

## From Discouragement to Growth Unanswered Prayers

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.  
The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Today we commence a new series called 'From Discouragement to Growth' with a talk entitled, Unanswered Prayers. All Bible quotations are from the New King James Version unless otherwise stated.

### **Series introduction**

We all have times in our lives when we feel discouraged. Many of the Psalms and some of the books of the prophets show us that we are not alone in that experience. Down through the years, men and women of God, even those with great faith and significant knowledge of the Lord, have gone through periods when they have felt almost ready to give up in despair. Philippians is one of my favourite Bible books, being shot through with a deep sense of joy, even though the apostle Paul wrote it during a very testing time in his life. But much as I love the book and keep returning to it, I have never been able to keep that sense of joy perpetually in my own life – my personal, spiritual experience comes and goes. I believe that makes me just the same as everyone else, and it means that I am interested in how I can move on from discouragement, not just to hopefulness, but all the way to growth! That is what this series is about, how we can turn life's many discouraging events into opportunities for spiritual growth.

I am writing this in late autumn and, as I look out of my window at our garden, and the other gardens around our house, there is very little evidence of anything growing! Trees are bare, flowers have nearly all vanished, plants have been cut back, and even the grass has stopped growing – one thing, at least, for which I am thankful! But we have lived here long enough to know that this state of affairs is temporary. Winter will come along and make everything look even bleaker, but then spring will replace winter, and the growing season will return. In fact, the fallow time through late autumn and winter, is actually necessary for the healthy return of growth in springtime. Hebrews 12:11 says that chastening, though unpleasant at the time, later,

“Yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

We could say the same about discouraging circumstances; indeed, they might be a part of God's chastening for us. So, if you are feeling discouraged yourself at the moment, or are wanting to help somebody else who is; this series is for you!

### **Topic introduction**

But we had better press on with our specific topic for today, 'unanswered prayers.' We all have plenty of examples in our own lives and it isn't hard to find a wide range of unanswered prayers in the Bible. David prayed very fervently for his first child with Bathsheba to live, but the child still died (see 2 Samuel 12:16-18). In 1 Kings 19:4 Elijah prayed for his own death, but God told him that there was still much for him to do. In the New Testament, Paul asked the Romans, in chapter 15 verses 30-32, to join him in praying about his upcoming visit to Rome. Those prayers were largely unanswered when Paul was violently opposed and arrested.

We even have the example of the Lord Himself asking the Father,

“Let this cup pass from Me” (Matthew 26:39).

He immediately submitted to the Father’s will, but the prayer was not answered with a “Yes.”

Bible teachers often say that God has three ways of answering our prayers: “Yes”, “No” and “Later.” Using these categories, no prayers are every truly unanswered; but I don’t think that piece of semantics is ever going to help us move towards growth! Since we don’t hear God’s answers in the form of an audible voice from heaven, the “No” and “Later” responses often make us feel like our prayers are unanswered, maybe even that God isn’t listening. This can cause us to ask ourselves several questions.

### **Questions we ask when our prayers are not answered**

The particular questions we each ask will depend on the specific prayers that have not been answered and on our own personality, but let’s look at a few of them together. They fall into two broad categories: questions which imply that it is God’s fault that my prayers were not answered, and those that imply that it was my fault.

#### **God’s fault**

We will consider three possible questions under this heading.

##### **1. Is God listening?**

We all know theoretically that God always listens to our prayers and can somehow give His full attention to millions of people, and billions of responsibilities, all at the same time, but it doesn’t always feel that way. On these occasions, it is helpful to have some Bible verses stored away in your memory. Verses such as:

Psalm 139:4,

“For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O LORD, You know it altogether”,

1 John 5:14,

“Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us”,

or 1 Peter 3:12 (quoting from Psalm 34),

“For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers.”

Reminding ourselves of these truths, and determinedly remembering that we personally know this God, can help us to start feeling again what has come to seem like an empty theory.

