

Unanswered Prayer

By David Feddes

A woman with a husband and two children died of cancer. I can't figure out why God allowed an awful disease to cut down a precious person in the prime of her life. I don't know why God allowed her husband and children to lose someone so dear to them, or why her parents, brothers, sisters, and friends had to go through crushing grief. I don't know why she got sick and died. I do know that it wasn't due to a lack of prayer.

This woman prayed many times for healing. Her husband and children prayed. Her brothers and sisters prayed. Her parents prayed. Her friends prayed. Entire congregations prayed. Many, many of us prayed and prayed and prayed that she would be healed. At times it even looked like the prayers were being answered in a thrilling way. There were encouraging reports, and our hopes rose. But those hopes were dashed by cruel cancer, and she died. Why did so many prayers bring such a crushing result? How could God not give healing and long life in response to so many prayers for such a beloved person?

A single woman longs to find a good man, get married, and have children. She's lonely and would rather not be single any more. She's the sort of wise, gentle person who would make an excellent wife and mother. She prays earnestly for God to bring the right man. She prays this way year after year, waiting and hoping. But the only men who show an interest in her don't share her faith and her moral standards. She's met some decent guys too, but they always end up marrying someone else. She's getting close to the age when she'll never be able to have children, and still God has not granted her repeated request for a husband and family. Why not? She remains committed to God, but she can't help wondering why God doesn't answer her prayer.

A man works hard and handles his finances honestly but loses his job and can't pay his bills. He prays for God to meet his needs, but his financial hole keeps getting deeper. Why doesn't God answer his prayers and ease his financial burden?

We might understand why God wouldn't grant requests for bad things, but many unanswered prayers are for excellent things. People pray for relief from famines and plagues, but suffering continues. People pray for peace in their nation, but conflict gets worse. People pray for their church to flourish, but it keeps going downhill. Why doesn't God answer these requests?

Unanswered prayer is a big problem. It's a problem if you're a non-religious person. If you don't know God very well but are told that he listens to prayers, you might decide to try talking to him and asking for his help. If you don't get the answer you were hoping for, you might think that prayer is useless and that God isn't worth bothering with. Unanswered prayer can be a barrier to faith for non-religious people.

Unanswered prayer can also be a huge problem for people who believe in God and believe in the value of prayer. Those of us who believe in God have high expectations. We believe in a God of limitless love and power, and we believe that he listens when we speak to him. So if he listens and loves us and has the power to do anything we ask, how could any prayer for something worthwhile go unanswered?

As we ask about this, let's not overlook the many prayers that God does answer. I believe in the Lord and in the power of prayer, and I've seen him answer prayer in amazing ways. But I've also seen earnest, desperate prayers go unanswered. There's no denying that unanswered prayer is a hard problem, even for very wise and sincere followers of Jesus.

A Door Slammed in Your Face

Christian writer C. S. Lewis wrote many excellent books which have helped build faith in other people, but when his wife, Joy, died, it was a terrible blow for Lewis. Perhaps the worst times were when Lewis felt God was ignoring him. God had not healed his wife from cancer, despite all their prayers. After she died, Lewis didn't feel God's nearness or comfort, despite all his prayers. Lewis kept a journal of his thoughts and later published them in his book titled *A Grief Observed*.

"Where is God?" wondered Lewis. "When you are happy... and turn to him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to him when your need is desperate ... and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You might as well turn away."

Years earlier, before C. S. Lewis became a Christian, he had been an atheist. When his wife died, his faith was sorely shaken, but he wasn't really tempted to go back to atheism. He was tempted instead to think that God is real *but horrible*. Lewis wrote, "Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer.'"

Unanswered prayers for Joy's healing and unanswered prayers for comfort in his time of loss made Lewis wonder if the real truth about God might be that he always tortures people. With so much pain and so much unanswered prayer, asked Lewis, "What reason have we, except our own desperate wishes, to believe that God is, by any standard we can conceive, 'good'?" Much evidence seems to point the other way. If God shows kindness for a while but then keeps his distance in our most desperate moments, what kind of God is he? So many problems, so much pain and death, seem to indicate a Supreme Being who is cruel.

