

PRAYER – ANSWERED & UNANSWERED?

A few people have asked for the scripture references and notes from this sermon. I've laid them out below. Before the talk, we watched a video of Bishop Sentamu talking about praying for five people as part of the "Thy Kingdom Come" initiative. The link for this is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gxdt2JbxUGM>.

SCRIPTURES PROMISING "ASK ANYTHING IN THE NAME OF JESUS" OR SIMILAR WORDING

- Matthew 18:19
- Matthew 21:22
- Mark 11:24
- John 14:13
- John 15:16
- John 16:23-24
- 1 John 3:22
- 1 John 5:14-15

EXAMPLES OF "UNANSWERED" PRAYERS IN THE SCRIPTURES

Noting that we're using "unanswered" here to refer to any state of affairs in which the person praying might say their prayers "hadn't been answered" – a wide range of experience including God saying "no" or "heaven being silent".

"NO"

Luke 9 – calling down fire on the Samaritan village. ***"No – you're out of line!"***

1 Samuel 15:10-11, 15:34-35, 16:1 – Samuel prays and mourns for Saul, until God says "enough – go anoint David" ***"No – you need to understand my will"***

"YOU'RE NOT READY FOR THE ANSWER"

1 Kings 19 – Elijah fleeing from Jezebel: "I have had enough, Lord." He said, "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."

- God certainly doesn't answer "OK", but doesn't say "no" either – he just gives Elijah rest, sleep, and then a mountaintop encounter

YOU NEED TO PERSEVERE!

Luke 18 – the persistent widow. The fact that Jesus teaches about persevering in prayer **demonstrates** that Jesus foresees situations in which we pray and those prayers are not always answered.

Possible reasons why we might have to persevere:

- It does us good, commits us further to the object of the prayer – see also Romans 5:3-4, James 1:2-4
- There is opposition – e.g. Daniel 10:12-14 – at least 21 days of significant prayer for the direction of a nation, held up by a spiritual force "the king/prince of Persia"

YOU'RE ASKING THE WRONG THING!

Job's questions: why did God create me for this misery? God, give me a fair hearing and let me argue my cause!

God – I am sovereign, know your place!

Job 38:1-2 – "Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm. He said: 'Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.'"

IT WAS ANSWERED (WE DIDN'T SEE IT)

Genesis 18:16-33, 19:27-29 – Abraham pleads with God: “surely you won’t destroy the righteous with the wicked”, presumably thinking in particular about Lot. We don’t see him meeting Lot again after that time – does he know that God rescued Lot? Or does he think that that prayer went “unanswered”? But, crucially, Abraham is presented to us in Scripture as someone who trusted God – so it seems likely that he trusted God to have acted fairly, even if he didn’t know the outcome for Lot.

What would it be like for us, when we don’t see a prayer answered, to first of all assume that God has answered it and that we need to understand? For our first response to be one of trust, not disappointment?

IT IS BEING ANSWERED (ON GOD’S TIMESCALE)

Isaiah 64 – “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!” – the immediate results are:

- more bad kings (except Josiah), further punishment and exile
- a new temple which the glory of God never filled
- four hundred years of silence
- and then – God comes down and rends the heavens: permanently!

Hebrews 11:39-40 – “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”

OUR RESPONSE

HEART ATTITUDE

I don’t want to try to explain away the mystery of why God sometimes says “no” to what seem like godly, fair and righteous prayers. Those mysteries belong to God, and only sometimes do we get to see the workings of His great mind.

But, I said that “unanswered” prayers were scarcer in the Bible, because it’s not to be our default expectation. How did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego pray regarding the death threats made to them? We don’t have the text of their prayers, but we hear it in their answer to King Nebuchadnezzar:

Daniel 3:16-18 – “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, ‘King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.’”

Their attitude is: “Our God can, and He will, but even if He doesn’t ...”

We need to grow in responding with trust, not disappointment, when answers are not quickly forthcoming.

- John 11:21-22 – Martha when Lazarus dies (“if you had been here ... but even now”) – what else could be done for Lazarus other than raising him? This is surely a (slightly tentative) cry of faith and trust in the face of disappointment.

WHERE ARE OUR EBENEZERS?

1 Sam 7:12 – “Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, ‘Thus far the Lord has helped us.’” (Ebenezer = *stone of help*)

Joshua 4 – Joshua sets up 12 stones at Gilgal as reminder of God parting the Jordan.

The “Wall of answered prayer” (thewall.org.uk)

SHARED ACTION

→ Raise an Ebenezer in your house!