

10 Reasons for Unanswered Prayer

by George Verwer

The problem of unanswered prayer is a common experience for many Christians, and it can be addressed by dealing with sin in our lives, coming to God with faith, and persevering in prayer.

Duration: 52:27

Scripture: Isaiah 65:1-2, Isaiah 65:12, Matthew 5:22-24, James 1:5

Topics: "Unanswered Prayer"

Description

In this sermon, a young preacher asks for advice after delivering his first sermon. An old man approaches him and gives him three pieces of advice. The first advice is to read every word, acknowledging that the young preacher did not do well in his delivery. The second advice is to read it better, using the analogy of a cliff being battered by waves but remaining standing. The third advice is to trust in God's timing, using the example of Daniel's prayers being heard from the first day, even though he did not see immediate results. The sermon encourages listeners to trust God even in the dark and to continue praying with faith.

Transcript

Music Music Music You heard about the young preacher who was in college, and he was just getting out of college, first time out of college. Going to his church, going to preach for the first ever time. He was a great bodge of an old schooler.

He preached, and he said, listen, this is my first time. If any of you got any advice, I really am open to advice. See me afterwards, give me whatever advice you want.

And everybody, of course, just shook his hand and thanked him greatly for the message he'd given. Apart from one old man that waited behind. And the old man said, I've got three things I want to say to you, young man.

And the young man said, please, anything, just share whatever you want with me. And the first thing he said was, well, you read every word. He said, I know, I know.

It wasn't good, was it? But it's my first time. Please, please, you know, I won't do it next time. He said, what's your second thing? He said, the second thing is you read it very badly.

He said, I know, I know, but it's my own handwriting, and I'll write it out more carefully next time. What's the third thing? Anything, just tell me. He said, what you read wasn't worth reading.

Very good. You're out of date. I have to keep telling stories forever.

Okay. Well, I'd like you to turn this morning to Psalm 88. This is a retreat of the unusual.

We had an unusual prayer time last night, not a normal prayer time. And I want to do something unusual this morning. Unusual for me, at least.

Normally, when I speak, I give an exposition, if you like, from the Bible. I don't want to do that this morning. I hope you don't think I'm backsliding.

But I want to take a subject this morning, rather than an exposition. Wow, amen. I thought that would excite people.

Just balance, that's all. A few days ago, a young man came round to my house for a chat. He'd fallen in love with a young lady.

He hadn't rushed headlong into the relationship with her. I don't know whether he'd read the discipleship manual. But even if he hadn't, he waited before jumping.

He prayed about the matter. He put out a kind of fleece, I suppose. And he felt, after all that, that God was leading him forward.

And they had two dates. And everything looked good. And then the young lady said to him, I don't think it's right.

She probably used more spiritual language than that. But she said, I don't think it's right. I think we should stop meeting.

And the day after, Andre came round to visit me. This is what he said. It's not the broken relationship which is hurting.

I don't think he really understood himself, but that's what he said. It's not the broken relationship which is hurting. I feel God has let me down.

I prayed. I waited. I felt I'd obeyed at every point.

But look what happened. Then he said this. If only God had said a clear no at the beginning, I could have accepted that, no problem.

But it seems as though God has let me down the garden path and left me stranded. I wonder if you remember, a little ship called MV Logos, sailing south of Argentina. The vessel was in trouble.

Christians, no doubt, around the world were praying. But the old vessel came to rest stuck on a rock. And I remember getting a phone call from Dale Rosson.

They weren't sure yet how damaged the boat was. And the tide was about to rise. And he said, let's pray.

Let's really pray. Let's get people praying around the OM world. And let's hope and pray that the ship will be lifted by the tide and sail or float free.

And I prayed, certainly. I'm sure many prayed. But the ship remained there, stuck fast.

Eventually written off as a total loss. As far as I know, it's still sitting on the rock today. Now let's read from the 88th Psalm.

Oh Lord, the God of my salvation, I have cried out by day and in the night before thee. Let my prayer come before thee. Incline thine ear to my cry.

For my soul has had enough troubles and my life has drawn near to shale. I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit. I have become like a man without strength, forsaken among the dead.

Like the slain who lie in the grave, whom thou dost remember no more, and they are cut off from thy hand. Thou hast put me in the lowest pit, in dark places, in the depths. Thy wrath has rested upon me and thou hast afflicted me with all thy ways.