Christians might point to Jesus to show that God is love and to counter any idea that God is cruel. Jesus spoke of a loving heavenly Father. But look what happened to Jesus! He was tortured and died on a cross. As he hung there suffering, he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus' words, wrote Lewis, "may have a perfectly clear meaning. He had found that the Being He called Father was horribly and infinitely different from what he had supposed."

Lewis went on to say, "What chokes every prayer and every hope is the memory of all the prayers [my wife] and I offered and all the false hopes we had. Not hopes raised merely by our own wishful thinking, hopes encouraged, even forced upon us, by false diagnoses, by X-ray photographs, by strange remissions, by one temporary recovery that might have ranked as a miracle. Step by step we were 'led up the garden path.' Time after time, when He seemed most gracious He was really preparing the next torture." Unanswered prayer can cause a horrible inner struggle. It might not be quite so bad if God just denied our request right away, but when God seems to give a positive answer and gets our hopes up, only to crush those hopes, it's hard to take.

When C. S. Lewis wrote in his journal of being tempted to believe in a bad God, an almighty torturer, he was having an especially hard night. The next day, he looked at what he had written and said, "It was a yell rather than a thought." It was more a cry of anguish than a rational statement. Lewis saw that it was nonsense to think of God as a cosmic torturer. Such a God could never have dreamed up "love, or laughter, or daffodils, or a frosty sunset." Lewis refused to believe that Jesus was wrong about God. Later, after more time had passed, Lewis felt God's light shining afresh into his life. Still, even though he didn't ultimately forsake God, the

fact remains that one of the world's most brilliant and prominent Christians was deeply wounded and had his faith shaken to its foundations by unanswered prayer.

Darkest Depths

If you wonder why your prayers haven't been answered, if you wonder why God seems to ignore you, you're not alone. C. S. Lewis felt that way at times, and so did people whose thoughts are recorded in the Bible itself. Psalm 88 is the prayer of a devout believer named Heman. He's been through a lot, he feels like he can't take much more, and he wonders why God doesn't do something about it. He complains that God rejects his prayers, but he still keeps praying, and even his complaint is a prayer. Heman says, "My soul is full of trouble... I am like a man without strength... You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths... I call to you, O Lord, every day... I cry to you for help, O Lord; in the morning my prayer comes before you. Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me? ... You have taken my companions and friends from me; the darkness is my closest friend" (Psalm 88:13-14).

Heman's problem is unanswered prayer. Every day he's been praying for help, but he feels that God just turns away and lets things get worse. So how does he respond to the pain of unanswered prayer? He prays about it! Isn't that odd? If you're frustrated that God won't answer your prayers, why pray to him about those unanswered prayers? Why not stop talking to God altogether if it doesn't do any good? Well, strange as it seems to pray about unanswered prayer, it's important to bring your struggle to God and to talk to him about it.

The Bible sets the pattern. In Psalm 13 David prays, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?" (Psalm 13:1-2). In the book of Habbakkuk, the prophet prays, "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" (Habakkuk 1:2). Jesus himself prayed that if it were possible, the heavenly Father would spare him from the horror of being crucified. But it was the Father's will that Jesus suffer and die. What did Jesus do when his request was denied and he was crushed on the cross? He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Unanswered prayer is a crushing experience, and we don't have to pretend that we're happy about it and doing just fine. The Bible records many prayers of people who felt devastated when God did not grant their requests, and in these prayers they poured out their hurts and grief. Such prayers don't offer clear, simple answers to our problem, but at least we get a sense that, like these biblical believers, we too may ask questions about unanswered prayer. We too can tell God about our struggles and express our disappointment that our prayers didn't get the results we wanted.

