

THE GOD WHO ANSWERS PRAYER

UNANSWERED PRAYER

Passage : 1 Kings 18:26-29

We are looking at the dramatic confrontation in 1 Kings 18 between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. There were many Baals, but only one LORD. Put at its shortest, our key verse (24) would read: 'You pray, and I will pray, and the God who answers prayer is God'. It is fundamental Bible teaching that the God the Bible wants to enter into relationship with His people and answer their prayers. They are to listen to what **He** has to say, and He promises to listen to what they say.

When we started this series I promised to look at the other side of the coin - the problem of unanswered prayer. That is what we are going to do today. We cannot fail to deal with this problem, for we are often reminded of it by our non-Christian friends. I don't know if it happens to you, but it happens many times to me that someone says they had some particular crisis and they prayed to God for help, and nothing whatever happened. So they say we mustn't ask them to believe in God, for they do not think there is anyone there at all

But it is not only unbelievers, who tell us they do not believe in a God who listens. Believers

Kings 18, which contains a classic statement of unanswered prayer. There is no better place to start than verses 26 and 29. In verse 26 the prophets of Baal take their bull, prepare it, and call on the name of Baal from morning 'til night. They have a prayer meeting from breakfast-time until lunch-time; there is no doubt about their earnestness; a great deal of time is given to it; they shout out to the heavens (verse 26b); but there is no response, no-one answers despite the fact that they dance around the altar. Every kind of sympathetic magic is used.

At noon Elijah begins to use the language of irony; he tells them to shout louder for maybe their god is suffering from hearing problems, or maybe he has gone to 'the privvy', or is having a nap, or has taken the answerphone off. This drives them to a fury; they shout louder, slash themselves with swords and spears, and continue their frantic prophesying until the time of the evening sacrifice. Then comes this superb statement, said three times, "**but there was no response, no-one answered, no-one paid any attention**" (verse 29)

Elijah's mockery has offended some scholars. In

"You call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God." (verse 18)

often make the point that prayers are not always answered. I think it was at the time when his wife died and he felt bereft by God and man that C.S. Lewis said he cried to God, but no answer came. He has written very honestly in one or two of his books about how he felt that 'the door of heaven was bolted'. In fact, it is because of his honesty that the producer who made the film on his life made out that Lewis lost his faith after his wife's death. But that is not right; he was a very honest man, and when he found no comfort from prayer in that particular crisis he said so. It would be a good thing if we all were more honest like that.

We will study this matter of unanswered prayer, both from the view of the unbeliever and of the believer; and we cannot do better than start at 1

the original language it is much more blunt than comes out in many of the English versions. I think Elijah is probably doing what many of the prophets do; they "answer a fool according to his folly". Many of the other great prophets use this weapon of irony when talking to idol worshippers about the folly of their prayers. To give you another example, (because this one of Elijah's is so familiar), let's look at Isaiah 44, starting at verse 12.

Isaiah uses the language of sarcasm to describe an idol worshipper who takes a bit of wood, uses some of it to make a fire on which to cook his midday meal, and then uses the rest to make an idol! I won't read it all, but will just pick out the salient points:

"The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers; he

forges it with the might of his arm; he gets hungry and loses his strength, he drinks no water and grows faint. The carpenter also measures with a line, makes an outline with a marker. He roughs it out with chisels and marks it out with compasses.”

Notice that they are making a representation of God, so what do they do? They shape it in the form of man in all his glory so that it may dwell in a shrine. The pagan can get no higher than the glory of man; he knows nothing of the glory of God. Verse 14 tells us what kind of trees he chooses (cedars, pines, or whatever it is), and how he uses it (verse 15). It is man's fuel for burning; "some of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire and warms himself. From the rest he makes an idol; he bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says "Save me, you are my god!".

“They know nothing! They understand nothing. ‘Their eyes are plastered over so that they cannot see, and their minds closed so that they cannot understand”.

Then comes the verdict on the idol-worshipper "No one stops to think!" No-one has the knowledge or the understanding to say 'Half of it I used for fuel - I even baked bread over its coals and roasted meat... Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?' He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart deceives him; he cannot save himself and say, 'Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?' That is a very powerful statement; the prophet says what the New Testament says - that all this idolatry is not the truth, it is a lie, and you can see it in your own right hand. It is a piece of wood that you have used to cook your meal with; you have used the other half to make an idol, then you bow down to it and ask it to save you! What blindness there is in that!