##### **2. Does God care?**

If God hears, then perhaps He is just not concerned enough about us! I could provide another list of Bible verses at this point, but I find the most potent answer to this doubt is to contemplate the Cross of Christ again. It’s amazing how many of our failings the Cross is the best cure for! Feeling improperly proud? Look at the Cross. Do you tend towards impatience with other people and the way they upset you? The best solution is meditating on the cross. I could go on, but the point for

now is that if you are genuinely focussing on the Cross, it is very difficult to believe that God does not care about you!

### **3. Can He change anything?**

So, if God hears and God cares, perhaps the reason my prayers are not being answered is that He just can't solve the problem I am bringing to Him. If we accept that God, by the plain statements of the Bible, and almost by very definition, can do anything, what we sometimes call His omnipotence, then we need to look for another answer.

There are a few things God cannot do. He is incapable of doing evil and He cannot do the logically nonsensical. This means that unless I am asking Him to do something morally wrong, like give me His blessing to do something that His word forbids; or self-contradictory, like make changes in my character without me allowing Him freedom to do that work, then God is choosing not to act in the way I am asking for some reason.

#### **My fault**

When some of us are struggling with unanswered prayers, we are tempted to make a difficult situation even harder by tormenting ourselves with imagining it is all our own fault. We might then ask ourselves some of the following three questions.

#### **1. Was it because of my sins?**

This is not a fundamentally bad question. The verses I quoted earlier from 1 Peter said that,

“The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers.”

We might ask ourselves if we are included in the list of “the righteous” and there might well be times when our prayers are unanswered because there is something the Lord wants us to put right in our lives. But on those occasions our sin is probably obvious to us, and we may have had a troubled conscious about it for some time.

One primary example of delayed answer to prayer in the Bible I have not mentioned yet is Abraham. God had given Abraham many blessings and promises, but they did not satisfy him while he did not have a son and heir. God delayed the answer to Abraham's prayers for a son for decades, not because Abraham had sinned, but to increase Abraham's faith. We will come back to that later, but for the moment, my point is, that if it is not immediately obvious to you why God is not answering, it is not likely to be because of your sins.

#### **2. Was I wrong to ask for this?**

This is another reasonable question. The verse I quoted from 1 John specifically said,

“If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.”

Perhaps I asked for something that was not according to God's will. That is a complex question which I will return to a little later, but, generally, it is perfectly fine to ask for things when we are not totally sure what God's will is. God is free to say “No” (as our topic for today indicates!), and I believe that God would rather that we occasionally ask for the wrong thing, than that we fail to bring Him our requests often enough.

### **3. Was I lacking in faith?**

This must be one of Satan's favourite ways of adding to our misery when our prayers have not been answered in the way that we wanted! There is a spurious logic that runs, "God promised to respond positively to faith, so, if my prayer is not answered, I can't have shown enough faith." The result of such reasoning is that my anxiety about the unanswered prayer is multiplied by a feeling of failure. It is a useful rule of thumb that Satan's tricks tend to turn us in on ourselves, away from God, and to produce discouragement and despair, while the Holy Spirit's promptings tend to turn us away from ourselves, towards God and to produce encouragement and hope.

#### **Reasons for unanswered prayer**

Before we can think about how to move on towards growth, we need to think a little bit about the reasons why our prayers might not be answered. We will do this under four headings.

##### **1. Asking amiss**

Perhaps the best-known verse about unanswered prayer is James 4:3, which says,

"You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures."

This verse tells us that we sometimes ask for things for the wrong reasons and that God will often refuse such requests. I might try and persuade myself that my request for increased wealth is motivated by a desire to give more generously to others, but God sees straight through my self-deceptions! We are all inherently selfish, it is part of our fallen natures, so this is probably a cause of many of our unanswered prayers. Unfortunately, we don't always see ourselves very clearly, forgetting to look steadily into the mirror of God's word which James 1:22-25 says, shows us what we really are and can also transform us. Not seeing ourselves accurately, we fail to see why our requests are not always granted.