If you're tempted by terrible thoughts about God, you don't have to pretend those thoughts aren't there. Pretending can't fool God anyway. If you sometimes can't avoid terrible thoughts, the next best thing is to be honest about those thoughts and to express yourself to God. Sometimes, by the end of your prayer, you may already feel strengthened—that happens in many of the biblical psalms. But at other times you may feel as hurt and helpless as ever. At the end of talking to God, you might still feel the way Heman felt at the end of Psalm 88 when he spoke of God terrorizing him and said, "The darkness is my closest friend." But even a prayer like that is still a prayer. God has included such prayers in the Bible to help us pray honestly in our darkest, weakest moments when he seems farthest away.

I hear from many people who express struggles and questions about unanswered prayer. I wish I could offer clear, comforting answers that would set such questions at rest, but I can't.

There are some truths that may help to a degree, but when you're feeling crushed and your prayers don't seem to be getting any response from God, you don't need answers and explanations from a preacher. You need God himself. Grief is not something that can be hurried along, and an inner struggle is not something that a few words from me or anyone else can resolve. Nothing and nobody but God, in his own way and in his own time, can comfort someone who feels rejected and abandoned by him.

A Chuckle in the Darkness

C. S. Lewis, in the pit of grief, wrote that when you go to God, all you get is “a door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You might as well turn away.” But God didn't leave Lewis locked in despair forever. A bit later Lewis was thinking about the suffering God inflicted on his wife. He wished he could have suffered instead of her, but at the same time he wasn't sure if he really would take her suffering on himself if he had the opportunity, and he wondered if one person could ever be allowed to suffer for another. Then he wrote, “It was allowed to One [that is, Jesus Christ], and I find I can now believe again, that He has done vicariously whatever can so be done. He replies to our babble [about suffering in someone else's place], ‘You cannot and you dare not. I could and dared.’”

Immediately after writing about Jesus taking so many of our sufferings away from us and shouldering them in our place, Lewis wrote, “Something quite unexpected has happened... my heart was lighter than it had been for many weeks... I have gradually been coming to feel that the door is no longer shut and bolted.” The door began to open, not by any brilliant idea or explanation, but by a fresh sense of the Savior who suffered on our behalf.

That wasn't the end of C. S. Lewis's grief. He still mourned for his wife, and he still had hard questions about God. At one point he wrote, “Tonight all the hells of young grief have opened again; the mad words, the bitter resentment, the fluttering in the stomach, the nightmare unreality, the wallowed-in tears. For in grief nothing ‘stays put.’” Still, despite the recurrence of such moments, said Lewis, “Turned to God, my mind no longer meets that locked door.” Something had changed. “There was no sudden, striking and emotional transition. Like the warming of a room or the coming of daylight. When you first notice them they have already been going on for some time.”

Lewis wrote of a special experience, a sense that God was near and that reality was far better than he had dreamed. He said he couldn't really describe the experience except by a simile, a word picture. He said to imagine a man in total darkness, not really knowing where he is but thinking he's trapped in a cellar or dungeon and feeling dread. “Then there comes a sound. He thinks it might be a sound far off—waves or wind-blown trees or cattle half a mile away. And if so, it proves he's not in a cellar, but free, in the open air. Or it may be a much smaller sound close at hand—a chuckle of laughter. And if so, there is a friend just beside him in the dark. Either way, a good, good sound.”

Lewis didn't want to make too much of this experience, but his unanswered prayers and unanswered questions no longer seemed like huge, overwhelming problems. He wrote, “When I lay these questions before God, I get no answer. But a rather special sort of ‘No answer.’ It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate gaze. As though he shook his head not in refusal but waiving the question. Like, ‘Peace, child; you don't understand.’”

Do you know what it's like to be in the dark night of unanswered prayer, feeling alone and terrified, and then hear something like a friendly chuckle? When you get no answer, do you

ever get that “special sort of ‘No answer’” that C. S. Lewis experienced? For a time it may seem that God is nowhere to be found and that life isn’t worth living, and then something happens. The world around you somehow seems less dark and dreadful, more friendly and alive with God’s presence. When your prayer is answered only by silence, you experience the silence not as God ignoring you but as quiet rest, as God’s peace telling you that some things are beyond your understanding. That kind of peace isn’t something I can create for you in a few words. “The peace of God that transcends understanding” is God’s gift (Philippians 4:7).

