

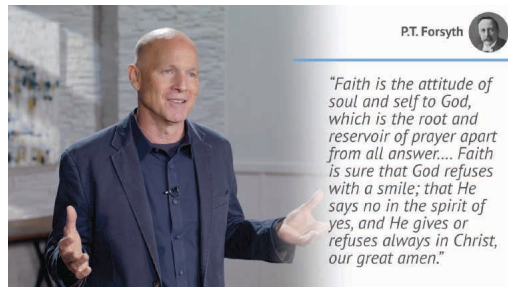
What about "Unanswered" Prayer?

Some years back, when my son was struggling with substance abuse, I wrote a book called *Prayers for Prodigals*. The book was a cry from the heart, filled with Scripture-based prayers for parents to pray for their wayward children. As I mentioned in the first lesson, my son has returned to the Lord and is a youth pastor. So many prayers have been answered that when I recently recorded the audio version of the book, I had to stop several times, because I would realize I was reading an answered prayer and my voice would break. Again and again, I saw how God had moved in answer to our prayers and the prayers of so many readers; and it brought me to tears.

But that's only part of the story. I have another prodigal that I'm still praying for, whom I have been praying for longer than my son. And while I've seen many prayers answered, some have not been—yet. Just a few days ago I read a letter from a woman who has been praying for her prodigal son for twenty-six years—and she still hasn't seen him come home.

Unanswered prayer can be one of the most difficult things we face in the Christian faith, especially when you are asking for something good, something you know God would have you ask for. Recently a couple in our church was praying for their daughter who was very ill. And we saw a number of answers to our prayers for her. She was doing better, getting stronger day by day. And then one day, she died suddenly from her illness, leaving behind a grieving husband and two daughters. That was so hard—and that's the thing about unanswered prayer—it can shake you to the core.

Some may say that there is no such thing as unanswered prayer—that God answers every prayer with a yes, a no, or a wait awhile. And while I understand that, I find that it's just a little too neat a box to put things in. Sometimes God may say "yes," but that answer is dependent on our continued obedience. Other times he may say "yes" or "no" to part of a prayer, but not to all of it. Other times God's Word shows us that a "yes" is dependent on perseverance in prayer, so that the answer is not just "wait." It's "you need to pray about this more!" Sometimes we simply do not know what God is doing in answer to prayer, and we have to keep

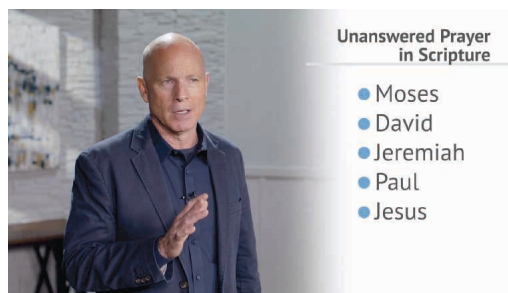


praying with faith.

I love what the Scottish theologian P.T. Forsyth wrote about this: "Faith is the attitude of soul and self to God, which is the root and reservoir of prayer apart from all answer. . . . Faith is sure that God refuses with a smile; that He says no in the spirit of yes, and He gives or refuses always in Christ, our great amen."

What Forsyth is pointing to is that real, honest prayer is about so much more than just requests or answers. It's deeply relational, as we've discovered in our previous lessons. In this lesson, we'll look at some surprising biblical examples of "unanswered" prayer. Then we'll tackle the issue of how unanswered prayer can be so difficult when seen in the light of the beautiful promises God has made in His Word about prayer. Lastly, we'll consider practical encouragement for coping with unanswered prayer in our personal lives.

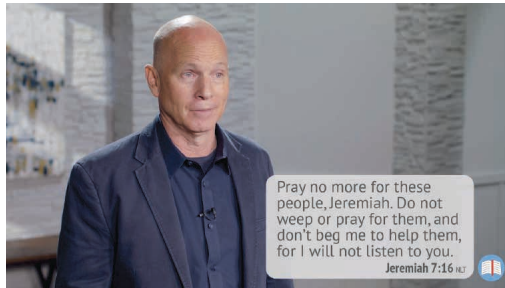
The names of some of the people in Scripture whose prayers went unanswered reads like a veritable who's who of faith: Moses, David, Jeremiah, Paul, and even Jesus. And their responses to unanswered prayer have something to teach us. Sometimes when we pray and an answer doesn't seem to come, we wonder if we should have done something differently—if we had just prayed a little more or had more faith. But these examples from God's Word show us that even the most faithful sometimes encountered what can seem like silence in response to their prayers.



