

THE SOCIETY OF UNANSWERED

PRAY-ERS¹

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Have you been praying for a certain blessing, and the answer seems never to have come? You have been persistent in prayer, as Jesus tells us to do (we “ought always to pray, and not to faint,” Luke 18:1), and still the answer has not come.

You have asked Him to show you what might be wrong, what might be hindering your prayers (Peter says that if a man doesn’t treat his wife right his prayers will be “hindered,” 1 Pet. 3:7), and God has not told you of anything wrong that might be “hindering” the answer. The Holy Spirit does not convict you of failure to do any known duty, even though you kneel before God and beg Him to notice you and to instruct you. Still you ask Him for that special blessing and it doesn’t come.

Welcome to Job’s “Club,” the Society of Unanswered Pray-ers. You are not alone. The Prime Member is Jesus Himself. He prayed “with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that He feared,” but still He had to go to the cross and die (cf. Heb. 5:7).

The next verse reminds us that “Though He were a Son,” yet He had to learn the lessons of life as we do “by the things which He suffered.” But for sure He does not want you to duplicate the agony He

suffered on the cross, nor even the agony which Job suffered. There is an answer to your perplexity and disappointment.

What do you do when prayer after prayer seems to go unanswered? Sometimes it seems that the more you pray, the more elusive is the answer you seek. God has foreseen that problem and directs us to His Word, the Bible, to find understanding. That is how the Father spoke to His Son at His baptism in the Jordan River—by quoting two Old Testament texts together, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17; Ps. 2:7; Isa. 42:1). A wise writer has said the words that the Father quoted to Jesus that day are spoken to us as well.²

Thus, your first step is to believe that you are His “beloved” child in whom He is “well pleased.” When you pray, you *must* believe that. “Without faith [it is] impossible to please [him]: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and [that] he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Heb. 11:6; James 1:5, 6). Many unanswered prayers are “prayed” in dark unbelief. It’s not that the Father is mad at you, no; the problem is that your dark unbelief breaks the connection. You pray “in Jesus’ name,” don’t you? Well, that means that you identify with Him in your praying. You *must*, no matter how it stretches your faith to believe it, and to say it.

Second, you grasp the truth that Jesus went through the exact experience you have had of seemingly unanswered prayers. It was on His cross—when He cried out, “Why have You forsaken

¹ Heb. 5:7-9. 71, 114.

² *The Desire of Ages*, p. 113.

Me?” He said, “The servant is not greater than his lord” (John 13:16). Don’t resent tasting of His experience!

Third, you learn as Jesus did, to believe God in total darkness. You may ask, “Why must I learn *that* lesson?” The answer: God is preparing you to endure throughout the “time of Jacob’s trouble,” when the only “light” will be that generated by your own personal faith in God’s word, as it was with Christ on His cross. You could never endure through that without this special pre-trial training.

Fourth, as you pray for more and more blessings yet to come, you never forget the ones you have already received. The greatest is that He has already saved you from the eternal grave that the second death means. That is an essential part of genuine faith—that constant realization that you are as one “alive from the dead” (Rom. 6:13).

The general idea the human race has about God is that He is far away. Jesus seems elusive, and “believers” often feel alone. Prayer appears to be unanswered, and they wonder, Does the One who says He is our Savior really care?

Psalms 37:4, 5, says: “Delight thyself also in the LORD; and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass.” And yet, year after year, maybe even decade after decade, and you have not yet realized “the desires of thine heart.” If that has been your experience, you are not alone (if that can be any comfort to you!). You have a serious problem—to decide what is your evaluation of the character of your heavenly Father.

The way we humans naturally think, the text is written backwards. It should say, “Let the Lord give thee the desires of thine heart, and *then* I shall delight myself in Him!” But the “delighting” comes first, otherwise there could be no such thing as faith. No matter how long you have waited for “the desires of thine heart,” you can choose to believe that your heavenly Father is true to His word even if you don’t see any prayers answered. This is an extremely critical point in our life: it’s where we choose to believe or disbelieve. God “calleth those things which be not as though they were” (Rom. 4:17), and we are privileged to share His faith—to believe in something we cannot yet see.