Thou hast removed my acquaintances far from me. Thou hast made me an object of loathing to them. I am shut up and cannot go out.

My eye has wasted away because of affliction. I have called upon thee every day, oh Lord. I have spread out my hands to thee.

Wilt thou perform wonders for the dead? Will the departed spirits rise and praise thee? Will thy loving kindness be declared in the grave? Thy faithfulness in the place of destruction? Will thy wonders be made known in the darkness and thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? But I, oh Lord, have cried out to thee for help and in the morning my prayer comes before thee. Oh Lord, why dost thou reject my soul? Why dost thou hide thy face from me? I was afflicted and about to die from my youth on. I suffer thy terrors, I am overcome.

Thy burning anger has passed over me. Thy terrors have destroyed me. They have surrounded me like water all day long.

They have encompassed me altogether. Thou hast removed lover and friend far from me. My acquaintances are in darkness.

So there in verse 13, the psalmist says that he cries to the Lord for help. He says in the morning, my prayer comes before you God. And then he makes this astonishing statement.

Why, oh Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me? I wonder if you've ever felt like that. Rejected by God. As though he was somehow hiding his face from you.

Just not listening to you. Probably as a good evangelical you've been taught never to think like that. But deep down I think if we had an honest conversation this morning many of us would have to say that it seems to us that many of our prayers remain unanswered.

And if there is an all powerful benevolent Father in heaven why doesn't he answer our prayers? Why doesn't he immediately answer the cries of our hearts? That's the subject I want to deal with this morning. Now of course there are some very logical reasons for unanswered prayer. I wonder how often two Christians are praying for totally contradictory things.

Two fellows, for example, in love with the same girl. Both pray that God would turn that girl's affections towards them. Any of you like God's job? What about the Christian camp praying for a week without rain? Next door you've got a Christian farmer praying desperately for rain as he sees his crop being damaged

by the drought.

So there's some clear and logical reasons for unanswered prayer. But the psalmist is dealing or struggling with something much deeper than that. Look again at verses 1 and 2. O Lord God who saves me, day and night I cry before you.

May my prayer come before you. It seems to him as though it's just not getting through. It's just not getting to God.

May my prayer come before you. Turn your ear to my cry. You're not listening, God.

Turn your ear to my cry. Look at verse 9. My eyes are dim with grief. I call to you, O Lord, every day.

I spread out my hands to you. And the Bible definitely gives examples of unanswered prayer. It's not just our experience which tells us that not all prayers are answered.

The Bible will show you that not all our prayers are answered. The most common example of that, I suppose, is Paul praying for the removal of the thorn in his flesh in 2 Corinthians chapter 12. Even though he prays three times, the thorn remains.

An even more interesting example for me is in Romans chapter 15, verses 30 and 31. At the end of verse 30, Paul says this to the Roman church. Strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, that I might be delivered from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints.

So Paul says, I'm praying for this. You Roman Christians, you join with me. Pray that I'll be delivered.

But you know that he wasn't delivered. In Acts chapter 21, we read of his arrest in that very city, the city of Jerusalem. And the imprisonment that followed, which eventually led to Paul's martyrdom.

So it is not unqualifiedly true that whatever we ask in Jesus' name, we shall receive. It is not unqualifiedly true that whatever we ask in Jesus' name, we shall receive. Experience proves that.

And there are biblical examples of that. Now some people are very troubled by that. And they go to extraordinary, and in my opinion, spiritually dangerous lengths to solve what for them is a great problem.

Let me give you three examples of how people try and solve the problem. The Bible seems to say that whatever we ask in Jesus' name, we shall receive. But experience proves that that doesn't happen.

So somehow you have to put the two together. Let's see how people go about it. One example is denial.

We just deny that some of our prayers are unanswered. I heard of one group who came to a Christian union teaching that physical healing was included in the atoning work of Christ. And of course, if you believe that, no Christian needs to be sick.

Some of the students immediately threw away their spectacles. They threw away their glasses. And they began to claim that their eyesight was healed.

But it was obvious to others that they couldn't see any better. When challenged, their reply was something like this. Well, I am healed, but my faith isn't strong enough.

I haven't got the faith to believe it yet. I wonder how such people would respond to someone who died from cancer, even though that person who died was being prayed for. Would they say, well, really, he's alive and well.

