

THE GOD WHO ANSWERS PRAYER

MORE ABOUT UNANSWERED PRAYER

Passage : 1 Kings 19:1-9a

The Christian belief that God answers prayer raises certain issues that we cannot duck. One of them is the issue of unanswered prayer, which we looked at last week¹. I find that it is a very big issue, so I will spend one more Tuesday on it with the aim that we will leave here today rejoicing because God does not answer some of our prayers. If your prayers and mine are as foolish as this one of Elijah's in verse 4 you will thank God that He often does not answer prayer! There must come a time in most people's lives when they feel they have had enough, even if it is not as dramatic as Elijah's experience. And there must have been many times in the life of every Christian when we have prayed to God in a way that is not worthy to be answered, and God's answer has been a very definite "No".

First, some definitions of unanswered prayer. Why were the prayers of the Baal prophets in chapter 18 unanswered? Because there were no gods there to answer them. There were no real Baals or idols, and that is the reason why their prayers were not answered. The petitions in the Lord's Prayer that we looked at in the last study, why are they sometimes not answered although they

from His people that God will NOT even listen to, because their hands are soiled with sin.

Unanswered prayer is a phrase we use for prayers which God has actually answered, but the answer is not the one we expected, or even the one we asked for. And often, as in this case, the answer is 'no'. Thank God for the answer here. I don't know what Elijah really thought. He asked in 19:4 to take his life and the answer was a definite 'No!' In fact God's purpose for Elijah was that he should get back on his feet, get back to work and be fully restored from what seems to have been a nervous breakdown.

If you glance at verses 6 onwards there is a really marvellous description of God graciously dealing with Elijah, not only on the spiritual level (when he got to Mt. Horeb and received those wonderful revelations and rebukes from God), but also the physical restoration when the angel touched him, gave him food to eat, water to drink, a long walk to take and rest on the journey. It is a really delightful picture of God dealing with the whole person, restoring Elijah and bringing him back to his balance, his senses and his courage.

"[Elijah] came to a broom tree, sat down under it, and prayed that he might die. 'I've had enough LORD', he said; 'take away my life; I am no better than my ancestors'". (verse 4b)

are prayed by true children of God and come to our Heavenly Father? Remember the small print around the Lord's Prayer, which says if I come as a hypocrite, a heathen or a humbug my prayers will not be answered, even though I am in God's Family.

There are other very remarkable verses in the Bible, one of which says God will not even listen to us let alone answer our prayer. In Isaiah 59 God tells Israel, and I think He must often say it to the sinful Church of our day: "**Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear, but your iniquities have separated you from your God, your sins have hidden His face from you so that [listen!] He will not hear**"! So, there are prayers coming

Many Bible students must have been struck by the change from chapter 18 to chapter 19. As I look at this picture it seems to me there are some very instructive lessons here, and I want to underline them for the benefit of all of us. In chapter 18 we see the God who answers prayer, and the great prophet Elijah winning mighty victories through prayer. He brought a little boy back to life in chapter 17 and defeated the prophets of Baal in chapter 18; so the whole theme is of a prayer-answering God, and a mighty man of prayer wielding his sword. But in chapter 19 Elijah is on the floor, almost out for the count, feeling it is time to give up. How can we explain the extraordinary change? Is it true that prayer doesn't work after all?

I want to give you two things to think about, which I think arise from this story, which were true then and are true now:

1. The Resilience of Evil

In verse 1 of chapter 19 Ahab returns to the palace and tells Jezebel everything Elijah has done. It must have been an extraordinary occasion. The old coward Ahab has given up already; Elijah has won and they will have to give up idolatry for they can't fight him. That is probably what Elijah hopes he will say. But what is the response of the very tough lady? She sends a message to Elijah: 'May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I don't make your life like that of the prophets you have killed!' There is no doubt who rules there! This illustrates the resilience of evil.

Let me give an illustration in regard to our world; we might pray for a world of peace. We are right to do this, but don't let us imagine that evil will lie down because we have prayed - even though we have a God who answers prayer, and prayer is a mighty weapon in the hands of God's people.

In Mark 13:8 Jesus makes a very clear statement as He looks into the future, over the horizon, beyond His death and resurrection, into the age in which we live. He says in Mark 13:7, "**When you hear of wars and rumours of wars don't be alarmed; such things must happen, but the end is not yet; nation will rise against nation and kingdoms against kingdoms!**" So we haven't seen the end of long rows of crosses in cemeteries, of wars, invasions, and an appalling list of casualties. Far from it! They will continue in your life-time, in your children's life-time and in your grand children's life-time.

Why then do we pray for peace? Partly because we are told to do so, and partly because we know that prayer does change our world. If you are an American you will know that the Founding Fathers were great men of prayer; and what a Christian civilization they built! What did our forefathers do for us in these British Isles? We are beneficiaries of many Christians who have gone before us, and many prayers that were prayed. It is worthwhile, with your children at home, to list all benefits we have because of the Christians who have gone before; like, for example, the rule of law, which they simply take for granted. Despite all that there will be no "Jerusalem built in our green and pleasant land", whatever you sang at assembly at school. God does answer prayer, but there is such evil in a fallen world, evil that is so resilient, that men take up arms again and again and again.

You may have seen the book by Bernard Levin - "A World Elsewhere". It is a beautiful title; he isn't talking about this world; he is talking about the myth of Utopianism. He is an extraordinary fellow! He constantly points out that he is not a Christian, and then he comes out with a profoundly Christian remark! Last week he said about the publication, "Have our Utopians never

heard of original sin?" It is a good question, isn't it! That's why Utopia is a myth. Levin says Utopia began in Eden but it ended in Eden also.

