

What to Do with Unanswered Prayer

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Anyone who's given himself or herself to prayer for a sustained amount of time has likely experienced the disappointment of unanswered prayer. But the more theologically astute among you may not like that phrase "unanswered prayer." You may call it a category mistake. I understand your point. In reality, there are no unanswered prayers. God is sovereign and giving us all what we would've asked for if we knew everything he knows.

And I'm sure David was told something similar when he penned Psalm 13: "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?" (v. 1).

Surely you know, David, that God hasn't forgotten you!

I'm sure he knew.

David continues: "Consider and answer me, O LORD my God" (v. 3). Apparently, David hadn't experienced an answer to his prayers for a while, and was asking God "why?" I trust you could give a quick, theologically accurate answer.

But David is a serial offender in the Psalms. Maybe you would even quote the Psalms to David and correct him! "He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see? (Ps. 94:9).

Still, David and other psalmists consistently ask the God who never forgets if he has forgotten them.

My Experience

Have you experienced this pain? I have. There have been days I've felt as if I could only pray, "Will you forget me forever?" Maybe you feel that's overdoing it. Perhaps you'd say, "Well, maybe you should pray for something else. It sounds like you're expecting God to do your bidding!"

Maybe. But I wonder if you'd be as quick to say so to a brother or sister struggling with addiction, praying 10 years for relief, longing for a wandering child, or to a congregation fearful of its doors closing.

I penned a poem about unanswered prayer once. I wince sometimes when I read it:

*Where is your listening ear, O Lord?
Why have you ignored me?
All my prayers are swallowed up in the ceiling!
Is my voice too quiet for you?*

It gets worse:

Where have my prayers gone, Lord? What have you done with them? “Ask me anything,” you say—“The desire of your heart!” All my desires have been crushed. All my groanings ignored.

Those last two lines are a sore spot for people who experience unanswered prayer. We read Jesus’s words of almost completely unqualified invitation—“Ask me anything and I’ll give it to you!” (Matt. 18:19; 21:22; Mark 11:24; John 14:13; 15:7; 15:16; 16:23–24; James 1:5–6; 1:17; 1 John 3:22; 5:14–15)—and wonder why he hasn’t answered us.

*When will I get some relief?
When will my sighings give way to smiles?
I know where comfort comes from,
But you have locked its doors from me.*

*My smiles are like powder, my laughter like grass;
With a breeze, they are blown away.*

Finding Companions

As I read the Psalms, I continue to find companions. Asaph considers his trouble and all the times he has prayed for relief: “When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints” (Ps. 77:3). He’s grown tired of asking. The morning comes, and it’s time to pray, but he’s too tired of being disappointed to ask for anything again.

Asaph continues: “Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he shut up his compassion?” (Ps. 77:7–9). Asaph knows the answer to his questions. In fact, elsewhere he answers them. Even Jesus begs for relief (Mark 14:36), and when he experiences the Father’s absence, he cries aloud: “Why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34).

The Psalms keep good company. They give me words when I’m at a loss. They open windows in the rooms of my heart I didn’t know were there, and they let in fresh air. That’s a grace for seasons of unanswered prayer.

When you sit patiently with these psalms, you find something more. You remember these aren’t just the words of David and Asaph; these are the words of God. Before David gave me the words, “Will you forget me forever?” God gave them to David. These complaints are God’s gifts. He knows how we are. When we are at the end of our rope, these words are his way of lengthening the tether.

Isn’t that something? God has inspired words of complaint and protest to say to him when we are confused and sad, angry and desperate. He gave us words to say into our pillow as we drink our tears. “Here,” he says, “these words will help. Go ahead. I’m not self-conscious.”

Fighting to Wait

There's an old church father, Diadochus of Photike, who was part of the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. He was known for writing *On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination*, or as it's best known, "The Hundred Chapters," which is primarily on prayer. He introduces a term that probably won't catch on with modern readers: "educative desolation." Diadochus says "educative desolation" is God's intentional hiding of his presence from the senses of his children. He hides the "experience of divine attention" in order to increase their desire for him. "Educative desolation," he explains, "brings to the soul humiliation, grief, and proper despair in order that the part of the soul that seeks glory and is easily exalted may return to humility." Such a soul that "seeks glory and is easily exalted," he observes, "does not easily renew its love of God." In infinite wisdom, the Lord uses various ways to awaken our longings for himself again.

I don't know if this is why God sometimes doesn't answer my prayers and makes me wonder if he's near. But I've found comfort in these instructions and have tried to look for ways to stir my love for him. When I do seek him, I've often heard the whisper of the Lamentations: "You came near when I called on you; you said, 'Do not fear'" (Lam. 3:57). Notice he doesn't say "Here's your answer," but "Do not fear." I can use that.

Until then, Jeremiah teaches me to wait as he laments his exile: "The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him" (Lam. 3:25). He says so when all he can think about is his affliction, and he wonders if God thinks of him (Lam. 3:19–20). He knows the right answer. So he waits. And God says "those who wait for me shall not be put to shame" (Isa. 49:23).

The Lord is good to those who wait for him. In my heartache and confusion, my waiting is not in vain. He's going to be good to me. He already has been.

John Starke is pastor of preaching at Apostles Church in New York City and co-editor of *One God in Three Persons* (Crossway, 2015). You can follow him on Twitter.