Your heavenly Father is not being mean to you; He needs you to honor Him before the world and before the universe as one who believes Him in the dark. That was the experience your Savior had on His cross: He *felt* that God had forsaken Him, yet He chose to believe in the face of total despair. That was the definition of His faith. And we have the Good News that He will have a people on earth who also have chosen to believe Him even in total darkness, when everything seems to be against them. They have asked their Father for a piece of bread; Satan wants them to think He put a stone on their plate. You have the choice to be loyal to your heavenly Father. And then leave that “desire of thine heart” in His care and thank Him in advance that at the right time you will enjoy it.

There was a man and his wife who had this problem in a big way. They had worship in their home daily for months and years, yes, decades. But

the critically important answer they had prayed for a thousand times seemed more impossible every day that passed.

Finally wife gave up. “The Lord has it in for me,” she told husband; “I’m the problem. God will never answer our prayers as long as I pray. I’m too sinful for any prayer to be answered! It’s hopeless. Count me out. This marriage just won’t work.”

The husband decided to do just that—ignore her, press on without her. No longer did two kneeling join their hearts in earnest, soul-stretching, believing prayer together. They had always loved each other but now became so alienated that they together dis-believed that God had made them “one.” The farness-away-from-God idea had destroyed their happiness, both of them.

It meant God had a problem on His hands because He had chosen this particular husband to be “the father of all who believe” in Him throughout all time; and here they were, two stumbling along in depressed unbelief. Wife was just as important a link in God’s plan as he was. Husband could never overcome unbelief until wife did also. (Her name, incidentally—Sarah).

God called Abraham to be our example in faith—he was to be “the father of the faithful.” And his wife was to share that honor of prestige in faith. Their marriage was to result in seven grand blessings for the world, most of all, that “in thee shall all families [homes, marriages] of the earth be blessed [made happy]” (Gen. 12:2, 3). But their own happiness turned out to be a long time coming. So long, in fact, that both husband and wife thought the only

way they’d find it was to break their marriage vows—that is, to let a third party in on their marriage.

In that marriage of Abraham and Sarah you have all the elements that make for alienation and divorce as we know it today: disappointment with the marriage and with each other; a wife who is bitter and alienated and angry with God (read Gen. 16:2); a husband who is all too ready to grab the excuse to find some happiness in the “other woman” (read vs. 4, how he “went in” to Hagar, the comely younger woman).

But the happiness and personal fulfillment still didn’t come. In fact, read the story and you’ll find they waited 25 years before they could realize the married happiness they had been wanting and felt that God had promised them. Then the blessing finally came with the birth of Isaac, just in time to save them from the bitterness that old-age marriage failure always brings:

Abraham humbly repented of his sin—which was more than mere lust; his sin was the darker one of unbelief (faith makes it impossible to yield to the temptations of lust); Sarah repented of her anger against God because Heb 11:11 says that “through faith Sarah received strength [finally!] to conceive.” The punch line of truth in this memorable marriage is: *Believe* the promise that God gave you of happiness in your marriage, and that believing will give you endurance and a rich reward that indulgence with a third party could never bring you.

If you are a true child of Abraham, make up your mind: you will be just as tempted to unbelief as he

was; but by the grace of Christ you can overcome as he (and Sarah!) did.

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isa. 55:9).

Our plans are not always God's plans. . . . In His loving care and interest for us, often He who understands us better than we understand ourselves refuses to permit us selfishly to seek the gratification of our own ambition. . . . Often our plans fail that God's plans for us may succeed. . . ."³

In the future life the mysteries that here have annoyed and disappointed us will be made plain. We shall see that our seemingly unanswered prayers and disappointed hopes have been among our greatest blessings.

"We are not now sufficiently advanced in spiritual attainments to comprehend the mysteries of God. But when we shall compose the family of heaven, these mysteries will be unfolded before us. . . ."⁴

Then much will be revealed in explanation of matters upon which God now keeps silence because we have not gathered up and appreciated that which has been made known of the eternal mysteries. The ways of Providence will be made clear; the mysteries of grace through Christ will be unfolded. That which the mind cannot now grasp, which is hard to be understood, will be explained. We shall see order in that which has seemed unexplainable; wisdom in everything withheld; goodness and gracious mercy in everything

³ Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 474.

