

Prayer: When It's Not the Answer We Want

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Date: 28 June 2020

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[0 : 00] Waiting is hugely frustrating. We appreciate that, especially when it comes to prayer. The thing is, we're in an instantaneous culture, aren't we? We want it now in society. We want people to do things for us almost immediately. We expect it. In fact, you know, send a text. We want a reply. We want something ordered. We want it tomorrow. And while we're waiting, we often read wrong messages into the waiting, don't we? You know, people don't care. They don't like me.

They're making me wait on purpose. All of those things that we sadly project into our relationship with God. This expectation that he should answer our prayers almost like an order, sort of straight away, promptly, on time, and exactly as we ask them. And when he does answer, and especially if it's a no, sadly, then God doesn't get our positive feedback. And we say to friends, oh, God didn't answer my prayer. And the worst still is that we may delete God from our future communications because of it. In this morning's reading, Jesus is facing humiliation, injustice, torture, pain, and death. He prays for an alternative to the cross. And who wouldn't? I think I would if I was in his position. He asks these five words, the five words that he's never prayed before.

And he asks, take this cup from me. Or it says in the NIV version this morning, we've read, remove this cup from me. I'm afraid, Lord, I don't want this. I don't think I can do this.

Have you ever prayed that prayer? Jesus knows that the coming of the kingdom will mean drinking an unbearable suffering cup. And at this crucial moment, he simply doesn't want to do it.

There must have been an audible gasp in heaven. Tears flowed from the Father's eyes. Perhaps a deep sense of, should I relent? Yet on behalf of us all for the victory of, that was to be born through the cross, through Jesus, through taking the sins of the world upon him, in that horrific yet victorious act, the Father says no to his son's prayer.

[2 : 26] Knowing that he is going to see his son, watch his son experience and suffer horrendous pain and injustice. But Jesus didn't leave it there.

Not what I will, but what you will. That's the next thing he says. What a courageous prayer having asked.

In the light of this morning's reading, it sort of puts all my prayers into perspective. And Lutz says, if God can bring blessing from the broken body of Jesus and glory from something that's obscene as the cross, then he can bring blessing from my problems, my pain, my unanswered prayer.

And yet I pray for miracles and I have seen a few. Praise God. I have also a list of unanswered prayer as well.

Yet I remind myself and give thanks to God that he gives us free will, that he doesn't micromanage my life, that he's not like a toddler and steps in at every moment, that I can learn lessons that he has taught me patience and waiting and also help me to deal with disappointment.

[3 : 41] Pete Gregg says in his book, when you drop a brick on your toe, it hurts your toe. Your father loves you and he knows the number of the hairs on your head. And therefore, by extension, therefore, he values your toes as well.

He doesn't want you to suffer unnecessary pain, but he will sit back and let gravity do what gravity does. Bricks rarely hover in midair above the feet of cherished believers.

I, like you, am waiting for the fulfilment of the kingdom when Jesus will come again. But we are in that not yet time.

We are in the now, but not yet. And there will be a place, there will be a time when Jesus comes again. There will be that time of no more pain, no more suffering. But that is not yet.

And today's reading and theme focuses me on the fragility, but the reality of life as a Christian in that not yet world. Pete says, you know, the creator is not a cosmic slot machine waiting to oblige our prayers with a can of Coke or peace in the Middle East.

[4 : 52] I think sometimes we need to realise that the love of God isn't always going to be yes to our prayers. The great Christian writer C.S. Lewis wrote a book.

It was called A Grief Observed. He wrote it after the death of his wife, Joy. It impacted me and it still continues to impact me in his honesty.

He'd waited a long time for his earthly love and he found it in later life with this wonderful woman. Yet it was to be short lived. And four years after their marriage, at the age of 45, Joy died of cancer. He wrote the book asking that it wouldn't be published under his name until after his death. Such was the rawness of his emotion that he poured out. And yet in all the tough questions, his faith remains strong.