Think about Moses. Moses was one of the greatest leaders in history, used of God to free His people from slavery. Exodus 33:11 tells us that the Lord spoke to Moses "as a man speaks with his friend." But in Deuteronomy 3:23, Moses wrote, "At that time I pleaded with the LORD: 'Sovereign LORD, you have begun to show your servant your greatness and your strong hand. . . . Let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan—that fine hill country and Lebanon.'" But the Lord responded to him, "That is enough. . . . Do not speak to me anymore about this matter" (Deuteronomy 3:23–26).



David prayed for his infant child to live and fasted for him for seven days. But 2 Samuel 12:18 tells us: "On the seventh day the child died." Jeremiah pleaded with God's people to repent and prayed for them, but the Lord told him, "Pray no more for these people, Jeremiah. Do not weep or pray for them, and don't beg me to help them, for I will not listen to you" (Jeremiah 7:16 NLT). Later in

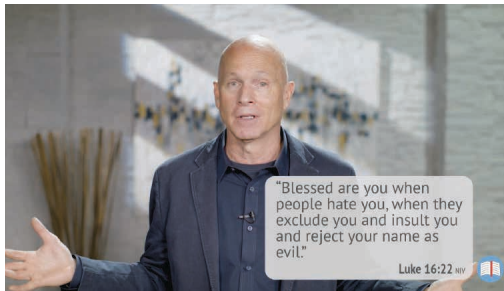


Lamentations Jeremiah prayed, "You have covered yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can get through" (Lamentations 3:44).

The apostle Paul pleaded with God three separate times to remove what he called a "thorn in the flesh," something that was a torment to him. We don't know what it was exactly, but we do know God's answer to Him wasn't simply a "no." It was actually these empowering words: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:8-9). But perhaps the greatest example in all of Scripture of a prayer that seemed to go unanswered was Jesus' cry from the garden of Gethsemane the night before He was crucified. Matthew describes the moment: "Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me'" (Matthew 26:39). The cup Jesus was referring to was His crucifixion. But He concludes His prayer with these words that are instructive for all of us who wonder what to do when our prayers are not met with the response we long for. He said, "Yet not as I will, but as you will." Jesus bows to God's wisdom in everything.

That being said, how do we reconcile unanswered prayer with some of the great promises Jesus made about asking God? Promises like, "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer" (Matthew 21:22) or, "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:14). As a pastor, I have prayed faithfully for healing for others many times, believing it was in God's will and praying in Jesus' name for what I thought were His purposes. And sometimes the healing occurred and it was miraculous, and other times it didn't. What are we to make of this? Of course, the most honest response is that God's ways are above our own, and we sometimes do not know why some prayers go unanswered. But we also have to consider Jesus' teaching on prayer by taking into account other things He said about what believers will face. In John 16:33 He told us, "In this world you will have trouble." He also said, "Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil" (Luke 6:22). Jesus also spoke of persecution and taking up your cross. These are His praying people that He is speaking to; and what He's pointing to is a life that is challenging. So, in light of this larger teaching, perhaps a fair question to ask is, "Do I expect that all of my prayers will be answered the way that I would like them to be?"

That question about what we expect of God is important because it



Reconciling Unanswered Prayer with Jesus' Promises

- Ask yourself...
 - Do I expect that all of my prayers will be answered the way that I would like them to be?

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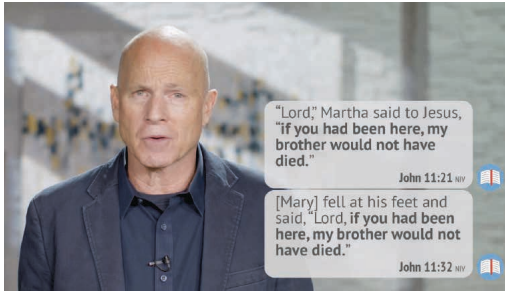
- Ask yourself...
 - Do I always have to have a reason from God for why something difficult happens in my life?