⁴ *That I May Know Him*, p. 359.

imparted. Truth will be unfolded to the mind, free from obscurity, in a single line, and its brightness will be enduring. The heart will be made to sing for joy. Controversies will be forever ended, and all difficulties will be solved.

All that has perplexed us in the providences of God will in the world to come be made plain. The things hard to be understood will then find explanation. The mysteries of grace will unfold before us. Where our finite minds discovered only confusion and broken promises, we shall see the most perfect and beautiful harmony. We shall know that infinite love ordered the experiences that seemed most trying. As we realize the tender care of Him who makes all things work together for our good, we shall rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.⁵

Jesus says things that are so backwards from conventional wisdom! In Mt. 5:6 He says that the really happy people are those who are always starving hungry and famished for a drink of water, whereas "we" in this world are always ducking in to fast food, or better still, to a gourmet restaurant. And if we're home, then the fridge door is always being opened. It's good to be *hungry*!

Is Jesus kidding? No, He makes sense. In a purely physical sense what He says is true, for a large proportion of Americans are too fat and it would do them good health-wise to be fairly hungry all the time. But of course His primary meaning has to do

⁵ *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 9, p. 286.

with a soul hunger “for righteousness” (which can take care of the physical problem also).

If you drag yourself to Sabbath school and church, sit through a boring class and endure a meaningless sermon and can’t wait until sundown so you can go shopping at the mall or watch the latest sports news, Jesus says you simply are not a “happy” person (the word “blessed” means “happy”). You are alienated from where life and happiness exist.

If you can keep on living Sabbath after Sabbath for months and years and feel no inner urge to *learn* what Daniel and Revelation mean, or what is justification by faith, or what really did happen on Christ’s cross, or what He’s doing in cleansing His sanctuary, you may *feel* ever so “rich and increased with goods, in need of nothing” when in reality you are the most “wretched” and “naked” of all God’s people in the last two millennia, your new Lincoln Navigator and plush house notwithstanding (see Rev. 3:14-21). You may think many of your prayers go unanswered (and maybe they do if you ask for the wrong things), but here’s one that God will delight in answering: ask Him to teach you how to feel the sharp pangs of being “hungry and thirsty for righteousness” (there’s only one kind—by faith). Beg Him to give you a famished feeling deep inside that will drive you to learn truth that’s really important and soul-satisfying—a never-ending “hunger and thirst.” Yes, and you’ll then be truly “blessed” or “happy.” It’ll be better than winning the Lottery.

Then there is Jesus. If your soul is tempted and you feel driven to discouragement, “consider Him who endured such contradiction of sinners against Himself, lest you be wearied and faint in your mind” (see Heb. 12:3). And don’t forget, do as He did: pray for your tormentors!

You are not worthy, you have no merit of your own. You cannot save yourself, but you can thank Him for saving you. That’s happiness!

Something happens deep inside your soul when you come to Him in that prayer of thanksgiving:

You feel deeply humbled (but not humiliated; there’s a great difference). You sense that He honors you in His recognition of you as a child of His Father. You are a member of “the family of heaven” (Eph. 3:15), closer to Him who is on the throne than any angel in heaven can be.

You are already “adopted” (Eph. 1:4, 5). An adopted child in a family is a member of the family, not on probation; he is secure in his new relationship although he may not realize it. He may be a naughty adopted child (such kids are often naughty simply because they are not sure that their adoption is genuine—they try to test its reality). They need to learn the truth of their adoption into the earthly family through the avenue of understanding their adoption (and ours!) into the heavenly “family.” Oh how precious is the truth that earthly family happiness depends on first appreciating our adoption into “the whole family in heaven and earth” (Eph. 3:15).

The blessed New Covenant gospel implants that solid confidence into the hearts of family members

and children. Let's not confuse our situation with any Old Covenant teaching in our family. Let's not employ fear as our method of imposing control; some heart-broken, tearful prayer of humility will do father and mother (and adoptive parent) worlds of good. The Lord does love you and your children, natural and adopted; He is working. Let Him work!