As Christians we can see the same blindness in our secular friends in the idols of today. What worries me about my unbelieving friends is not what they don't believe about Christianity (I am used to that!); it is what they do believe. That is what surprises me. With the idolater, the pagan and the unbeliever it isn't what they don't believe that worries us; it is what they do believe. That someone can actually believe that a bit of wood representing the glory of man can be an image of God seems incredible, doesn't it?

Here are those prayers in 1 Kings 18. They are sincere, impassioned, fervent, importunate and wholehearted; but there is no-one there to answer! So, no wonder they aren't answered. You would think that if someone prayed morning, noon and night to a no-god, and no-one listened or did anything about his prayers, that he would speedily stop praying! That is what happens in a Christian culture. As I mentioned earlier, my secular neighbour tells me that he prayed, nothing

happened, and therefore he has given up praying. But the moment we cross the barriers of a Christian culture into paganism - and after all, heathen religions are now invading our country - we find that these heathen religions pray to a no-god therefore cannot get an answer in any Christian sense; yet they are awash with prayer! You only have to walk down to Whitechapel Road to find yourself called to prayer five times a day. What is so extraordinary is that pagan religion does not give up praying even though they have no-one to pray to!

That sort of thing comes even within the parameters of Christendom. Does it not amaze you (it always amazes me!) that when we open the pages of one of the major newspapers of our country day after day we find someone giving thanks to St. Jude for answering their prayers. Nowhere in the Bible is there any suggestion that the saints or the Blessed Virgin Mary can hear our prayers; yet I am told regularly that people pray to these no-gods, and that their prayers are answered! What amazing things people believe! The truth is that all that kind of intercession is facing in the wrong direction; it faces in the direction the pagan has marked out, and talking to no-gods. Many claims are made that this kind of prayer is answered; but if it is it certainly must be regarded as unconvincing and un-Christian.

What is the miracle that happens when someone becomes a Christian? This is a very important question. What happens when the Spirit of God regenerates someone? What is the very first sign that we have been brought out of darkness into glorious light? What is the very first evidence of spiritual life? What is the very first thing I do as a real, living Christian? In other words, what is the Pentecostal gift? It is a new language. The very first thing the Holy Spirit does in the heart and mind of the believer is to make him or her turn to the right direction and address the true God. So, in Romans 8:15 Paul says, "**You did not receive the spirit that makes you a slave again to fear**" [for all heathen religions are religions of fear]; **you received the spirit of sonship; and by Him** [that is, by the spirit of sonship] **we cry ‘Abba, Father’**". We use the ordinary language of children to their parents; we cry out to a God we have now discovered through the work of the Spirit. Now we do not use formal language, we use informal language and we know we are getting through; now we know we have got past the ceiling; we are in the Family and we are talking genuinely in a personal way to God as "Father". That is the very first thing that happens when we are regenerate; we begin to pray and address God as Father. In Galatians 4:6 Paul says, "**Because we are sons God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out ‘Abba, Father’**". Isn't that lovely? The Spirit calls out through us.

I must add a negative which never ceases to surprise and excite me. At the very moment God invades the life of a secular man by His Spirit,

(I don't think you women are guilty of this) He gives him a mouth wash. You must have noticed it. That language of swearing - using God's name in vain, exclaiming 'God!', or 'Jesus!' or 'Christ!' when anything goes wrong - that language which is as natural as breathing when I am a pagan is just washed out of my mouth instantaneously when I am converted. That is one of the great miracles of conversion. The Spirit takes that language, which is deeply offensive to God, out and He puts a new language in. I now use the name of God which He has given me, which is 'Father', and I start to pray to Him in genuine reality.

What that means, my friends, is that the joy of answered prayer is for the Christian Family, and it is outside the Family that unanswered prayer will be the rule. If you want God to answer prayer you **must** join the Family. Even 'the Family Prayer' is not for school assemblies, but for the Christian meeting; it can only be truly spoken to God by those who have been born again into the Kingdom of God, who are God's sons and daughters. So, no wonder the prayers of pagans in 1 Kings 18 were not heard.

