

When prayers aren't answered as we would choose

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your word. Please now help us to understand it and apply it that we might live in the light of it.

For your glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, this is the fourth talk on our series on prayer over Lent. If you've missed any of the others, they're all on our website. You can listen there or listen again.

But here's a recap on what we've covered so far. We talked about why we should pray. We're to pray because of our duty and it's our delight and because we are dependent on God for everything. When are we to pray? We're to pray at all times and in all places and situations. When we are joyful and when at times are grievous. And we're to pray, as we saw last week, with all kinds of prayers and requests. For things practical and spiritual, local, international, for God's greater glory and for our good and blessing.

That constant stream of prayer, bringing our worries and our needs to God, is how we experience God's peace. We hand things over to him. So, no prayer, there is no peace. But if we know prayer, K-N-O-W, as the Bible describes it, that ongoing relationship of God, of prayer with God himself through prayer, then we will know God's peace.

[1 : 25] That's God's promise to us. But how does that apply during those times when our prayers seem to go unanswered, when heaven seems silent and we have to wait?

What do we do when there is a clear no to something we were desperate to hear aloud and instant yes? What then? How is it possible to still know God's peace in those situations?

Well, that's our focus today. But let me start with the personal story. I think the time in my life when I have prayed the most fervent and heartfelt prayers and pleaded with God ceaselessly over a number of days to hear and answer as I thought best, that time those prayers were answered with a very clear no.

My mum had been ill for a while. She was towards the end of her treatment for leukaemia and things were going well. There was a bone marrow transplant lined up and that would probably have saved her life.

Everything was going in the right direction until she picked up an infection. With no natural resistance, the hospital blasted her with every antibiotic they had to hand, but nothing worked.

[2 : 40] And by the time I was called away from work to make my way down to Eastbourne where my parents were living, mum was in a coma and all we could do was watch and wait and pray.

And I did pray.

Why can't you do that with my mum? Why can't you do it now? I begged him to repeat that miracle in my day. But there were no bolts of life bringing power from heaven.

There was no extra time reprieve. I had prayed and God had heard my prayers and the prayers of many others too. But the answer was no. And my mum died just at the age of 53.

Now, I suspect that story isn't unusual. Many of you will have had experiences like that, of fervent prayers that weren't answered in the way you had asked. And of course, we're not alone, are we?

[3 : 58] What did we just read from that passage in Matthew's Gospel? Jesus fell to the ground in the Garden of Gethsemane and pleaded with his father three times.

Three times. For a way that he might save the world without having to endure the cross. And what was the answer? No. No.

There was no other way. Jesus had to endure the cross. The cries and prayers of David in Psalm 13 portray a different kind of problem. In David's case, it felt as if there was no answer at all.

As if God had turned his face away and was ignoring him. That's not the case, of course. But that is how it feels sometimes, isn't it? If we're honest, David had been praying for a long time.

His need was undiminished. But it felt as if God was maybe busy doing other things. Or he no longer cared. And all the time, David's suffering and anguish was building up and building up. [4 : 58] How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts day after day of sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me? It's a heartfelt cry of prayer, isn't it? How long? You can sense too that David's hope of an answer is slowly fading.

Not because he doubts God's power, but because he himself is getting weaker. Whilst his enemies seem to be getting stronger. Give light to my eyes, Lord, or I will sleep in death.

Then my enemy will say, I have overcome him. Now, as we've seen with David and with Jesus, there is no problem at all of praying the same prayer again and again and again.

Maybe over years. David does it. Jesus does it. The Bible encourages it. Jesus actually teaches a parable about it. To be persistent in our prayers. Yes. But our prayers have a window of opportunity, don't they?

[6 : 04] A time when a positive answer will make a difference and a time when that window of opportunity is gone. Death and defeat make those prayers void. You can sense that in verses 3 and 4.

So how do we cope when our long, repeated, desperate prayers aren't answered as we wanted? Or when it feels as if God isn't listening? How can we keep on praying to God?

To keep on trusting God during those times of waiting? And even after the unwanted answer is given? We need to know, don't we? We need to know because if we're honest, this is a challenge we all face.