He just appears to be dead. Really, he's lacking faith. You see where the argument of denial gets you to, if you follow it to its logical conclusion.

A less radical, but very common solution, in my opinion, equally inadequate, is this idea that God always answers prayer, but his answer can be yes, no, or wait. So when you pray and it isn't answered, it's not really unanswered prayer, it's just that the answer is no, or the answer is wait. I'm sorry, but that to me seems to be playing with words.

Jesus said, whatever you ask in my name, you will receive. He didn't say, whatever you ask in my name, you'll either receive or you won't, or you might have to wait for it. He said, whatever you ask in my name, you will receive.

A third option is to rationalize. People, for example, are praying for a man to get out of hospital, and the next day the man dies. The response of the leader of the prayer meeting is, well, we ask God to release him from hospital, and God has answered our prayers.

Rationalizing. Three ways that people seek to deal with this problem of unanswered prayer. And I suggest to you this morning that all three of those ways are quite dangerous spiritually.

So let's think of some of the reasons why prayer is not like a slot machine. You put your requests in, you pull the lever, and there's your answer. It isn't like that.

Let's consider why it's not like that. We'll begin with the obvious and then move to the less obvious. I've got ten or eleven reasons why prayer sometimes is not answered.

The first, and I guess the most prominent, is sin in our lives. The Bible is clear that where there is unconfessed sin in my life, my prayer life will be affected. Psalm 66 and verse 18 is the most often quoted verse to make that point.

If I cherish, if I regard, if I live easily with sin in my heart, the Lord will not listen. It's not only that he won't answer, he won't even listen to my prayers. At this point, that God doesn't even hear when you're praying with unconfessed sin in your heart is drawn out further in the book of Jeremiah, chapter 14 and verse 12.

Listen to what God says to Jeremiah concerning the disobedient children of Israel. Don't pray, Jeremiah, for the well-being of these people. Don't pray for them.

Although they fast, I will not listen to their crying. Though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. So there was no point, Jeremiah, praying for Israel in their disobedience.

God wouldn't even listen to Jeremiah. He wouldn't even listen to the people of Israel if they began to pray until the sin was dealt with. And you remember that Joshua found himself in a similar position after Israel's defeat by the little rural army from the village of Ai.

We read in Joshua 7 and verse 6 that Joshua did the evangelical thing. He tore his clothes, he fell down to the ground before the ark of the Lord and he remained there until the evening. And then God came by in verse 10.

He said to Joshua, stand up. What are you doing on your face? Why are you praying, Joshua? Israel has sinned. They violated my covenant which I commanded them to keep.

But it's not only the Old Testament that gives us graphic examples of this. The New Testament is equally clear. You remember Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5. He's dealing with the sin of anger.

And he says in verse 22, anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. And then he goes on to say this, a verse we often used to use in O.M. I haven't heard it so much recently. Jesus says, if you're offering your gift at the altar and you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift in front of the altar.

Go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift. When you're reading your Bible, you often try and bring it into the 20th century culture. If you were doing that with this verse, you would have to, I think, read it like this.

If you're at the worship service on a Sunday morning or a Tuesday night, and you're about to break bread, and you remember that your brother has something against you, now note that, not that you've got something against your brother. You might feel great about him. But you know he's got something against you, therefore the relationship is broken.

What do you do? Jesus says you leave your gift. You leave the worship service. You don't break bread.

You don't worship God if you know there's something wrong between you and your brother. You go and deal with it. And then you come with your offering.

It's good for husbands to know that sometimes, it's good for husbands to know that sometimes, if they're not treating their wives well, that will affect their prayer lines. Just read one verse which I only came across this morning in this context. 1 Peter chapter 3 and verse 7. This is quite a challenge to me.

1 Peter 3 and verse 7. You husbands, likewise, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with a weaker vessel, since she is a woman, and grant her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered. That's clear, isn't it? If I'm not treating my wife well, if I'm not treating her as I should, then my prayer life can be hindered. Well, you could go on making that point from many, many passages of Scripture, and I suppose it's the fundamental reason for unanswered prayer, harboring sin in our lives, unconfessed sin, which we're just not dealing with.

Let's move to a second very simple and very obvious reason for unanswered prayer, and that is lack of faith. Mike spoke to us last night, and I was greatly helped and challenged by Mike's exposition. He spoke to us from James chapter 1, and there in James chapter 1, or he spoke to us from James chapter 5, but here in James chapter 1, we have an example of what happens when you pray without faith.