##### **2. We know best!**

If you have ever read any of Charles Dickens' novels, you may have noticed that he often created female, lead characters who were incredibly meek and submissive, hardly ever expressing any will of their own. My wife is not one of those people, and I am not known for being without an opinion on most things either! This means that we sometimes come to an issue, each with our own view of the best approach to take and are surprised to find the other one is disagreeing! Don't worry, we usually resolve things without fighting, but I suspect that we can all have a similar issue in our relationship with God - we think we know best! We bring something to God and helpfully suggest how He should meet our request. When He doesn't do that, we are surprised and disappointed!

##### **3. God was protecting us**

I want to be clear in saying that some of the prayers which we do not see answered can be truly heartbreaking. The illness and death of loved ones, despite all our prayers, and the ongoing rejection of Christ by those for whom we have prayed over many years, can be devastating. But there are also many times in our lives when, with hindsight, we are deeply thankful that God did not give us what we asked for! Relationships that we hoped for fervently, but which would have actually caused us great harm. Jobs or careers which we pursued in prayer as well as practically, that would have taken us in the wrong direction in life. There are lots of occasions where we should be deeply thankful that God, in His wisdom and perfect foresight, said "No"!

In Psalm 106:15 we read about Israel, during a rebellious time,

“[God] gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul.”

This verse tells us that, sometimes when God gives us what we ask for, it is anything but a sign of His blessing! Those of us who have raised children will remember occasions when we deliberately let them do something foolish, to their own harm (hopefully minor!), to teach them an important lesson. We normally did this when they had been persistently trying to head in the wrong direction. Beware, in case God does the same with you!

#### **4. Some other reason!**

That’s a terrible title for a section, isn’t it? A bit like that final line in your job description that says, “Any other duties as required”! But there are so many reasons why God chooses not to say an immediate, “Yes,” and many of them reflect no criticism on the person praying at all. Listen to the apostle Paul’s account of some of his prayers from 2 Corinthians 12:7-9:

“And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

Paul, at least, was given a reason by God for His refusal, but we are not promised that will always happen.

There are even some prayers of the Lord Jesus Himself that were not answered with a simple “Yes.” Hebrews 5:7 says,

“Who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear.”

This indicates that God heard those prayers, and was, of course able to deliver His Son, but He did not do so. We know, and Jesus of course knew, why this request could not be granted.

Sometimes our position is more like that of Job in the Old Testament. Horrible things happened in Job’s life. Job knew they were not his fault, and he longed for the opportunity to speak freely with God about the cause of all his suffering. When he finally got the chance to do so, the answer God gave Him might be paraphrased along these lines: “I am God, and understand, and control, vastly more than you can ever know. I do not need to explain Myself to you. You need to trust Me.” There are times in our own lives when it can feel like God is giving us a similar message.

#### **Towards growth**

It really is time for us to get to the heart of today’s topic – that is, how we can use the experience of our unanswered prayers to help us to grow as Christians! We will look at this under three headings.

##### **1. What can I learn from this?**

Earlier, we considered a range of questions that our unanswered prayers might cause us to ask. The vital question, which should always be prompted by the things which God sends into our lives is, ‘what can I learn from this?’ I am going to make four suggestions, but really the possibilities are as varied as our individual characters and experiences.

### **a. Flaws in my character**

Perhaps the chief aim of God in each of our lives, is to make us more like His Son, Jesus. Stop and think just how many differences there are between your character and that of Christ! This means that there is a big job of work to be done in reshaping your character and mine. There are things about my character that should not be there, or at least they should be far less prominent. There are other qualities that are woefully under-developed. When we became Christians, we all enrolled in God's school of character development, and unanswered prayers are one of many things that God can use to teach us lessons. What things do I keep asking for that God keeps saying "No" to? What does that say about my priorities and attitudes?

### **b. Gaps in my experience**

Perhaps you remember a time when you were applying for your first job and every employer wanted somebody with 'experience.' It's hard to get experience if nobody will give you a start! Well, God has given us all a start! One of the things you soon discover in life, at work and elsewhere, is that not all experience is pleasant! I always used to advise my staff that if they wanted promotion, they should start taking on new responsibilities and look for ways they could learn the skills which the next job demanded. Perhaps God is preparing you for your next job and He is giving you a 'placement' that is different from the one you expected. Nobody said growing was a pain free process!

