

Why Didn't God Answer?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 November 2023

Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 01] As we progress our journey through this series on prayer, and we think today about that question when it feels like God doesn't answer prayer, I want to talk about something that has the power to make us feel so deeply uncomfortable. And it's this. Silence.

Silence. Now sometimes silence is something that we associate with tranquility, peace and quiet.

There are times when we crave for that. But that's not the type of silence that we're thinking about when we think about the kind of prayer and that sense of anguish that we may get over the sense that God doesn't seem to be listening. I'm talking about the kind of silence that perhaps we might associate with times of waiting. Think of situations in our lives when that happens.

Maybe you've gone for a job interview. And those closing words are something like, oh, thank you, we'll be in touch. And then you wait. And you wait. And you wait.

Maybe you've got something going on medically and you have some tests. And then there's that time between having gone for the examination and the waiting for the results. And you don't know when that's going to be. And you're waiting for that phone call or that letter.

[2 : 13] Maybe there's that silence when there's been some situation of conflict or potential conflict with somebody else. And you send that message and you're trying to sort of put things right with them.

Maybe you sent them a message or something. You're just waiting for them to get back to you because you don't know what the outcome's going to be. And it feels that that kind of relationship situation that feels oh so fragile is just kind of there on hold. And you're waiting.

Those are just a few examples. And I'm sure we could think of plenty of others. Where silence, the silence of waiting is agonising. Seconds can seem like minutes. Minutes can seem like hours and hours can seem like days.

That's the kind of silence, the kind of waiting that this psalm is about. The kind of silence that we can experience in our prayer life.

Where we ask God for something. We reach out to God for something. We want to hope in a particular outcome in prayer.

[3 : 31] And yet no matter how hard and how sincerely we pray it feels like it's met with silence. It's as though God is on mute. Let's remember that these words of these psalms, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me, are the words that we hear according to Matthew and Mark's gospel, Jesus on the cross.

And that itself tells us something so, so powerful. That central to our faith as followers of Jesus is that Jesus himself and his finest hour and his darkest hour cried out those same words.

When you and I cry out that same sense, God, where are you? And it feels that he's just silent, that he's not engaging with our prayers. We actually find ourselves in solidarity with Jesus himself on the cross.

You're not alone because Jesus himself cries out that prayer. Why God? My God, why have you forsaken me?

And because we are not alone in that sense of agony, but know that Jesus is with us in it, then we can know that the same God of resurrection hope is with us and always will be.

[5 : 20] So what might we say then about that experience of silence? And I'm assuming that every single person in this room and every single person listening to this online will have experienced that at some point in their lives and probably to some extent right now.

That sense where you ask God and yet this feels that the prayer is met with silence. What might we say? Let me be really clear about this.

Anything I'm about to say is not intended as an oversimplification. And I'm very suspicious of any pat answers to deep searching questions. So that is not what is being offered right now.

But I share this with you as a thought that I've found very helpful and continue to find helpful. And it's this. That silence makes us feel uncomfortable.

It may make us feel uncomfortable in all sorts of everyday situations. But it particularly can make us feel uncomfortable when it comes to our prayer. But maybe, maybe, just maybe, there are those times when silence can actually function creatively and purposefully.

[6 : 43] And what I'm talking about here is silence as a form of communication. communication. Because without silence we actually can't communicate.

Unless there are pauses between words and between sentences nothing will ever make sense. We need silence in everyday communications in order to understand one another.

Years ago when I was a student and I have no idea how this happened and it hasn't happened before or since but I was working on a dissertation and something happened with my computer and I lost every single piece of punctuation.

We're talking about 10,000 words. No full stops no commas no colons nothing. one long meaningless sentence.

Now there was more than one of my tutors that would say that that sums up the style of my writing anyway but on this occasion there were basically everything was removed.

[8 : 01] I got it back again I don't know how but all the punctuation had gone it was missing. You take the pauses out nothing makes sense. Remember a few years ago I actually saw a road sign that had been hand painted and a really vital exclamation mark was missing so the punctuation had gone and it just had the words on the sign and the sign was meant to say slow men at work.

You take the punctuation out you take the silence out and you lose the power to communicate. That's true in language it's true in physical things art or architecture for example.

Think how any piece of architecture is giving its sense of beauty its sense of form its sense of structure not just through what is there but through what isn't there through the spaces the gaps.

it's true in music unless you have the pauses the silences the rests well you lose it all.

Handel's Messiah the hallelujah chorus and there's that that pause that gap that silence before that thunderous hallelujah you lose the silence you lose the thunder.

[9 : 33] Let's never underestimate the power of silence as a form of communication. Maybe just maybe when our prayers are met with what we perceive as silence actually that silence is something that God is using through which to speak.

now the sceptic will be listening to this and think oh yeah but that's what you're talking about there is just the God of the gaps I mean the silence of your God effectively just represents the emptiness of heaven.

The reason why God is silent is because God's just not there. Now at face value that's a very very sensible response but it misses an important point.

