

## **NAVIGATING UNANSWERED PRAYERS**

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Here's something for you to ponder about. What do you and I have in common with Billy Graham, C.S. Lewis, Mother Teresa, John Wesley – people with powerful ministries? The one thing that you and I have in common with them was that they too experienced the barrenness and the dryness of unanswered prayer. I've come to the conclusion through my ears of ministry, that one of the main reasons why our lives lack joy, or peace, or fruit, is the fact that somewhere tucked away in some part of our journey on earth is unanswered prayer.

An unanswered prayer has the potential to steal your joy, to steal your peace, and even make you walk through life by rote, just going through the motions. I think that, more than anything else is the bane of the church; that when a church reaches a place where everything is just a matter of going through the motions, then we have lost the vibrancy of a wonderful relationship with our God.

I just sense that the Lord wants to deal with that today. So, if you'll allow me, I'm not going to preach a sermon to you. Instead I'd like to do a teaching on unanswered prayer and would also invite you, if possible, to take notes. This is not something that you should listen to and then forget about, but something that might help you as you navigate this period that often comes into our lives.

So, as we look at this whole realm of unanswered prayer or the eloquent silence of heaven that so brings down our spirits sometimes, I want to present to you a few areas that we can be watchful of. And along with each of these areas, I'm going to give you scripture so that we can keep it scripture-based, and know that this is the Word that is undergirding these thoughts.

### **1. BITTERNESS AND RESENTMENT.**

We need to guard our spirits and hearts from bitterness and resentment. Why bitterness? Because bitterness can make us feel distant from God and others, and poison our very heart and our outlook to life. The fallout of that is we then begin to allow our unanswered prayers to lead to resentment to God. And when we have resentment towards God, automatically we have resentment towards others as well.

Ephesians 4:31-32 says *"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, .... Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."*

Make sure that there is no root of bitterness in your heart because, at some point, you asked God for something and nothing happened. And that has allowed you to color everything in your relationship

with God after that. Instead, look for moments of gratitude where God has helped you in the past, reminding yourself of God's goodness and His faithfulness. Look for those stones of Ebenezers, those stones of remembrances that have dotted your life till now, where you looked at it at one point and said, "God, help me here!" and you raised a stone of Ebenezer, a remembrance. Think back to those moments.

## **2. DOUBTING GOD'S CHARACTER.**

Be careful that you don't begin to doubt God's character. Doubting God's love, His goodness or power can weaken your faith and trust in Him. And when your faith in Him and your trust in Him is weakened, then your relationship with Him gets down to a very mundane kind of relationship. Your prayers begin to be safe prayers. "Bless everybody, Lord." But you don't have the faith or the trust to say "this is the deepest need of my heart today, Lord."

Proverbs 3:5 *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding."*

So meditate on scriptures that affirm God's love and sovereignty.

Romans 8: 38-39 Think of all the things that are mentioned there – nothing, none of them can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, not one of those things.

Jeremiah 29:11 *"For I know the plans that I have for you, plans to prosper you, not to harm you."* God's plans for you beloved, are the best. Nothing that you can ever come up with will beat that.

## **3. DON'T COMPARE YOURSELF TO OTHERS.**

Be careful that you don't compare yourself to others. Sometimes we compare ourselves to others by saying, "My goodness! God answered their prayers but hasn't answered mine. Is there something wrong with me? Does God love them more than He loves me? Does He hear them more than He hears me? Is there some inadequacy in me?"

Galatians 6: 4 *"Each one of us should test their own actions, then they can take pride in themselves alone without comparing themselves to someone else."*

Don't look at others and compare yourself or the prayers that have got answered with them. Focus on your unique journey with God, trusting that His plans are the best plans for you, both specific and perfect. There is only one you in the whole wide world, among the 8 billion people or more that are here. There's only one you, and God has a specific plan that fits only you.

#### **4. IMPATIENCE AND FRUSTRATION.**

Watch out for impatience and frustration. Impatience can lead you to take matters into your own hands. You get frustrated and say: "I'm done waiting for God to come through on this. I'm just going to go ahead and do what I think is the right thing." So we lose that trust in God and we need to be careful about rushing ahead of God's timing or becoming frustrated when answers don't come immediately.