Does the Lord need humans to do things that He wants done "in earth as it is in heaven"? When we pray the Lord's prayer, we are confessing that His will should be done in earth as it is in heaven"; but who is to accomplish that?

Angels are His "ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation . . ." (Heb. 1:14). But their ministry is not to do things that those "heirs of salvation" should do themselves. The Father's will can never "be done in earth as it is in heaven" until His own people get busy and do it. A prayer that will always be answered is this, "Father in heaven, what do You want me to do?" It may be a phone call that you have shied away from; to make the call will require laying self aside!

It may be a letter that you have been impressed that it is your duty to write; that too will require a denial of self. It may be a personal visit likewise that you need to make.

Welcome to the joyous thrill that is yours when you know you have done what the heavenly Father wants you to do. That means you have become a fellow-laborer with Him!

Can you think of a higher honor you could have but that—as the holy angels all step aside in deep

respect to you as you *do* what the Father has appointed you to do?

A little boy didn't know how to swim. But *he* wanted to paddle around in the lake. His brother was six years older, and he knew how, and he wanted to try to teach his younger brother.

They didn't know it, but the city had done some dredging in that lake. You couldn't see the deep dredge holes, of course. Suddenly he fell into one of them. It seemed like stepping off a cliff. He just went right down like a stone. Everything got dark.

He was so glad that his big brother saw him disappear beneath the water, and he rescued him. Because he did that for him, he became his "savior" from drowning. So really he owed his life to his brother!

Now, what has Jesus done for you?

The Bible tells us that He is "the Savior of the world." It sounds nice to say that, but what does it mean?

We are all a part of the world, so what the Bible really says is that He has saved *us*. But what has He saved us from? What can you thank Jesus for?

No person in the world today has actually seen Jesus, but He is a real man, and He is also God. But for sure He is one of us and He belongs to us. The reason why we can't see Him like we see any other person is that He is much greater than any other person. Billions of people would want to see Him (and they will see Him some day soon), but it wouldn't be fair for Him to show Himself only to you or me. So everybody looks forward to seeing Him *in person* when He comes the second time. But when

we do see Him we will thank Him, because He has *already* saved us from death.

But that's not the ordinary kind of death that He has saved us from. It's not the death that has happened when there's a funeral.

Jesus tells us that a funeral isn't about the real thing. When a person dies now, he simply goes to sleep until God's resurrection day, when he will come up again. Jesus said that God "so loved *the world* that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not *perish*, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16, KJV). The death that people die now is not what that word "perish" means. When people die now it's just like when at night you say, "Good night, see you in the morning."

There is another kind of death—that's what the Bible says is "the second death" (Revelation 2:11; 20:14). And that is what it means to "perish." At the end of the great "thousand years" that are yet to come, the wicked people will be judged, and they will "perish" in the lake of fire. No resurrection from that—ever. They will just be gone forever. That's what "hell" will be.

It's not because God will be extra angry with them; He does not hate them. He still pities them. But they themselves have made their choice to "perish." God won't force them to change their minds. They don't want to live forever in God's kingdom. They actually want to be separate from Him and separate from His kingdom. And so, God must give them what they really want. It sounds crazy, and it is, but Jesus says that "anyone who hates Me loves death" (Prov. 8:36). Can you imagine that?

That is what Jesus has actually saved you and me from. Take a deep breath; that is proof that Jesus has saved you from that second death because if He had not saved us from it, we would all be dead right now in it. So don't ever think that Jesus has done nothing for you!

All this means that God intends that the life you and I have today shall be the beginning of everlasting life. And it will be so, if we "walk with Jesus." He is not "I-want-to-be-your-Savior." He *is* your Savior! Now don't push Him away.

When we think of what Jesus has saved us *from*, we want to say the biggest "Thank You" we can think of, because He could never have saved us this way unless He had already died our second death for us. And that's just what He did when He died on His cross. The death He died was hell itself, *the real thing*.

Many people don't see this, and that's why they don't give themselves to Jesus to live for Him. But now you *do* see it, don't you?

Someone thanked his brother for saving him from going to "sleep" when he was a child, in the first death. But now I thank Jesus because He saved me from the second death, and I tell Him that I am glad to obey Him and give Him my whole life.

Won't you choose to do the same?