group. This young man had just attended a hospital appointment at which confirmation of the original diagnosis of a similar tumour was expected... only to find he was completely in the clear! Why was one miraculously healed and not the other? Why did the believers' child die, and the (as yet) unbelieving brother live? Why did a day or two's prayer from a few people yield amazing results, but not months of faithful intercession from many?

As Christians we live in two worlds: **(S)** the 'now' and the 'not yet'. It is, arguably, the central tension we live with as Christians: I have been saved, I am being saved, I will be saved. Which is it to be? Can it be all of them? Why do I already have 'every spiritual blessing in Christ' (Eph 1:3) and yet need to keep being filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18)? How can I have died to sin (Ro 6:2) and yet find that 'sin living in me' (Ro 7:20) still keeps doing bad things? How much of the spiritual life is 'now' and how much 'not yet'?

The issue of unanswered prayer is where this tension – between the blessings we enjoy now and the ones which are yet to come – is probably most difficult. Why do some prayers get answered and others not? I remember coming across an article about 10 years ago entitled: '27 reasons why God doesn't answer prayer.' Now that would have been a log sermon, even by my standards! But they might just as well have summarised it much more simply **(S)**: 'WE DON'T KNOW'

Slightly flippant – or maybe more than slightly – but it makes the point, doesn't it? Prayer will always remain something of mystery. At its heart, it's the most profoundly simple thing in the world – prayer is talking to God, and we can do it anytime, anywhere, on our own or in groups, out loud or silently. Yet how and when prayer is answered lies within the will of God, and although we can understand something of God's will, God is God and we will never fully understand these things.

And I can't promise to give you all the answers today. But I can try and set put some guidelines. Before we go any further, though, we must remember that the heart of prayer is **relationship (S)** – i.e. being with God. God encourages us to ask for things (that is, if you like, the chief activity of prayer, and we shouldn't be afraid to ask) – but the context is relationship. God is a generous and loving Father, not a heavenly slot machine: put this much prayer in, get this result out. Part of the trick to a healthy prayer life is always to remember this: it doesn't give us all the answers, but it does profoundly affect the way we pray.

Last topic 'persevering prayer' – reminds us that don't always get a quick answer. Not a slot machine, but often a deeper reason lying behind a prayer that doesn't seem to be answered straightaway. Summarise as follows:

SLOW: (S) God knows that an immediate answer isn't the best for us. E.g. of Mum and Dad's retirement home – didn't get first one – second even better. Loving Father – knows what we need

GROW: (S) main topic of last time – grow our spiritual muscles. Learn valuable lessons by persevering in prayer. E.g. My work alpha in 2002 – lots of prayer – first session ruined – (1) backfired; (2) God at work in person. It was a 'grow' answer from God. Or our church in London: plans for redevelopment – 'no' first time. Hubris, too showy, not all of church on board: more realistic, better supported, well financed – 7 years later a beautiful and manageable hall opened. God appeared not to answer so we could grow in our faith and life as a church.

NO (S) – sometimes just says 'no'. Why? Often for reasons above – sometimes are issues – here are 3 to watch out for:

(S) WRONG REQUESTS: things that God can't agree to. This is where we need to know our bibles, and the sorts of things that God loves to answer, and the things that he won't. Obvious example: if pray that God would help you win the lottery, he'll say no because gambling is forbidden. If pray that God would make something bad happen to the neighbour that has wronged you, he'll say no, as the primary command is to forgive and make peace. 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.' You can pray for a *just* outcome – which may or may not be to your advantage – but not for revenge.

Other, more subtle, wrong requests. We pray for God to intervene in situations and he appears not to? Why? Need to recognise that God does not remove our free will, and he hardly ever forces himself on people. Heard testimonies of people who set out to kill someone, and were kind of stopped by God – but extreme. Often we pray for people to stop doing something: but what's needed is a change of heart. He won't force a change of behaviour. Pray for a change of heart, not a change of behaviour.

(S) WRONG MOTIVES: James – pretty blunt (most people think he was a preacher – writes like one) – READ v3. Big argument in church James writing to: rich businessmen and poor, all in same congregation. Various disputes e.g. favouritism ch2 (EXPAND). Lot of disgruntlement – 'politics of envy' – appears that some of church were praying to be richer and prayer not answered. James says why – you'd only spend it on your pleasures. God's not going to give you money for you to fritter it away and live selfishly.

James reminds his readers of contrast between what really means to follow Jesus often contrasts with standards of rest of world. Issue here is remarkably up-to-date – money. He's saying that if you're a Christian, you get a different perspective on money. (What v6 means – life changes.) Challenges us to remember that following Jesus is a whole new way of life – need to be careful our prayers are not just secular values dressed up as prayer. Money obvious example – also comfort. We pray a lot for comfort – God is gracious, he gives us rest and joy and peace – but need to be careful. May be why God doesn't answer more of our prayers....

New basic principle: obey God and he'll give you all you want. Psalm 37:4 **(S)** – Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desire of your heart – sting in tail, what you 'want' changes.

(S) WRONG LIFESTYLE. Isaiah – already had wealth – sought God but didn't listen. Living ungodly lifestyle – oppressing workers. God: 'I'm not listening.' Look honestly at ourselves – is anything getting in way?

Obvious: patterns of sin

Less obvious: me-centred lifestyle. Indifference to poor. How feel about refugees – if feel they're scroungers God probably won't answer your prayers – loves poor and vulnerable and tells his people to look after them.

Good question – is newspaper you're reading encouraging godly values or poisoning them? (Could say same about books or TV programmes?) News especially important – nothing neutral. Lots of papers nowadays infect our heads with worldly attitudes – both sides of political spectrum. In past I have stopped reading papers that were poisoning my mind. Good basic principle – does it give more compassion or more contempt? More love or more hate?

Need to be careful – but not where I'll finish. If God required perfection, never get a prayer answered! So let's finish with an even bigger truth: **(S)** God is merciful. One issue that rarely matters is one we talk about most – amount of faith. Only need a mustard seed of faith – doubt is OK. Motives matter, lifestyle matters. But in the end God is love. He's loving Father – and he loves to answer the prayers of his obedient children. Thankfully it's not all about us. Praise God. Amen.

Removed

Radical difference between Christians and non-Christians. It's not between two sets of nice people, one who happen to be Christians and ones who aren't. Sharp division between kingdom of God and of world. Friendship with the world is enmity towards God. He's not saying don't live in the world, don't have lots of friends who aren't believers. Church is not about withdrawing. But what he is saying is that our values are different.

And (this is an uncomfortable truth) people who aren't Christians don't listen to the voice of the Spirit. Jesus tells us in John 16 that the Spirit's work in people who aren't Christians is to convict them of sin, righteous and judgement – i.e. of their absolute need for Jesus. So we'd be far better off for God to be at work in someone's life drawing them to the truth than for God to somehow force a change.