I mentioned a few moments ago those fervent prayers for my mum that were answered with a no. But I have to say I've known times of waiting as well. I've been praying one particular prayer for nearly 30 years.

And at the moment there is no sign of an answer. And it feels as if things are getting harder for God to answer that prayer. So sometimes those prayers now begin with the words of Psalm 13.

[7 : 07] How long, O Lords? How long? How long until you answer? And I'm sure I'm not the only one who's been praying those sort of prayers for such a long time.

And there's a danger, isn't there, when our prayers go unanswered? Or when the answer isn't what we wanted. That when that happens we can turn in on ourselves or we can turn away from God.

We can say to ourselves, I'm so unworthy and wicked. That's why God hasn't granted my prayer.

And we can feel wretched because it's all our fault. Or we can say, well, I was wrong to trust God in the first place.

He either isn't good or he isn't powerful or he isn't there. So we can turn away from him.

Self-loathing and unworthiness or doubt, disbelief and fear.

Most of us battle with those kind of feelings from time to time. But look how the psalm ends. Did you notice that? Kim picked it up beautifully as she was reading. That the confidence in those last two verses.

[8 : 18] But I trust in your unfailing love. My heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise for he has been good to me. And you look back and you think, well, how is that possible?

You've spent four verses saying God hasn't answered your prayers. And here you are rejoicing. Where David reminds himself of and delights in God's saving work.

And the goodness God has shows him up to this point. Those last couple of verses, he's reaffirming his faith. He's acknowledging God's love. Saying that it never runs out.

And despite the fact that he is still waiting, he is determined to keep singing his faith out loud. And think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

How does Jesus respond to that no from his father? Not by running out of the garden and jumping on the first ship away from there. No, by submitting himself to his father's will.

[9 : 17] If it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it. May your will be done. Jesus asks his father for another way.

And when there was none to be found, he committed himself to God's will and he endured the cross. And aren't you glad that he did? Aren't you glad that God didn't answer that prayer?

Because where would we be without Jesus' sacrifice? We'd still be lost in our sin without God, without hope in this world. And without no hope, without any hope for the next. Thank God that the father said no to Jesus' plea.

So what about us? How might we deal with unanswered prayers in the same way as Jesus and David? We need to learn from them both, don't we? And do what they did. And I want to suggest four things this morning that both David and Jesus knew that if we can remember and we can bring to mind in these times, they will help us trust God and to keep praying and to keep praising. Here's the first one. We've got to remember that God hasn't changed. When our prayers go unanswered, we can fall into the trap of either thinking that God is being mean to us or that there is something that we have done that has caused him to turn his back on us.

[10 : 41] And with one small caveat, neither of those things are true. Firstly, the fundamental truth about God is that he does not change. You can find loads of verses in the Old Testament and New Testament that say that.

Psalms 55 is one of them. Verse 19, God, who is enthroned from of old, who does not change.

Malachi 3, verse 6, I, the Lord, and I do not change.

James 1, verse 17, every good and perfect gift from above coming down from the father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

So what do we know about God? Well, he is a God of compassion and goodness, of mercy and love, holy and righteous. He was like that in the past. He is like that in the present.

And he will be like that in the future because God does not change. So let's not fall into the habit of thinking, well, God's just being mean. No, no, no, no. That's not God's character.

[11 : 45] He is a loving father. He's all these glorious things. And whilst our sin and disobedience can and do put a distance between us and God, and that can be a reason why our prayers are not answered, the remedy for that, of course, is in our own hands, isn't it?

If we draw near to God, he promises to draw near to us. If we confess our sins, God promises to forgive. And if there is a block to our prayers being answered, something in our own lives, it's not something you're going to have to search for.

You'll know it. You'll know it. Remembering that God's character does not change means we have no reason to ever think that God is withholding his blessing out of spite or meanness, or because he is waiting for us to earn an answer.

We don't earn our salvation. We do not earn answers to prayer. So the antidote to these doubts is to remember God's character. David does it in the psalm.

His unfailing love, his amazing grace, his enduring mercies. What's the best way to remember all of those things? Well, it's to look at Jesus on the cross. To recall all he has done for us and all that it cost him.