But someone will ask, 'Are all the prayers of Christians answered?' Obviously the answer to that is 'No', and I am going to continue with that in the next sermon of this series, for I want to get back to 1 Kings 18 to see that even Elijah, that great man of prayer, did not have all his prayers answered. However, we will leave that for another day and turn to our New Testament reading, which has been a considerable shock to me this week - Matthew chapter 6.

The positive teaching on prayer in verses 9-13 is so well known that I don't need to say anything about it. The lessons to be learned there on prayer are numerous - not least, for example, that God's affairs, His kingdom, come first. So if we rush into His presence with all our concerns, then maybe we will not find all our prayers answered. But those are elementary lessons. What has struck me is the small print around the main positive teaching; verses 5-8, 14 and 15 are all negative teaching. So Jesus surrounds all He has to say positively to His disciples about prayer with these warnings and cautions. It is like the giving of the Ten Commandments. God brings the people of Israel out of Egypt into a new world where they are to follow Him; and, the moment they are brought into this new relationship with Him as redeemed people, they are given the Ten Commandments - 'Don't do this, don't do this, don't do this'. That means 'Now you are My people, don't slip back into the old ways'.

This is very interesting. It shows that God knows so well that we slip back easily into unbelief, even as Christians, that in this positive Sermon on the Mount teaching to disciples He has to say to us, 'Even though you now know how to pray to me as Father, and what to ask Me, even though you are My dear children, My disciples, **don't go back to paganism!**' Look, for example,

at verse 7, where Jesus says, "**When you pray**, [that is, 'When you, members of the Family, pray] **don't keep on babbling like pagans**". It is a very striking Greek word here; 'babbling' is almost unique in Christian literature, and nobody quite knows how to translate it. Many learned commentators think Jesus must have had 1 Kings 18 in mind when He said the words in verse 7.

Why do pagans go on babbling their set phrases, repeating set prayers over and over, shouting to God as if He cannot hear? First of all because they think the power lies in their hands, and if they can put enough pressure on these unknown gods they will have to give way! That is typical of human beings; we want our own way so we put the pressure on; and we try to put the same pressure on God.

Pagans try to put pressure on God, and we Christians can get like that. We are simply to bring our needs to God. The pagan is determined to have his way no matter what happens, he is 'god'! But Jesus says, "**Don't be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him**". The pagan thinks God doesn't know and does not care. Jesus says 'Don't be like the pagan' or we will find our prayers not being answered, and we won't be able to understand why.

Verse 5 is even more shocking, for whereas verse 7 refers clearly to heathenism - to pagans, in verse 5 Jesus talks about the respectable leader of the synagogue service - the Jew who is by no means a pagan or an idolater. He uses a pitiless picture of formality - a man who has never learned to pray genuinely to his Father, person to person, whose prayer is entirely nominal and formal, on the Sabbath. He loves to pray on street corners for he can then be seen from two roads. He also loves to pray in front of people in the synagogue where everybody can see him and say what a wonderful man of prayer he is. It was probably the most remarkable prayer ever heard in that synagogue, but it never reached heaven! So it is very striking that alongside the negative in verse 7 that refers to paganism there is the negative in verse 5 which refers to nominalism within the Church. It does need to be said in the formal older denominations that that kind of prayer and worship, which is mere formalism, gets nowhere!

Verses 14 and 15 are also an illustration of don'ts, although it does not say so formally. If God gives you something which only He can give, namely the forgiveness of your sins, and you are in a position to forgive someone for what they have done against you, but will not forgive them, you cannot expect God to answer your prayers. He will give you nothing more if you will not pass on what He has given you. If you will not treat people as He treats you, it is sheer humbug to expect Him to answer your prayers. If God pours out blessings on you, and you do not pour any out on others, if He graciously has dealings with you and you will not have dealings with others because they are somehow beneath

you, don't expect your prayers to be answered.

It really is devastating stuff! It goes right down to the ground rules of answered prayer. God delights to answer His children's prayers, but He makes it very plain that His children can slip back into ways that are purely formal, pagan, or that of hypocrisy. He says in that case we mustn't expect Him to answer our prayers. But suppose we do keep all the rules; we will see that even then God doesn't answer all our prayers; and next week we will see one of the reasons why.