James 1 and verse 5. The subject is wisdom, you're praying for wisdom, and James says, if you lack wisdom, you've only got to ask God, He'll give it to you generously, without reproach. In other words, you can go again and again to God, asking for wisdom on the same thing, and God will never reproach you. He'll never say, you came to me yesterday to talk to me about that.

Why do you need to come again? He's not like that. You can come again and again, and He'll receive you without reproach. But, verse 6, let him ask in faith, without doubting.

For the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, or the waves of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. About three years ago, I had a most unmemorable holiday in Wales. We were in a caravan, on top of a cliff, and it rained, and the gales went, I think, for about ten days out of the fourteen.

And I remember, on one night at least, I think it was two actually, having to get up at three in the morning, and going to the awning, that's the kind of canvas bit that you fix on the side of the caravan, and physically, in my pyjamas, hold on to this awning, so that the wind did not deposit us all in the sea underneath. The one memorable thing about that whole holiday, my kids say, we'll never go back to Wales, but the one memorable thing was one night we climbed down the cliff, it was pouring with rain, the gale was blowing, and we went to watch the sea. And I'll never forget it.

Terrific waves crashing in against the cliff. And you stand there thinking, that cliff's going to go. It's going to be destroyed.

But what happens? The wave comes and crashes in, and then it goes back again. It comes, and then it goes back again. And sometimes James says, you're rather like that when you pray.

You come to God, and then you go away. You're not really believing. You come, but you're not really sure.

Gary, as he was praying just before, very honestly said that sometimes he's very skeptical in his prayer life. We were hearing from Mike last night of how it's possible to be agnostic, or even atheistic, as Christians. Do we really believe? I was going to preach to you this morning on the fact of God living in us.

God, by His Spirit, living in us. I wonder if we really believe that. I wonder if we really live in the light of it.

If we're going to know power in our prayer lives, we've got to deal with sin quickly, number one. And secondly, we've got to come to God believing that He is, as the writer of the Hebrew epistle puts it, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. So there's two very obvious reasons for unanswered prayer.

Number one, unconfessed sin. Number two, lack of true faith. Another clear reason, and again, it's a very obvious one, is that sometimes when you pray, there is a delay, because your prayers set off something.

They set off, if you like, warfare in heaven. And until that warfare in the heavenlies is won, you will never see the reality on earth. And if you want the most vivid biblical example of that, you probably know where to turn.

It's the 10th chapter of Daniel. And if you've got your Bible, you might just turn to it, because it really is a very interesting portion of Scripture. We're healing so much, and we're reading so much these days about spiritual warfare, or warfare in the heavenlies.

Here's a very clear biblical example of that. Daniel chapter 10. The situation is that in verse 1, Daniel had been given a vision, a revelation, which deeply disturbed him.

So much so, verse 2, that he'd been mourning for three weeks. He'd been mourning and praying in response to the vision for 21 days. Then look at verse 10.

Behold a hand touched me and set me trembling on my knees. And he said to me, O Daniel, man of high esteem, understand the words I'm about to tell you. Stand upright for I've been sent to you.

Verse 12. He said to me, Don't be afraid, Daniel. From the first day, 21 days ago, the first day that you set your heart on understanding this and on humbling yourself before your God, your words were heard.

Now isn't that incredibly encouraging? Maybe some of you have been praying for 10 years, 20 years, 30 years for something. Because you see nothing, it doesn't mean nothing is happening. From the first day, says God, through the angel to Daniel, that you began to pray, your words were heard.

And I've come, says the angel, in response to your words. But, verse 13, the prince of the kingdom of Persia, the powers, the spiritual powers behind the throne of Persia, the great power in the world at that time, was withstanding me for 21 days. So Daniel's mourning and praying set off warfare in the heavenlands.

And behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me. It wasn't until Michael came with help that the warfare was won in the heavenlands and Daniel's answer could be received on earth. Now it's incredible to think that your praying and my praying might set off that kind of business in the spiritual kingdoms.

But there's a further reason for apparently unanswered prayer. Sometimes the delay is because of satanic opposition and a warfare in the heavenlands must be won before you and I can receive our answers on planet earth. Well, those are three obvious reasons for unanswered prayer.