In the film Shadowlands that reflects that, Anthony Hopkins, who plays Lewis, has a moment where he's leaving a meeting where he's been praying for joy.

[6 : 01] And his friend Harry meets him at the door. He said, I know how hard you've been praying and how God is answering your prayer. Lewis pauses as he puts on his coat to leave and says, that's not why I pray, Harry.

It's because I can't help myself. I pray because I am helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping.

It doesn't change God. It changes me. The situation didn't change for Jesus. He poured it out and he asked.

And on that day, it was a no. Maybe we need to address the elephant that's sat in all of our rooms at the moment. If God loves us so much, what's the purpose in seeing our loved ones suffer when we pray hard and we see miracles for others and yet not for us?

All I can say is that it doesn't stop me asking and praying for miracles for my loved ones. My relationship with my Heavenly Father is enough that on that great day, whether my prayers were answered or not, in all my disappointments and in my pain, it will be enough that I can talk to him face to face.

[7 : 17] And I ask him about my unanswered prayer, my disappointments and my pain. Some, of course, may be answered before that great day.

I really hope they are. But it puts it in perspective that when I meet with the Lord, I too can thank him for the thousands of prayers that he did answer day by day, week by week.

It's good to get unanswered prayers sometimes into perspective. In John 17, 21, Jesus prays a prayer that is still yet to be answered.

And he prayed for you and me that we would be one, his church, his people. And maybe we need to get onto that and get a bit intentional about that, about coming together more and more as Christians and looking for the coming of his kingdom.

Christchurch has been such a blessing in our ecumenical oneness. Dealing with disappointment in life is life.

[8 : 30] Jesus didn't promise that the cross that he asks us to take up and carry would be without its pain. The splinters of life go deep into our soul.

Yet as an atheist friend of mine kindly reminded me once as I tried to justify to him unanswered prayer. He said, do you know, it's far more comforting, Clive, to think God listened and said no than the alternative which I have, which is believing that nobody's out there, that nobody's listening and that nobody cares.

I'll end this morning with a car story. Well, it was a story that I was listening to in the car and it was on the radio.

The story being that a pastor of his church, they'd been praying long and hard for a guy called Ted. He was an older guy who had terminal cancer. And amazingly, Ted responded to treatment and became well.

All within a very short space of time. On the Sunday, they were going to give thanks for this. Yet in that week, a younger guy in the church, a father with two children, was taken ill and tragically, he died very suddenly.

[9 : 50] The leaders came to the pastor and said, well, what are we going to say on Sunday? You know, how can we celebrate? The leader thought, said, and I'm going to say Ted, the older guy, he got healed.

Praise God. Yet Pete, the younger guy, he got better. Ted did get healed. Yet Pete, the younger guy, despite the pain for his family, he is in eternity with our Lord Jesus Christ.

He just happened to get the better thing that day. And if you're a Christian, albeit in excruciating pain and the loss of a loved one, and as you grieve, and you may have grieved for many years, you may understand what the pastor says for your loved one, that they got better.

On days like this, it heightens my resolve to tell people, to bring people into relationship with Jesus. We're reading this book at the moment, *Unleashed* by the Culvers.

It's an amazing book. It's about the Acts 2 church and how that relates today in a sense of urgency. And I catch that for people that would come into a deeper relationship with Jesus.

[11:06] So on that day, when troubles come, and it will, because the Bible says that it will, and when this life ends, and sadly for some, often suddenly at a young age, in amongst the pain and the anguish, we may say they got better because they know Jesus and they are with him, just as he promised, like he promised to the guy next to him on the cross on that day, today you will be with me in paradise.

That's why I struggle, I think, with one of the top funeral hymns that's played at crematoriums, you know, I did it my way, you know. Not my will, but yours is perhaps better prayed.

Because through death, pain and disappointment, there is joy on the third day. There is joy in an empty tomb. There is joy in the price that was paid by Jesus for each and every one of us because of him.

And because of him, we all get better in the end. Why? Because on that one occasion, a loving father was strong enough to say no.