### **c. Empathy**

This is probably a specific example of experience. Empathy is defined as the ability to understand and share somebody else's feelings, shown in how much compassion and understanding we can give to another. Sympathy might mean feeling pity while being glad that we don't have the same problem. Empathy starts to feel the other person's problem as if it were my own. It is very hard to empathise with someone if you have never had a similar experience. This makes empathy one of those qualities nobody ever really wants to acquire. However, when we are struggling, empathy is exactly what we want others to show! Empathy makes for better Bible teachers as well. If God kept taking all my struggles away and smoothing out all my difficulties, I would never be able to stand alongside somebody else in a way which indicated that I knew what they were feeling.

### **d. My talking to listening ratio!**

Everybody has a talking to listening ratio. One of my aunties has a ratio of about 100:1! Some farmers I know reverse that proportion. What is your talking to listening ratio with God? Prayer is a wonderful thing. Most of us don't do anything like enough, but we need to learn to listen as well. Listening to God is a vital skill. Perhaps people living in our era find this harder than ever before. There is so much noise and so much busyness in our lives, God is hardly being heard! Maybe He sometimes wants us to spend a bit more time exercising our spiritual sense of hearing. Nobody commends a child who is always demanding and never saying thank you, or just sitting still to listen and learn.

## **2. Exercising faith**

It is often said that faith is like a muscle, and as such, it is strengthened by exercise. Romans 4:16 refers to the

"Faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,"

thus presenting the faith of Abraham as an example, and pattern, for every one of us. We have already, briefly, thought about Abraham and the way that God made him wait for the answer to his

prayers for a son. God did not do that because He is a tyrant who likes playing with people, or because He did not value Abraham. The story of Abraham is the story of a man whose faith grew by the exercise of a series of difficult challenges, not least of which was the wait for a son, which went far beyond all natural hope.

I can't promise that God will finally grant you whatever you may have been requesting for years: it is not that simple. But I am sure that God has a purpose in what He is doing - probably several purposes, and one of them is to stretch and strengthen your trust in Him. My almost forgotten biology, says that muscles grow when we exercise them to the extent that we slightly damage the tissues, at which point they grow back stronger and more numerous. Too much stretching can tear and damage, but no stretching at all leads to atrophy, which is the decline due to underuse or neglect. God's school has a gym as well as intellectual lessons!

### 3. Perseverance and character

Finally, I want to quote Romans 5:3b,4:

“Tribulation produces perseverance and perseverance, character; and character hope.”

Perseverance could also be translated as endurance, both words indicate an ability to keep going in spite of difficulty and delay. Paul was telling the Romans that tribulation, which is suffering or trouble, has the effect of producing perseverance, perseverance produces good character and that good character leads to hope. That sounds like a positive chain of cause and effect, taking us all the way from trouble to hope. It's a chain that needs each of the links, and it takes us back over ground that we have already covered in this talk.

God is prepared to go to a lot more trouble and effort in transforming us to be like His Son than we often anticipate. The Bible paints a picture of a God who delights in answering our prayers positively, and I am glad to say that He does so on very many occasions. But it also describes a Father who wants the best for us and will not settle for the lower standards with which we would often be happy. So, our prayers are sometimes answered with a “Yes” and sometimes with a “No”, but they are always answered by a God who loves us deeply, even when His answers cause us real pain. That pain is intended to produce growth. Let us try and understand more about how God wants to make that happen.

God and Father, we thank you that you want us to bring our requests to You and that You always give them Your full attention. We acknowledge that there are many reasons why You do not give us what we ask for, or do not do so immediately. Grant us the grace to accept Your answers, and the strength and understanding to benefit from them by allowing them to make us grow more like Your Son, in whose Name we ask this, Amen.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on From Discouragement to Growth, 'Unanswered Prayers', talk number T1349.

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