I want to turn now to some less obvious. So my fourth point would be that I believe sometimes God is answering my prayers and your prayers, but the problem is we are not listening and therefore we don't hear God's answer. And I'd like you to turn to the 65th chapter of Isaiah to see that point clearly.

Isaiah chapter 65. In this chapter, first of all, we're introduced to a God who is more than willing to speak to His people. Look at the amazing mercy of God in verse 1. Isaiah 65, 1. I revealed myself, says God, to those who didn't ask for me.

I was found by those who didn't seek me. Isn't that marvelous? God willing to reveal Himself even when people don't want to see Him, don't want to hear Him. To a nation that didn't call on my name, I said, here I am.

Here I am. Verse 2. All day long, I, God, have held out my hands to an obstinate people. Look at verse 12.

I called, this is God, I called, but you didn't answer. I spoke, and you didn't listen. I wonder if often that's the problem.

We think the problem is God isn't speaking. God isn't answering. And God is saying, I'm speaking.

I'm revealing myself. But you're not listening. You're not willing to hear my voice.

Now why? Why would that be the case? Why would it be that we sometimes are not ready to listen to God? Well, I've got a couple of reasons. Firstly, I think sometimes we don't want to hear God. If we're really honest, we don't want to hear Him.

You see, the problem when God speaks is that it doesn't leave any room for discussion, does it? When God speaks, there's no room for discussion. When I've spoken, there'll be a lot of room for discussion. I'm sure, you know, you'll be telling me what I've gone wrong over coffee.

My kids are always very good at that. There's always room for discussion when I speak. But when God speaks, you don't discuss.

You obey. Doesn't mean you can't tell God your feelings about something when He speaks to you. Lovely to see the psalmist crying out in response to what God says and does in his life.

There's a place for that. But we always know that when God speaks, however much we like to maneuver, we have to obey. Going back to that young fellow who came to visit me a few days ago, I was bound to ask myself as I was talking to him, and I actually asked him as well, was he really ready to hear God say no when he was praying for that girl? Was he ready to hear God say no? I remember a dear Christian mother.

She's a really wonderful woman of God. And I was talking to her once about her daughter who's unmarried. And she was praying every day for God to bring somebody into her daughter's life whom she could marry.

And I had to go away from that home wondering if that dear woman was really willing for the no answer. And until we are ready to hear the no of God, we're not really ready to pray. Until we are ready to hear the no of God, we're not really ready to pray.

And that's one reason why sometimes when God speaks, we just don't listen. Because we're rather afraid of what he might say. The second reason is that, this is personal, you may not share the problem, but I'm sure I don't give time to listen to God.

Time to hear his voice. You know, if there was a crowd of people and from that crowd a neighbor or an acquaintance called out my name, I wouldn't recognize the caller. But if my wife or my children were in that crowd and they were calling, I would know immediately because I've learned to recognize their voices through what? Relationship.

I've learned to recognize their voice through relationship. I was thinking of Samuel when God called him as a young man. And he didn't recognize that it was God.

No criticism, of course, of such a young man. Just a challenge for me. When God speaks, do I recognize his voice? And I come to know him through relationship in such a way that I'll be able to identify his voice when God speaks.

It's interesting that of all the books I've got on my shelf on prayer at home, and I've got a long, long list of books on the subject of prayer, until recently there was no book on listening to God. Joyce Huggett has broken the norm with her book on listening to God. But all the books that I've got on prayer are all about talking.

There's nothing about listening. Alan Redpath in one of the books makes this typical Redpathian comment. I sometimes wonder if our quiet times are not huge barriers that impede and hinder our spiritual growth.

You can imagine the congregation now sitting up and listening to Alan. Why? Because too often it's my thoughts, it's my words, it's my problems that dominate the tone of my prayers. True prayer, says Redpath, is first of all taking time to listen to God, to be conscious of his presence and of his spirit in our lives.

I sometimes wonder if in our OM prayer meetings we're far too activist. We are doing all the talking. We are doing all the requesting.

And maybe God is trying to get through. He's trying to speak to us. But we are doing all the talking.

And we learn to recognize the voice of God. Well, one author suggests that if we're going to hear the voice of God we'll need three things. First of all, we'll need a definite place and a definite time in our daily schedule or in our weekly schedule if we're going to get used to hearing the voice of God.

Now this is such a common point you'll think I will be embarrassed making it in an OM prayer meeting. But I wonder if we're willing to give an hour a day. That's 4% of your time on earth.