[13 : 02] How can we ever doubt God's love if we fix our eyes on Jesus? We must not imagine that the God who gave his son for us has changed.

He hasn't. His love is the same. God does not and he cannot change. Secondly, God's power and authority are undiminished.

Do you remember the adverts for Duracell Bactris when they came out? There was that annoying bunny rabbit with the two symbols that was doing this all the way along. And all the other batteries ran down really quickly, didn't they?

Apart from that Duracell bunny. Oh no, he was going and he was going and going and going. Well, even Duracell bunnies run out of energy eventually. But God doesn't.

God doesn't. His power will never run down or run out. So the same power of God that brought the universe into being and created mankind, brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt, well, that same power was seen as the Israelites then conquered the promised land and humbled mighty Babylon and brought the exiles home.

[14 : 15] That same power was seen in the ministry of Jesus. It was seen at work as Jesus was raised from the dead back to life. That same power was at work as they went out and taught and spread the gospel news to the whole world.

And one day the whole world will see that power as Jesus comes again. And God renews the heavens and the earth. God's power has been seen throughout the ages and it has not run out. What does that mean for us? Well, it means that we must put to bed any lingering doubts that God hasn't answered our prayers because somehow he has grown tired and weary.

We grow tired and weary. God doesn't. God doesn't. Paul reminds the Ephesian Christians of this. God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine according to his power that is at work within us.

To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever. When does his power work? For all generations forever and ever.

[15:23] It's not because of a lack of power that God doesn't answer our prayers as we would like. Neither is it because God is somehow banned from intervening in his worlds.

God has not been shut out of his creation. He remains sovereign over all things. Psalm 22 reminds us of that. Dominion belongs to the Lord. He rules over the nations.

God's character hasn't changed. He is still just as loving and gracious as he ever was. His power hasn't run out. His sovereign rule is unchallenged. He still has the power and authority to do all things.

Third thing to remember. God's knowledge and wisdom are perfect. When heaven seems silent, when the answer we receive is not the one we wanted, the question that comes to mind is why, isn't it?

Lord, why haven't you answered this? Why didn't you heal that person? Why didn't you solve that situation over there? Well, sadly, the Bible doesn't answer those specific why questions, but it gives us so many reasons for hope and faith.

[16:39] We've looked at some of those already. God hasn't changed in his character. He hasn't changed in his power or authority. And the scripture also tells us that God's ways are just, holy, true and good.

And as we read the scriptures and see the history of God's people in both testaments, where we're given an invitation to trust God now because of how he has behaved in the past and to trust him in the future, even when the events that we see unfolding before us don't look as if they could possibly be wound and woven into God's perfect plans.

Don't you feel that sometimes? You look at something happening, you think, how on earth can you bring good out of this? How on earth can God be at work in the Middle East at the moment?

What is going on? But that's how the cross looked, isn't it? Can you imagine being one of those disciples, having had three and a half years with Jesus and now seeing him hung, nailed to a Roman cross?

That moment looked like the greatest of all failures. Yet think what immense good and glory God brought to himself by not answering Jesus' plea in the Garden of Gethsemane.

[18:03] If you look at that, surely we can think, well, might not God be able to bring good and glory from this sadness and suffering over here? Might he actually know the outcome of all these things and be working in some wonderful way through them?

Think of the story of Joseph and his brothers. How he was sold as a slave. Imagine having brothers like that.

Oh, we don't like our brother, we'll sell him. Joseph's story ends with him telling his brothers, actually you intended this for evil, God intended it for good.

And for the saving of many lives. Think of the persecution the early church endured. So severe that they all fled.

But what did they do as they fled? Well, they took the good news of Jesus with them and planted churches in every town they went to. And little individual cases as well.

[19:02] The Old Testament tells the story of the little Jewish girl who was taken captive. And how she told her mistress of the God of Israel who could heal people of leprosy.

And so Naaman, the commander of Israel's enemy's forces, was healed. God was at work through things like that.

See, you and I are not God. We see only in part. We understand things only in part. Our grasp of history is minute compared to God's.