All our victories won in prayer for our world - and they are real victories - are temporary. Matthew 6 gives us a good example of the temporary nature of glorious victories. When we look at the marvellous Family Prayer that Jesus taught His children to pray [By the way, it is a Family prayer for Christians to pray - not a general prayer] we can see from the very way it is put that it is to be used **all the time!** There is never a time when we don't need this prayer. Look at verse 11: "**Give us today our daily bread**"; there is a victory today when God answers that prayer by keeping you in a job and your family supplied with bread, isn't there? Many of you have prayed that prayer and have supported others as God gives His answer for their needs. But does that mean you will not lose your job tomorrow? Of course it doesn't!

For example, a young man is called into the new boss' office and given the sack at 9 o'clock! He is a Christian, and for him it was not just a matter of daily bread, but a daily bed! He didn't even have a bed to sleep in last night. So the fact that God unquestionably provided his need in days past doesn't mean the battle is over and he doesn't have to come to God his Father continually for his needs. And we too!

Look at verse 12: we pray that and mean it; and God does "**forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others**"; but does that mean we will never come to Him another day to ask for forgiveness? Of course not! What about verse 13? That is a glorious prayer. If I asked a group of Christians to stand up and tell how often God has delivered them from some of the attacks of the Evil One, all the people would stand! Does that mean we retire and never use that prayer again?

The devil never gives up his battle, so we never put down the sword of prayer. The temptation was for Elijah to retire after chapter 18 - to feel the time for his pension had come. 850 false prophets destroyed! Elijah was triumphant; the king was going back to the palace to tell everybody that the LORD is God! But it did not work like that. Evil is very resilient! Even within a few moments Ahab's wife had taken up the cudgels for evil again. The resilience of evil is a fact in our world. We pray to gain the victory over it, and God answers our prayers; but it comes back tomorrow!

2. The Limitations of our Understanding

Take one very obvious point: we cannot see the future; we cannot even see into the present and understand it. I like the rebuke in 1 Kings 19:18. Elijah did not even know the present situation. He kept telling God that he alone remained. [By the way, that is a disease many little Christian groups have; they think they are the only people in the world who remain faithful to God. It is a strange

occupational disease of faithful Christians.] But God told Elijah, "I have reserved 7,000 in Israel, all those whose knees have not bowed down to Baal, and all whose mouths have not kissed him". '7,000 Lord? I thought I was the only one!' He didn't even understand the present, leave alone the future! Suppose God had given him a little video of the future, and as he sat depressed under the broom tree he could have seen a visible account of his own departure to heaven. Suppose he could have seen the chariots and horsemen carrying him up to heaven and heard Elisha say that he had been the defence of Israel all his life, and they didn't know what they would do without him. Don't you think he might have been cheered up a bit? Suppose he could have seen the Transfiguration - he representing the Prophets and Moses representing the Law as they talked to Jesus about the victory of the Cross and the Resurrection. Do you think that might have lifted up his heart a bit? Suppose he could have seen James in his study writing a letter and saying, 'By the way, if you want to know about prayer, and the power of prayer, read the story of Elijah'. Suppose he could have seen the day when Jehu came into the Palace courtyard and the two servants tossed that woman Jezebel out of the window; and the moment she hit the ground the dogs ate her up!

If Elijah could have seen the future it might just have occurred to him that all the bluff in chapter 19 verse 2 was just a pinprick of annoyance which added up to nothing! Jezebel had no future; her threat was an empty one. We cannot fight God! But Elijah did not see the future; so, seeing only the present, and not knowing that God was bound to win the victory - as you would have thought he would know by now - he got it all wrong in the present, and was utterly in despair about the power of prayer and the God who answers prayer.

There was a German survey done which was a good illustration of how the future changes our minds. An influential German newspaper published a survey which shocked many German politicians. The Mayor of Stuttgart summarized the findings of the survey rather tellingly. He said it was necessary to conclude that, inspite of the German war sacrifices, it was better to lose the War than to win it with Hitler! He said the D-Day landing should therefore be seen as the beginning of liberation from the terror of national socialism. There is the son of one of the great German Generals saying that D-Day began the liberation not only of Europe, but of Germany! 64% of Germans agree with him, and 67% say they would not have wanted to live in a Germany where Hitler had won the war. See how the future has changed their minds! Those thousands of Germans were praying for victory during the War. On a recent television programme there was a British soldier who captured some German soldiers and took their guns and belts off them. Written under their belts was the phrase 'God is with us'! No doubt there were also English-German Christians also praying that God would give them

victory; but I wonder if you could find a single Christian man or woman in Germany today who is not glad that God did not answer those prayers.

We can be very deceived about the present because we do not know the future. Jezebel was absolutely sure in verse 2 that the gods were with her, but God was not! Elijah was absolutely sure that God had given him up and let His people down, but God was with him, and the answers to all his prayers were assured, except the answer to this very foolish prayer. So today we are celebrating unanswered prayer when we do not really know what we are talking about. That is the trouble. Most of the time because of the limitations of our understanding, we do not know what we are talking about. That is why we pray! We are putting every day, every problem and every situation into the hands of the only One who does know what is going on.

(Footnotes)

¹ Please see sermon on 1 Kings 18:26-29, 'The God Who Answers Prayer – Unanswered Prayer'.