reveals our hearts. Do I always have to have a reason from God for why something difficult happens in my life? It may also be God's mercy toward us that is behind some unanswered prayers. As C. S. Lewis confided to a friend once in a letter, "If God had granted all the silly prayers I've made in my life, where should I be now?" But sometimes we don't feel that way because the prayers aren't silly. They're from the heart, about serious things, and we have difficulty comprehending why God allows heartbreaking things. But given our limited understanding, we also have to wonder if we could accept the reasons from God if we actually knew them. I believe there are some things that simply cannot make sense to us from our limited vantage point. When I was in high school, I lost a good Christian friend who was a couple of years older than I, who lived just up the street. But if Jesus Himself had told me the reasons why my friend was taken, I honestly can't say that I or his family would have been able to accept them. Think of Mary and Martha, who both told Jesus at their brother Lazarus's tomb, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21,32). Unanswered prayer feels that way at times, as if Jesus just wasn't there. But we also have to ask this: Am I willing to accept disappointment from Him? Will I trust Him in the dark, and continue to believe? Will I walk by faith and not by sight?

Our God is both sovereign and personal. And the beautiful thing about Jesus is that He also knows what it's like to ask, "Why?" From the cross, He prayed, "Why have you forsaken me?" And what He is doing in those moments is praying the first verse of Psalm 22. Because Jesus is both fully God and fully human, He understands us completely. He is "Immanuel, God with us." And that means we can bring our questions and struggles to Him, and He will comfort us. When Jesus encountered Mary and Martha in their grief, He wept. As Peter wrote, we can cast our cares on Him "because he cares" for us (1 Peter 5:7).

And that brings us to the practical encouragement we have for coping with unanswered prayer. The most comforting thing about casting our cares upon Jesus is that His love has ways of meeting us unexpectedly. There were times when my son was wrestling with addiction that were so difficult, and it seemed like our prayers were bouncing off the ceiling and everything around us

was falling apart. But as I turned my heart and mind to Jesus in the middle of that mess, I found that He met me with His peace again and again. That didn't mean that we didn't struggle, it just meant that He was faithful to get us through even those moments

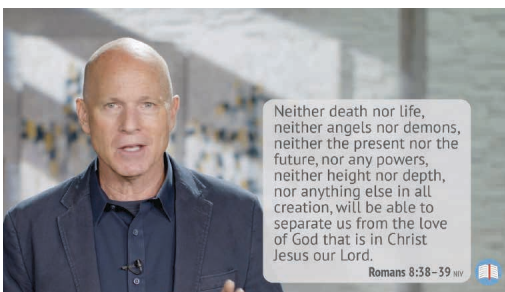


Practical Encouragement for Coping with Unanswered Prayer

- Jesus' love has ways of meeting us unexpectedly when we cast our cares on Him.

Practical Encouragement for Coping with Unanswered Prayer

- Jesus' love has ways of meeting us unexpectedly when we cast our cares on Him.
- Remember the times God has been kind to you in the past.



that we didn't understand.

If you struggle with unanswered prayer in your life, go to the Lord in prayer, talk it out with Him, pour out your heart to Him. And as you do, remember the times God has been kind to you in the past.

In the book *Approaching God*, Steve Brown writes:

The next time your urgent prayers are not answered in the way you would like them to be answered, ask yourself three questions: (1) Has God loved me? (2) Has He demonstrated that love? (3) Has He ever lied to me? The proper answer to those questions won't make the pain go away, but they will remind you that He is there, that He knows what He is doing, and that even if you don't understand, He does. It will remind you to never doubt in the dark what He has taught you in the light.

God's Word tells us that all we are and everything we have is a gift from Him. When Jesus said some difficult things and many left Him, Jesus asked the disciples if they wanted to leave too. Peter responded, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). When our prayers go unanswered, it helps to remember that life is fleeting, and we are sinners who are saved by God's mercy alone, and that "every good and perfect gift is from above" (James 1:17). We cannot make demands on Him, because He has already given us more than we deserve. And one day, He will wipe every tear from our eyes (Revelation 21:4). As Charles Haddon Spurgeon said, "God is too good to be unkind, and He is too wise to be mistaken. And when we cannot trace His hand, we must trust His heart." The apostle Paul assures us, "Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38–39). Absolutely nothing—not even unanswered prayer—can keep us from our Savior's love.