One hour a day just to get used to the voice of God. Is there a place? Is there a time, sorry, in our lives? And is there a place? I've got a place in my house where I go. Nothing sacred about the place but it's one place in my interesting house where I know I'll get quiet.

And the kids know they can come anywhere in the home to see me apart from that one place if I'm there at a particular time in the day. They avoid it unless they've got a real problem. If you've got a place, if you've got a time it may not be the same time every day it may not even be every day.

I'm not into that kind of fetish. But is there a time, is there a place in your world where you're going to get used to listening to the voice of God? This author also says position is important. Might be kneeling in a room might be a prayer walk for others.

He says prayer is work and you must discover the working environment most suitable to you. That's a very good point, isn't it? You must find out the working environment most suitable to you because prayer is work. And thirdly, if you're going to hear the voice of God you'll have to learn to deal with distractions.

I'm sure you've all experienced it. You close the prayer room door if you've got a prayer room. You settle down in your prayer position whatever that is and immediately for my wife it's questions about the house you know, whether is there bread in the bread bin making the breakfast downstairs and so on.

For me it might be did I make that phone call yesterday? What about that list of seven things I've got to do before nine o'clock this morning? Am I really going to be able to get them in? And it's interesting, isn't it? That the moment you begin to pray it's when those things crowd in on your mind. You may be reading the newspaper before perfectly easy to read the newspaper without distraction. But the moment you try and pray all these things come into your mind.

How do you deal with it? I'll tell you how I deal with it. I always take a sheet of paper with me when I go to pray. And when I get one of those thoughts, you know have I made that phone call? I write it down.

Anything else that comes in, I write it down. Then I feel I've dealt with it or I've dealt with it to that point and I can put it to one side. Another thing I found very helpful was Joyce Huggard's picture of coming down the stream.

You're in a boat and you're coming down the stream a motor launch. And coming towards you is all the flotsam and the jetsam, the rubbish of every kind in that stream. But what happens? You push your way through it through all the flotsam, all the jetsam steadfastly heading for your destination.

Nice picture of how to deal with all that distraction. Just keep going. You may need to write things down that you've got to deal with later in the day but keep going in your course towards God and towards meeting with Him.

Well there's another thing to check. If you feel your prayer life just isn't meaningful it's just not getting anywhere I wonder if the problem is with you. It's not that God is not speaking it's that you are not listening.

Maybe you're not prepared to listen. Maybe you're not given the time to listen and the commitment to hear the voice of God. Number five, and we've only got ten and I haven't got a watch so somebody should blow a whistle if I'm going over time.

Number five, sometimes God by not answering our prayers is saving us from personal harm. Sometimes God by not answering our prayers is saving us from personal harm. There's a lovely little old fashioned ditty which I came across not so long ago which goes like this.

So weak is man, so ignorant and blind that did not God sometimes withhold in mercy what we ask we would be ruined at our own request. Let me just repeat that because it's very old English. So weak is man, so ignorant and blind that did not God sometimes withhold in mercy what we ask we would be ruined at our own request.

You know it's a very good job that God doesn't answer all of our prayers. Think of Moses, think of Elijah think of Jonah, just three men in the Bible who at one point in their emotions got so low that they cried out to God in prayer, the suicidal prayer. Oh God, take my life.

I've had enough. Remember Elijah, right after his marvelous moment of triumph on Mount Carmel. He flees to Horeb.

1 Kings 19 verse 4, this is what it says. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it prayed that he might die. He prayed that he might die.

I've had enough Lord, he said. Take my life. It's a good job, isn't it? God doesn't immediately grant all the requests that come in prayer from our emotional outbursts.

I've sometimes heard people criticizing those who when they make their request to God continue with those words if it is your will. A lot of people don't like that, do they? They think it's kind of cop-out shows a lack of faith and I suppose it could be but not necessarily. I know that I'm weak.

I know that I don't know myself. I want God's will not the whims and fancies of my own emotions. God knows best and I want his best for me.

I'll never forget Elizabeth Elliot's words. Thy will be done is the rule of heaven. My will be done is the rule of hell.

Hell is the place where you finally get your own way. Sixthly, it may be better for others sometimes if our prayers remain unanswered. Again, our emotions so easily lead us astray.

I hope you've read Martin Lloyd-Jones' biography. A couple of volumes. If you haven't read it, it should be read soon.

