

Our Unanswered Prayers

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There are times when God seems to be silent to us. To our earnest supplications, he answers not a word. We are told to ask and we shall receive—to seek, and we shall find—to knock, and it shall be opened unto us. Yet there come times when we ask imploringly, and seem not to receive; when, though we seek with intense eagerness, we seem not to find; when we knock until our hands are bruised and bleeding, and there seems to be no opening of the door. Sometimes the heavens appear to be brass above us, as we ask, "Is there anywhere an ear to hear our pleadings? Is there anywhere a heart to feel sympathy with us in our need?"

Nothing is so awful as this silence of God—to feel that communication with him is cut off. It is a pathetic prayer in which a psalm writer pleads: "Be not silent to me, lest I become like those who go down into the pit." Anything from God is better than that he be silent to us. It would be a sad, dreary, lonely world if the atheist's creed were true—that there is no God; that there is no ear to hear our prayer; that no voice of answering help or love or comfort, ever comes out of heaven for us.

Are prayers ever unanswered? There are many prayers which are answered, although we do not know it, and still think them unanswered. The answer is not recognized when it comes. This is true of our common mercies and favors. We pray every morning, "Give us this day our daily bread," and then we never think of our three meals each day as being answers to prayer. We ask God for health, for clothing, for the things we need, for prosperity in business, for friends; all these things come to us in continuity, without break. But do we remember that we prayed for them, and that they come from God as answers to our requests?

The same is true of many of the spiritual blessings which we seek. We ask for holiness. It does not seem to us that we are advancing in holiness; but all the while our life is imperceptibly and unconsciously receiving more of the mind and spirit of Christ, and we are being changed into his image. We expect the answer in a marked way, while it comes silently, as the dew comes upon the drooping flowers and withering leaves. But, like the flowers and the leaves, our soul is refreshed and our life is renewed.

We put our cares into God's hands in prayer, and they do not seem to become less. We think there has been no answer to our supplications. But all the while an unseen hand has been quietly shaping, adjusting, and disentangling for us the complex affairs of our life which made us anxious. We are not conscious of it—but our prayers have been receiving continual answer in peace and blessing.

We find ourselves in the midst of circumstances which appear adverse to our happiness and good. We seem about to be crushed by sorrows, by disappointments, by trials, or by antagonisms. We pray to be saved from these distressful conditions. No answer seems to come. The shadow deepens; the blows fall. We sit in the darkness, and say that God did not answer our prayers. We are unaware of the blessing that really came to us in the time of our pain. The cup of suffering was not taken away; but we were secretly strengthened, so that we were able to drink it.

We are very ignorant. We know not how to pray as we ought. The thing we ask for is not just what we need, although we think it is. The thing we really need comes—in place of what we thought we needed. The prayer seems to be unanswered, while in fact it is answered in a far better way than if what we sought had come instead. We think it is more of God's gifts we need; these do not come—but God himself comes into our life in new fullness, imparting to us more of his love and grace. We have an answer better than we sought. The Giver is better than his best gifts.

Thus, there is a large field of praying in which answers come—but come unrecognized. We have been blessed, although we knew it not. We did not perceive the blessing when it was given to us. We did not understand that the good things we were receiving so plentifully, were answers to our prayers. We thought God was not heeding our requests, when really he was giving us abundant answer every day!

But there are other prayers that really are not answered. God is silent to us when we ask. Yet there is a reason for his silence. It is better we should not have the things we want and plead for. For example, we ask God to lift away our burdens. But to do this would rob us of blessings which can come to us only through the bearing of the burden; and our Father loves us too well to give us present ease—at the cost of future and eternal good. There are mistaken notions current about the way God promises to help us. People think that whenever they have a little trouble to endure, a bit of hard path to go over, a load to carry, a sorrow to meet, or a trail of any kind—all they have to do is to call upon God, and he will at once deliver them, take away the burden or the sorrow which threatens, free them from trial. They think that is what God promises to do. They imagine that

when anything goes a little wrong with them, all they have to do is to pray, and God will set it right. But this is not the manner of God's love. His purpose concerning us is not to make things easy for usâ€”but to make something of us.