And the point is that there is all the world of difference between live silence and dead silence. Let me explain what I mean. Imagine you walk into a restaurant and you look around the room and there's a number of couples sat around tables.

In one corner over here you see one couple and they're silent. Over here you see another couple and they're equally silent. And yet there's two very different things going on and it's apparent just by looking at them.

[11 : 00] The couple over here are silent because they've just not got anything to say to each other. They're bored.

They've run out of words. That's dead silence. Meanwhile over here in this other corner there's a couple that are gazing into each other's eyes and you can tell without the need for any words whatsoever that they're so deeply in love.

They're not speaking because they don't need to speak. That silence is more powerful than any amount of words.

silence. So how might we interpret then the live silence that might be the reality when we are seeking to engage God in prayer and we cry out my God my God why have you forsaken me as the words of that psalm put it and as indeed as Jesus puts it on the cross.

How might we interpret our experiences of apparent silence in our prayers? Again this isn't intended as formula but I find it helpful.

[12 : 26] Bill Hybels many years ago suggested that there may be three things and they all happen to rhyme. The first thing is that God might say no.

And that's when the silence just means no because the thing that we are praying for is wrong. It's not good. It's not in our interests. It's not healthy.

Dear God please give me that Ferrari. I could do your work so much quicker. Sometimes if the prayer is wrong, if it's selfish, if it's wrongly motivated, if it's not in our interest or in the interest of others, then the answer is simply no.

But sometimes the answer isn't no, it's just slow. In other words, the timing is wrong. The thing that God is going to give, that we are praying for, will happen in the course of time.

But it's just that right now, it's not that time. Now sometimes we can look back on our lives and we can see the way in which that silence eventually has been broken. Where God has answered prayers that previously we thought he wasn't.

[13 : 45] And sometimes we can look back and it makes sense and it understands. I realise I was asking God to do that in my life back then and it didn't happen and I'm so glad now on reflection that it didn't happen then because the timing was wrong.

Yet it happened this later stage in my life and that was when it was right and I can see it, I get it. There are other experiences in our lives where actually God doesn't answer straight away but he does much later and it just doesn't make sense to us at all why we had to wait.

And that's why we call Christian faith faith because there are things that we just don't understand and won't understand this side of eternity. Sometimes God just says slow.

I will answer your prayer, it's just not yet. So sometimes the request is wrong and God says no. Sometimes the timing is wrong and he just says slow.

But there are other times perhaps when there's something wrong with our own lives that we've got to put right first. In which case God says you've got to grow.

[14 : 51] It may be that there's something, we are praying for God to do something in our lives all the while that we are aware that there is some certain situation that we are refusing to listen to that we won't put right.

Something where if we dig deep down inside we know it's not right, it is wrong, it is profoundly wrong. Maybe it's a relationship that we haven't tried to put right. Maybe it's something in our lifestyle that actually we know that that is not right, that that is not pleasing to God.

And yet we still keep on doing it. if that's us, let us not be surprised if our prayer life seems to be met with silence.

Sometimes it is a simple thing but a real thing that we just need to make certain changes in our own lives. And God says, silence, you've got to grow.

Sometimes then God says no when the request is wrong. Sometimes if the timing is wrong, he says slow. Sometimes if there's something wrong with ourselves, with our own hearts that we need to put right, then God says you've got to grow.

[16 : 01] But if all of those things are in place, then God says go. The important thing with all of this though, is not to stop.

Because these things are a mystery. And sometimes that silence can meet us in a way that, you know, we just can't make sense of it.

Or at the time it just doesn't make sense. And the important thing there is not to give up praying. But to keep on putting Jesus front and centre.

Even when it doesn't make sense. One last story and then we're going to pray. Illustration. And it's to do with a particular type of plant called a Chinese bamboo plant.

There's a particular variety of Chinese bamboo which grows in a very unusual way. You take the seed of this plant and you put it in the soil and you water it and you fertilise it for about a year.

[17 : 02] And nothing happens. You do this for another year, more fertiliser, more water, and you wait for a second year and nothing. Year three, more water, more fertiliser, more waiting, nothing.

Year four, water, fertiliser, waiting, nothing. In the fifth year of watering, fertilising, and waiting, a little shoot will poke up through the surface and then grow anything up to 90 feet in six weeks.

Here's a question. How long does it take for that thing to grow? Six weeks?

Or five years? Let's pray. Lord, you know what it can be like to face that agony of silence.

You've shown us that you know what that is like through the cross. Lord, right now in our own experience, there may be all sorts of different reasons why we feel that sense of silence and it can be painful.

[18 : 40] It can be agonising. Lord, right now in the midst of that silence, help us to put you front and centre and to keep on keeping on and not to give up.

Lord, grant us the ability to hear that silence, to interpret that silence, to discern the meaning of that silence.

Search our hearts, help us to understand the nature of the things that we are praying for. Lord, in the midst of our waiting, whatever that may mean, whatever that looks like right now.

Fill us and go on filling us with the power of your spirit. Be at the centre and may we not give up in our prayers. Help us to trust in you.

Now as we continue to worship and in the time to come. In Jesus' name. Amen.