It's an interesting book. You know, when he was dying, not unnaturally, his daughters were praying. One daughter and her sister were praying in the bedroom for his recovery.

And their prayer went like this, Lord, preserve Dad for your people a little longer. And Lloyd-Jones replied, I think in writing actually, I don't think he could speak at that point. This was his reply, Don't hinder me from the glory.

Don't hinder me from the glory. Time and again through history, apparent tragedy has been overruled by a sovereign God to the blessing and the progress of his kingdom, even when Christians have been praying against it. Have you ever looked at the graph of the growth of the church in China? When you get to about 1950, I think it is, there's one and a half million Christians in China.

And then the graph just goes up like that. And I've often wondered, what happened in 1950? Never, could never put the thing together at all. And then one day I was with Chau Wee Hien in a conference, and I asked him about this.

And he said, oh yes, there's an explanation for that. He said the major problem for missions in China was twofold. The Christians were all the coastal regions, and they wouldn't go inland.

And the big thing was praying for their ancestors who had died. If they became Christians, who would light the joss sticks? Who would pray for their ancestors? And then Mao came along and made two decrees. One, a mass movement of population from the coastal districts into the hinterland, by law.

And number two, praying for your ancestors who have died is prohibited in this country. It will cease. Now you can understand what's going on in heaven, can't you? God must have a bit of a sense of humor.

We're all there praying, get Chau, Mao out of there. Deliver us from Mao. God is actually saying, now just hold on.

I use the Chaldeans in the Old Testament. I can use Mao in the 20th century. So sometimes our prayers remain unanswered because God has a sovereign purpose.

And it's better for others if our prayers at that point remain unanswered. Number seven. Unanswered prayer, I believe, keeps us from conceit and pride in the Christian life.

2 Corinthians 12, Paul writes of the amazing visions and revelations from the Lord which he'd been privileged to enjoy. I wonder if he would have handled it if he'd been taken into the seventh heaven. And you'd receive these amazing revelations, these amazing visions.

So Paul writes in verse seven, to keep me from becoming conceited. Because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh. That's very, very interesting language, isn't it? It was because of these great revelations that a thorn was given to me.

A messenger of Satan to torment me. Now we don't know what this thorn in the flesh was. Every commentator almost has a go.

But we don't know what it was. It troubled Paul greatly, however. Three times he pleaded with the Lord for its removal.

But we all know that God didn't give a positive response to that request. Why? Well, there's a number of reasons, and you'll see another one in a few moments. But one reason, quite clearly, was to keep Paul from becoming conceited.

To keep him humble. Can you imagine what we'd become like if every time a problem came our way, we just pulled the lever of prayer on the slot machine, and there was the answer? I think we'd become quite unbearable people. Proud, self-sufficient, and no doubt much more.

The fact that we often have to wait on the Lord, to plead with the Lord, keeps us dependent on Him. Reminds us of our frailty, and of our weakness. Number eight.

A period of waiting on God helps you to sift and sort through the essentials in your life. It's almost Christmas again. It's not so much of a problem these days with my kids growing up, but it was always amusing when my kids were much younger.

About November, they used to start coming round, you see. Dad, I want this for Christmas. And I became a professional at giving the maybe answer.

Because I knew, of course, that that would just be the first of a hundred requests of different things that they would wish for Christmas. But then eventually, you know, sometimes around about the 15th of December or so, you'd hear something being mentioned for the second time, and the third time. And all of a sudden, you began to take these things seriously.

I found that in prayer as well. Sometimes I pray for something once, and it just slips out of my mind. Other times, God lays something on my heart, and it's mentioned in prayer every day, and sometimes many times each day.

There's one thing which I'm praying for now, and every time I have a spare minute, it seems this thing is in my mind, and I mention it to God. And I learn a lot about myself from my prayer life. What is really important to me as a man? What is really important to me as a Christian? Times of waiting on God can really sort you out as a person.

One author puts it like this. Unanswered prayer can remind us of the true purpose of God in our lives. He is not the heavenly bellboy.

That's a powerful illustration, isn't it? Two rings on the bell of prayer, and God comes running to your assistance. He's not the heavenly bellboy. He's not there to meet my neurotic needs, not to kowtow to my whims and fancies.

He is there to transform me into His likeness. Just as one third of my earthly life is spent in physical darkness, so God in His wisdom ordains that from time to time my prayer life must work a few night shifts as well. In other words, sometimes you're in the dark when you're praying.