The apostle Paul struggled with unanswered prayer about something that bothered him terribly. We don’t know exactly what it was, but Paul called his problem “a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan, to torment me.” Again and again Paul pleaded with God to take the problem away, but God didn’t do it. Instead God told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:7). Paul’s problem remained, making Paul felt weaker than ever, yet he also felt God’s power working more strongly than ever. Paul’s unanswered prayer wasn’t really unanswered. God didn’t grant Paul’s request, but he gave a better answer: more of himself.

Wait for the Lord

It’s comforting to know that God loves you and is listening to you, even if he doesn’t grant your request, even if he puts you through terrible pain and loss. But what if you still haven’t heard that tender chuckle in the darkness? What if you only experience the locked door and the terrible silence? Again, I can’t offer a simple formula so that you will instantly sense God nearby. All I can say is, “Wait.”

That may sound like lame advice, but often there’s not much you can do to deal with the anguish of unanswered prayer except to wait for God and depend completely on him. In Psalm 27:14 the Bible says, “Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.” Psalm 130:6 says, “My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning.” When it’s night, you can’t do anything to make it daytime. You have to wait for the sun to rise. But that waiting can be positive waiting, eager waiting in strong expectation. You might be in the darkness of disappointment and sorrow, you might not see any rays of gladness or hope, but wait. Wait for the Lord to shine on you.

And as you wait, you can be sure of one thing: the Lord Jesus knows more than any of us about unanswered prayer and feeling forsaken by God. Though he is the Son of God, his heavenly Father did not grant his petition to be spared from horrible torture and death or to be relieved from bearing the pain of all the sins in the entire world. If you cannot yet hear God’s chuckle in the dark, you may still hear the echo of Jesus’ scream in the dark as he hung on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” That was unanswered prayer indeed—no one ever suffered so terribly as Jesus did. But after the suffering came the chuckle in the darkness, then the earthquake, and then death itself cracked apart as the resurrection power of God burst forth.

Waiting for the Lord may sound lame—until you realize who you’re waiting for. Jesus walks with you through the darkness, and the darkness will surely give way to Easter dawn. As you struggle with unanswered prayer, it’s okay to voice your grief to God, and at the same time it helps to say, “My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning.”

In the End

I don't want to sugarcoat sorrow or offer instant comfort by saying, "All's well that ends well." But I do want to offer a gentle reminder that if you belong to Jesus, all does end well. That doesn't mean you have to pretend it's easy to deal with unanswered prayer. If you've been praying for something for many years but haven't received it, it can be a long, grinding disappointment. If you've prayed about a crisis of life-and-death urgency but the result was the death of a loved one, you may feel shattered by unanswered prayer. There is a time to mourn and to pour out your grief to God, a time when all you can do is try to hang in there and wait for the Lord until he refreshes your soul. Sometimes you'll feel unable to hang on, and you'll fall apart. That's okay. God knows how to take things that fall apart and make them better than new.

A day is coming when all things will be made new, all tears wiped away, every prayer granted in the fullest most, wonderful way. And even in this life, God may help you see that his choice was best, even though it wounded you terribly.

After C.S. Lewis lost his wife to cancer, there were times when he raged and despaired, but in the final entry of the journal he wrote during the grieving process, Lewis wrote, "How wicked it would be, if we could, to call the dead back! [Joy] said not to me but to the chaplain, 'I am at peace with God.' She smiled, but not at me." Lewis knew that his wife was smiling at God. The cancer had not been healed and their marriage union was torn by death, but his wife entered the closest possible union with God. Was that really such a bad answer to prayer?

If you don't have faith in Jesus and don't have a relationship with God, you must receive the Lord and commit your life to him before you can expect any answers to prayer. If you do belong to Jesus, you won't get every prayer answered the way you want, but you can be sure that God's grace is sufficient to get you through, and you can be sure that the small chuckle you hear now in the dark will become huge, everlasting laughter when the full light of morning arrives and you see the Lord face to face.