

Understanding the “How Long, O Lord” of Unanswered Prayer

I. Powerful Prayer Moments

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
² How long must I take counsel in my soul
 and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
³ Consider and answer me, O Lord my God;
 light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,
⁴ lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,”
 lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.
⁵ But I have trusted in your steadfast love;
 my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
⁶ I will sing to the Lord,
 because he has dealt bountifully with me. – Psalm 13

“If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my father in heaven.” – Matthew 18:19

“Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it.” – John 14:13

“Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there, and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.’” – Matthew 17:19-20

II. Perplexing Prayer Moments

“There are, no doubt, passages in the New Testament which may seem at first sight to promise an invariable granting of our prayers. But that cannot be what they really mean. For in the very heart of the story we meet a glaring instance to the contrary. In Gethsemane the holiest of all petitioners prayed three times that a certain cup might pass from Him. It did not. After that the idea that prayer is recommended to us as a sort of infallible gimmick may be dismissed.”¹

¹ C.S. Lewis, “The Efficacy of Prayer”

“Let’s not make the mistake of supposing that this situation is unusual or uncommon or rare. It is the stuff of the Psalms because it is the stuff of believing life in this world.”²

III. Some Possible Reasons Our Prayers Go Unanswered

IV. The “Challenge” of Scripture

“The essence of request, as distinct from compulsion, is that it may or may not be granted. And if an infinitely wise being listens to the requests of finite and foolish creatures, of course He will sometimes grant and sometimes refuse them.”³

And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, ⁴² saying, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.” – Luke 22:41-42

V. The “Unanswered” Prayer of Paul

I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— ⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, *which man may not utter*. ⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— ⁶ though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. ⁷ **So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations**, a thorn was given me in the flesh, *a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited*. ⁸ **Three times I pleaded** with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. – 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

1. Unanswered prayer is sometimes the “answer” we need.

² Dr. Robert Rayburn, Pastor, Faith Presbyterian Church (Give honor – I’ve been so encouraged by this man.)

³ C.S. Lewis

“This strange paradox of the truly Christian mind – preferring to admit weakness than to call attention to strength, so as to leave maximum room for the demonstration of divine power and action in one’s life – is a mark of real Christian maturity. It is, as we all know, far too rare! Paul, of course, had a great advantage over us. God explained to him why he had refused to answer his prayers. We are not given such explanations, and that makes it harder. But we are given Paul’s history to teach us why we are refused from time to time and what sort of purposes God may have in refusing us.”⁴

2. Unanswered prayer reminds us that it is the furnace that removes the dross.

3. Unanswered prayer tests and strengthens our faith.

“...Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” – 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

“For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” – 2 Corinthians 12:10

⁴ Robert Rayburn