You're praying and you're praying and praying and nothing seems to be happening. But something is happening. You are being changed.

You are being taught something about God. You are being taught something about yourself. And that's really what life is all about, going back to last night where Mike was with his priorities.

That's what's really important. You being changed into the image of God. Number ten, number nine, sorry.

Unanswered prayer increases our longing for God. Listen to the famous cry of the psalmist again. You've sung it many times.

Psalm 42. As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs for Thee, O God. If you're anything like me, every time you sing that, you wish it was the cry of your heart and not just the words coming out of your mouth.

As a heart, or a deer, pants for the water, so my soul longs for You. Now where did that spiritual desire come from? Was David just walking across the fields one day, having a great time? It wasn't David, was it? Was the psalmist just walking across the fields one day and having a great time and he just felt like that? Such a passion for God. Well, of course not.

Unfortunately, it's not like that, is it? The psalmist was in exile. He was one of the worship leaders in the temple. And the one thing he loved to do, if you read the psalm, is lead the people in praise, lead them to the temple, there to worship God.

And there he was in exile. He was thousands of miles from the temple. He could never, ever foresee himself doing it again.

And that drove him to God. Praying about the temple, praying about getting back to the land, or whatever. As he came, and as he prayed, and as he prayed, and as they remained in exile, what happened was that longing for God, that desire for God, was built up in his life.

Jacob. If Jacob hadn't had to wrestle with God that day, just being granted his request, he would never have seen God face to face, would he? The fact that he had to wrestle with God brought him face to face with God. Unanswered prayer can increase your longing for God.

So finally, sometimes prayer is unanswered. Because God has something much better for you than you're actually asking for. That's the great lesson of 2 Corinthians 12, of course.

Paul was praying for the thorn to be removed, but God had something better. Through that very problem that Paul wanted removed, God was going to bless him. God was going to teach him the sufficiency of his grace, and he was going to make Paul a testimony to God's power.

When it clicked with Paul, you remember his response. I glory in my infirmities. Don't take the thorn away.

Give me another. I glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest on me. I wonder how often God overrules my small, ignorant requests and gives me what he knows is much, much better for me and maybe for others as well.

Apparently, unanswered prayer causes many problems for thinking Christians. And you can see, I said to you earlier, some of the things that people do to try and bring out an answer to the problem. What I've said this morning doesn't answer all the questions.

It doesn't answer all the problems. And we never will answer all the questions and all the problems. But maybe it's just a little insight at least into some of the difficulties you and I are struggling with.

Maybe there's something very personal to you right now, something that you've been mentioning to God and that just doesn't seem to be an answer. I hope the little bit that I've shared may help you as you struggle with that. So finally, if you're praying and you're praying and you're praying and nothing seems to

be happening, what do you do? Well, I think the first thing you do is check your life.

Is there some sin unconfessed? Is there some broken relationship? Which you know you should deal with and you just haven't dealt with it. Remember, you shouldn't be even in the worship service, worshipping the Lord, without taking whatever action you are able to take in that area. That's the first thing you should do.

The second thing you should do is ask yourself, now, just a minute, am I listening? Maybe God is speaking, but I'm just not giving the time to God to hear. I think we do need to practice the presence of God. In the words of the title of that great old book by Brother Lawrence, practice the presence of God.

Maybe that's something that you could start thinking about if you haven't thought about it very much up until now. Going away and meeting with God. Not so much to talk, but to listen.

Take the book, the Bible with you, because that's nine times out of ten how God will speak. Practicing the presence of God. Is there sin in my life? Number one.

Am I really listening to God? Number two. Number three. Is my prayer being kind of overruled by God? Would I bring harm upon myself if God actually answered my prayer? He knows best.

Would it bring harm upon others if God really answered my prayer? Therefore, fundamental to my prayer life must be, God, you know best. This is how it seems to me. This is why I bring the request.

But you know best. So your will be done on earth, in my world, as it is in heaven. Learn to trust God even in the dark.

Remember that lovely promise from the book of Daniel, that from the first day you began to pray, even though you've seen nothing happening on earth, from the first day you began to pray, your words were heard. If you keep all that in mind, it might just bring a little more understanding to some of our prayer problems. We'll leave it at that.

Jesus Christ. Yes, let's pray together. Let's pray together.

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