Psalm 27:14 *"Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord."*

Maybe today, some of you need to hold on to your horses and say, "I'm feeling like jumping the gun on this, doing something. And maybe I need to just hold back."

Develop patience by remembering that God's timing is always perfect and for your own good. Remember the folly of Abraham and Sarah. They couldn't wait for God; they took matters in their own hands, and an Ishmael came along. Don't accept an Ishmael when God wants to give you an Isaac. Wait for the Isaac. Wait for the promise that God has.

#### **5. SELF-PITY AND DESPAIR.**

Be careful of self-pity and despair. When we focus sometimes on unanswered prayers, we begin to have a victim mentality. We feel that 'God doesn't care about me' leads to hopelessness and discouragement. Be careful that you don't have a pity party for yourself when prayers don't get answered. That's a slippery slope that you don't want to be on. You end up in a place that is so far from God and so filled with mistrust about who He is.

Psalm 42:11 *"Why, my soul, are you downcast?"*

Sometimes that's where we find ourselves. So downcast, so dejected, so discouraged, because we wallowed in what has not happened in self-pity. And then he says, *"Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him."* That's where we ought to be instead of going down into self-pity – to pick ourselves up and say: I will praise Him. Turn to worship and gratitude, to shift your perspective and rekindle hope in yourself.

God has done numerous things in your life, if we only pause to think. When you're tempted to get into self-pity, remember the goodness of God. One of the songs that has blessed me immensely in the last 5 years is the song, "The Goodness of God".

And all my life You have been faithful  
And all my life You have been so, so good  
With every breath that I am able  
Oh, I would sing of the goodness of God.

In that moment, when you're called into pity for yourself, to wallow in self-pity, rise up and say, "I will sing of the goodness of God."

## **6. DISTRUST AND CYNICISM.**

Be careful that you don't go into distrust and cynicism. Cynicism can harden your heart and block you from fully engaging in prayer and worship. Why? Because you become sceptical of all of God's promises. Everything gets thrown out like "The baby with the bath water." And yet, we are told to have faith.

Hebrews 11:1 *"Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."*

In times like this, maintain childlike faith and say, "I will just hold on to You." Ask God to renew trust in you even when the answers are unseen. I tell you, church, I have seen over the years that I've been in ministry, faces of people who are filled with cynicism and are sceptical about God. Their faces have become hard like chiselled from rock. The problem with being like that is that that kind of bluntness begins to touch other people as well. You're never able to get close to people like that because they'll hurt.

## **7. TURNING AWAY FROM GOD.**

Be careful of turning away from God during this time. Disappointment can tempt you to distance yourself from God, cutting off the very source of comfort and hope. If you go away from God, from the only one who can bring comfort and hope into your situation, there's no hope for you. You've cut yourself away from that life-giving tree. Guard yourself! Avoiding prayer and worship or reading God's word will become a temptation at a time like this. Don't give in to it.

James 4:8 *"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you."*

One of the moments that really gets me and fills me with a little bit of sadness is when we have communion and I sometimes see ones who should be coming to the table, not doing so. Beloved, the table is not meant for perfect people; the table is meant for broken people, for people who are saying, "Lord, I've gone down this road which has taken me far from You. But Lord, I want to. Would

You meet me in the context of the bread and the juice?" It saddens me to see somebody sitting with that and saying, "I can't come to this table."

Turn to God. Don't turn away from Him.

## **8. FORGETTING GOD'S PAST FAITHFULNESS.**

Forgetting how God has worked in your life before can weaken your trust in Him.

Psalm 77:11 *"I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember Your miracles of long ago."*

You know these are things to write down and reflect on. Write down the blessings of God – how God has blessed you in the past. It will make for wonderful reading as you look back and say, "O my goodness! God really came through at this time." Keep that kind of a journal, because when you forget God's faithfulness, then it also affects the people who are around you. When we tend to forget about God's faithfulness and deal with just the present, we tend to cut off people. You say, "I'm just going to cut this person out of my life." it's something that happened in the moment, but that same person may have stood by you in the past, cared for you, took care of you, gave you resources, prayed for you. And yet, we're willing for one moment in the present, to erase all the faithfulness of the past, and we take that up with God as well. You didn't answer my prayer, so I'm not going to think about the things that You have done.