We're limited in every way in our understanding, by our geography, our years, our knowledge. You and I can't see into the future, let alone shape it to our design. Yet all of history is proceeding towards God's chosen ends.

In small ways. And in the great glorious span of history. And just because at that moment we think, I have no idea how this could work out.

[20:06] It doesn't mean that God isn't at work. So think about the Bayer tapestry for a moment. Some of you are into sewing and tapestry. And I'm sure you'll know this.

On the front edge, it looks amazing. It's incredible complex design. What's it going to look like on the back? Knots and tangles.

With no pattern or anything. You and I look on the back of the tapestry of history. Even in our own lives, that's what we see very often.

But God looks on the other side. He looks at how things are being put together. Creating something glorious. And that is the hope that we have.

We spoke earlier on about a child who asked their parent for something that the parent knows will either harm them or won't be for their good right now. That maybe something is better than they hoped for.

[21 : 03] And surely however much that child might plead and cry out for it, any loving parent in that situation is going to say no. Well, God's love is deeper and stronger than anything you and I can give.

Can we trust him to do what is right? Surely we can. And of course, the greater our knowledge of God and his ways, the deeper our understanding of God's character.

Not to mention our experience of his love and mercy in our own lives. The more we are willing to accept that God is good. And he is great enough to have all these things covered.

And whilst we might see things one way, there is an overwhelming probability that God has another perspective. And that the answers to prayers that he gives and does not give are in fact what is best and right.

Both for his glory and his good. God's wisdom is always best. His plans are always best. Tim Keller, one of my favourite authors, sums that up this way.

[22 : 11] This is worth remembering. God always gives us in prayer what we would have asked for if we knew everything that he knows. Can you get your head around that?

God always gives us in prayer what we would have asked for if we knew everything that God knows. Of course we don't.

But he does. He does. That's something to cling on to as we struggle with the silence and unwanted answers we receive from our Father in heaven. Here's the last thing to remember.

God has a glorious future ahead for those who love him. This is the ultimate hope of the Christian, isn't it? I think part of the reason we get ourselves in knots over our sin and suffering and unanswered prayer is that we often have an earthly mindset, not a heavenly one.

We've fallen for the lie that some churches actually teach openly that things in life now should be good and glorious and happy all the way through.

[23 : 18] That God should answer all our prayers for our health, wealth, happiness, safety, joy, etc, etc. But that's not what the Bible teaches. It's not what Jesus says. He says in this world you will have trouble.

And that's what history shows, isn't it? It's what our own lives show. It's what the life of every believer has shown. Like Jesus, like all Christians, everyone, the world over, we will all know pain and loss and suffering and death in this world.

It's not fall into the trap of thinking that everything has got to be glorious. But of course, the things that happen in this world are not the end of the story.

One day, all our longings and unanswered prayers and longing for healing and peace and joy will find their fulfillment in God's new creation. One day there will be no more pain.

One day there will be no more sickness. There will be no more death or disease. No more loneliness. No more poverty or violence. No more hatred and sin. And it's there in the kingdom of God that all those no's and not yet's will be answered with a glorious and resounding yes in Christ.

[24 : 37] See, here's another lovely saying to remember. The end for the Christian will be glorious and perfect. And if right now it isn't glorious and perfect, then it isn't the end.

The end for the Christian will be glorious and perfect. And if right now it isn't glorious and perfect, then it isn't the end. It's not what we're destined for. That will come later.

When heaven seems silent and we don't get the answers we wanted, we can and we should keep on praying again and again until all hope is gone. Or maybe God changes our hearts to pray for something else.

But in the midst of those struggles, when the questions and doubts rage, we must bring to mind God's unchanging nature, his power, his authority, his wisdom shown most perfectly to us in Jesus. And we, like David, must lift our eyes to the glory to come, to the glory of God, and fix our eyes ahead to the day when Jesus comes again.

[25 : 45] And as we do that, well, then we can sing like David sang. And we can keep praising and keep trusting the one who has saved us. And who has and will continue to be good to all those who trust in Christ.

We'll be thinking more on that topic on our two prayer sessions as we go through this week. But for now, let's rejoice in those truths.

Amen. Amen.