So when we pray to God to save us from all care, to take the struggles out of our life, to make the paths mossy, to lift away all loadsâ€”he simply will not do it. It would be most unloving in him to do so. Prayers of this kind, therefore, go unanswered. We must carry the burden ourselves. God wants us to learn life's lessons, and to do this, we must be left to work out the problems for ourselves. There are rich blessings that can be gotten only in sorrow. It would be a short-sighted love, indeed, that would heed our cries and spare us from the sorrow because we cried for this, thus depriving us of the wonderful blessings which can be gotten only in the sorrow.

A child may indolently shrink from the study, the regular hours, the routine, the drudgery, and the discipline of the schoolâ€”begging the parent to let him stay at home from school and have an easy time; but what would you think of the father who would weakly and softly grant the child's request, releasing him from the tasks which irk him so? Nothing more unkind could be done. The result would be the dwarfing of the child's life for all the future. Is God less wisely kind than our human fathers? He will not answer prayers which ask that we may be freed from duty or from work, since it is by these very things we grow. The only true answer in such prayers is the non-granting of what we ask.

Then, there are also selfish prayers that are unanswered. Human lives are tied up together. It is not enough that any one of us shall think only of himself and his own things. Thoughts of others must modify all our life. It is possible to overlook this in our prayers, and to press our own interest and desiresâ€”to the harming of others. God's eye takes in all his children, and he plans for the truest and best good of each one of them. Our selfish prayers, which would work to the injury of othersâ€”he will not answer. This limitation applies especially to prayers for worldly things. We must not pray selfishly even for prosperity in business. We must not ask for our own comfort and ease, without qualification. Love must come into our prayingâ€”as well as our living. Or if we forget love's law, and think only of ourselves in asking, God will not grant us our desires. He thinks of all his children, and will not do injury or harm to one to gratify another. These are examples of prayers which are not answered. They are not according to God's will. They are for things that would not prove blessings to us, if we were to receive them.

There is yet another class of prayers which appear to be unansweredâ€”but whose answer is only delayed for wise reasons. Ofttimes we are not able at the moment to receive the things we ask for. A child in one of the lower grades in a school may go to a teacher of higher studies, and ask to be taught this or that branch. The teacher may be willing to impart to the pupil the knowledge of the higher studyâ€”but the pupil cannot receive the knowledge until he has gone through certain other studies to prepare him for it. There are spiritual qualities for which we may pray earnestlyâ€”but which can be received only after certain discipline. A ripened character cannot be gotten by a young Christian, merely in answer to prayer; it can be gotten only through long experience.

Or it may be that the things we pray for cannot be given to us until they have been prepared for us. Suppose you were to plant a young fruit-tree, and were to begin to pray for fruit from its branches; could your prayer be answered at once? It is thus with many things we ask for in our pleadingâ€”they must be grown before they can be given to us. God delays to answer, that he may give us in the end, better things than could have been given at the beginning. He seems silent to us when we plead; but it is not the silence of indifference, nor the silence of refusalâ€”but the silence of love, which really assents to our request, and sets about preparing for us the blessings we crave. We need only patience, to wait our Father's time.

Here it is that ofttimes we fail. We cannot wait for God. We think he is indifferent to us, because he does not instantly give us what we crave. We fret and vex ourselves over the unanswering of the very prayers which God is really answering, as speedily as the blessings can be made ready for us, or as we can be made ready to receive them. We should teach ourselves to trust our Father in all that concerns our prayersâ€”what he will give, what he shall withhold, and the time and the manner of his giving.

These are suggestions concerning what seem to be unanswered prayers. The prayers may have been answered in ways in which we did not recognize our requests. They may be, indeed, unanswered, because to answer them would have been unkindness to us, or would have wrought hurt to others. Or the answers may have been delayed until we are made ready to receive them, or while God is preparing them for us.