## **9. LISTENING TO NEGATIVE VOICES.**

Be careful that you're not listening to negative voices during this time because they will come to you. Guard against worldly or unbiblical opinions to try and make sense of it.

Romans 12:2 *"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."*

Surround yourself with encouraging faithful voices and teachings. Deal with the negativity because Satan will come to you and say, "Did God really say He's going to help you? Does God really exist? I mean, have you heard from Him? Is He doing the things that you asked Him? Does He really care for you?" And pretty soon we're thinking the same way. Instead, we're supposed to be saying "Get behind me Satan, for I know my God. He is good, all the time."

## **10. SEEKING SOLUTIONS OUTSIDE OF GOD'S WILL.**

Be careful of seeking solutions outside God's will.

Matthew 6:33 *"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well."*

## **STALWARTS OF CHRISTIANITY WHO STRUGGLED WITH UNANSWERED PRAYER.**

I asked you in the beginning about C.S. Lewis and Billy Graham. C.S. Lewis was the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and a devout Christian. He experienced profound grief and struggled with unanswered prayer, particularly after the death of his wife Joy Davidman. In his book *'A Grief Observed'*, Lewis wrestles with doubts and questions about God's presence and the seeming silence in the face of deep, deep pain.

Mother Teresa, in her private writings, revealed that she often experienced a sense of spiritual dryness and the absence of God's presence. Despite her lifelong devotion to serving the poor and sick, she struggled with what she called 'the dark night of the soul'. And everything seemed so quiet and silent; she couldn't hear the voice of God.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, such a prayerful person. But at times, he faced personal doubts and questions about God's will in his life.

Billy Graham says that in all the thousands of people who came to the Lord through his preaching, he agonized over the people in his own family who hadn't yet met the Savior, for whom he was praying constantly.

### **How did they overcome?**

C.S. Lewis, though he questioned God's presence and the purpose of suffering, ultimately found solace in the belief that God was with him in his pain even if it wasn't immediately apparent. His experience led him to a more profound understanding of grief and pain.

Mother Teresa remained devoted to her mission, choosing to press on in faith even when she couldn't sense God's presence. And she says that this became a test of her faith so that she could better relate to the sufferings of people around us. They used this part of their lives to continue to press on and press forward.

John Wesley didn't retreat from his calling but continued to pray and serve. He believed that perseverance in prayer and faith was essential even in the face of difficulty.

Billy Graham, continued to preach and trust in God's plan, believing that God's timing and understanding were greater than his own. And he remained committed to spreading the gospel even when he didn't see the immediate results.

So beloved, all of these areas have the potential to keep us distant from God, to lead us to a kind of average mediocre Christianity, one that just means "I come to church, I go through the motions and I leave."

### **How can we prevent these attitudes?**

1. Trust in God's goodness. Remind yourself that God is good.
2. Surrender your expectations. Let go of rigid expectations.

One of the prayers that is so crucial and critical for us, after the prayer of salvation, is the prayer of relinquishment. It's the prayer that says: "Nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done." So often we hold on to those things that we want and we say, "Lord, make this happen," instead of releasing it and saying, "Lord, if this is Your will, then let it happen." The prayer of relinquishment.

3. Surrender your expectations.
4. Focus on gratitude. Give thanks to God constantly. Bring up those things that He has done for you.
5. Examine your hearts and see. The Bible says: If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. So see if there's any wicked way in us and then ask for God's cleansing.
6. Persevere in faith. Don't move away, move in when these things happen.
7. Lean on community. Don't isolate yourself during times of doubt or frustration. Seek encouragement from fellow believers.

Galatians 6:2 *"Carry each other's burdens and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ."* Share your struggles with trusted friends or church members who can pray with and for you.

8. Pray for others.

I paused in the first service at this point, because it says lean on community. Lean on your brothers and sisters. And I sent out 2 mails this week to you. The first was inviting prayer requests from you all as a church and saying what was going on in your life. As a church, we want to pray for you, and it broke my heart when I saw the prayer requests. Because they were so deeply personal. They made themselves vulnerable saying, "This is my deepest need. I want prayer."

Here's the thing, beloved. When people bring prayer requests before the church, they are saying to each one of you: I trust you with what's going on in my life. will you help me? Will you stand with

me? That's what it means when we, as a church, say we're going to pray. It cannot be that you say, "Okay, I got this. I read the prayer request, and it's fine. I'll pray."

It would be like I walk up to one of you and I say, "Here's what's going on. This is the hardest thing I faced. Will you pray for me?" And you just turn and walk away. That's what happens when we don't take notice of a prayer letter that comes as a request from members of this congregation. That's what you are doing actually, beloved. I don't mean in any way to bring condemnation on you. Not at all. I beg of you, when you receive a mail saying these are prayer requests, take it to the throne room of God. Please.

That's who we need to be as a church. Church is not about just coming and singing songs, listening to a sermon and going back. It's about caring for one another in this group.

I heard a talk this past week, I think it was Simon Sinek. Trust doesn't happen when we offer help; trust happens when we ask for help. Trust happens when I come to you and say: I trust you with my situation. Will you stand with me?

That's what it means, beloved, when we say "Carry each other's burdens." How alone we can feel when we realize that we have nobody to support during a particular time! It can be a very lonely place. And yet, God has called each one of us to be part of the Church at Powai, and said, "I want you to care for one another." And all that you're being asked to do is to pray, to intercede. Fifteen minutes, or if the Lord leads you 30 minutes or an hour, but will you raise these to the throne room of God?

Because when we do that, then our faith increases as well. And when we go through dry times and we write in a prayer request and say, "I'm in a barren place. Would you pray for me?" How wonderful it would be to know that 200 people are going to be saying: I'm going to take you to the throne room. God is going to hear your prayer because I'm going to pray.

I don't know where you are today in that area, whether you've withdrawn, whether you've got into this safe place where you just go through the motions. Sundays mean come to church? Whether there's a vibrancy in your relationship with God? Whether you have the same intimacy where you can go to Him and say, "Lord, what's going on in my life? I want more of You, Lord. I want the joy, the peace that is the heritage of the children of God, and I don't have it."

I'll close with this paragraph I was writing.

In this journey of life, our sight is limited. We see what we see and the rest we walk by faith. Faith-walking is saying "God, for the things I cannot see, I trust that You are seeing. And so may my faith



lean into Your 360° vision.” That’s what faith is – leaning into God’s vision which sees 360°, beyond our limited vision.

Then in that space beloved, I guarantee you, if you listen carefully after you tell Him that this is what you’re doing, you will hear Him say, “Of course, I’ll carry you. I have promised never to leave you or forsake you. Never! No one can pluck you out of My hand. The love that I have for you, nobody can come close to loving like that.” That’s the God who you and I worship. That’s how deeply He cares for you and how much He longs for us to have a vibrant joyful relationship with Him.

This wasn’t my sermon for today, actually. Yesterday evening, I finished preparing my sermon, printed it out, kept it on my table and I went home. But I just didn’t have peace. In fact, I told Sheila days before, what I was going to preach on. But I just didn’t have peace. I kept fighting with the Lord and saying, “Lord, don’t do this to me last minute.” I felt Him saying, “This is what it is.”

So I took my phone and began to speak. And whatever He was giving me, I wrote out. Beloved, when that happens, I know for a certainty that He wants to meet with you today. Beyond a shadow of a doubt that He wants to do business with some of you, that maybe some of you are in a dark, deep, barren place. You haven’t seen fruit in a long time. Joy and peace have been missing in your life, and you become so good at flying under the radar and just doing the minimum. Today God wants to free you for that abundant life, fruit – joy, peace. This is the heritage of the children of God.

I truly believe that God wants to meet with some of you here. If you’re honest with yourself, you’re going to say: I’m in that place, in that dark night of the soul. It’s a long time since I actually had joy in my heart. I’ve held something against God because of unanswered prayers.” But today God is calling and saying, “Would you just draw close to Me, just give Me that area of hurt. Let Me just wrap My arms around you, speak words of encouragement to you.

There’s a song, an old time favorite – “Precious Lord”. I want to invite you to stand while the song is going to be playing. If the Holy Spirit is touching your heart and saying, “I want to do business with you,” would you do business with Him? Would you feel free to come to this altar and say: Lord, I’m done with the way I’ve been or where I am. I want more. If this is my heritage, Lord, I want it.

Listen to the voice of the Spirit of God.

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