

How do you persevere when prayers go unanswered? * Genesis 37-50
July 25, 2022 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

The question that we're going to look at this morning is a very important one:

How do you persevere when prayers go unanswered? How do you keep on praying when God seems silent?

That's a great question and one that I'm sure we've all wrestled with. The Bible tells us that God answers prayer and we know from experience that God answers prayer, but sometimes God doesn't answer prayer as quickly as we'd like. What do we do then?

Now admittedly, that question begs another question – namely – why do some prayers go unanswered? – and if you're interested in that question, I'd encourage you to take a look at the handout that I included in Friday's email. Peter Greig wrote this book called "God on Mute" and in it he lays out sixteen (I think quite reasonable) reasons why might God not be answering your prayer and you can take a look at it those at home and benefit from it that way.

The person who has asked this question though has taken the next step and said – 'Ok, for whatever reason, God hasn't answered my prayer YET; but I trust He will and I don't want to get discouraged and give up, so how do I keep at it and keep on persevering in prayer?'

To answer that question, I'd like to take you to Joseph's story at the end of Genesis – Genesis 37-50. The Bible doesn't say anything about what he prayed, but just imagine what his prayer life must have been like – 'Lord, deliver me from this pit' – and he gets sold to slave traders. 'Lord, set me free' – and he gets sold to an official in Egypt. 'Lord, let me go home' – and he ends up in jail. Joseph I'm sure knew what it was like to have prayers go unanswered and yet by the end of his story, He experienced God's answers to prayer in a really marvellous way. So let's look together at Joseph's story and see what we can learn about how to keep on praying. I'm going to give you three strategies to help you to persevere, three things to remember to keep you praying even when God seems silent.

So... Genesis 37 - Joseph. How many of you have seen 'Joseph and the amazing technicolour dreamcoat'? It's that guy.

Joseph was his father's favourite son and his father, being a bit of a blockhead, decided to honour his son with a really fancy coat – the coat of many colours in the musical – it may have been just a fancy long-sleeved coat – the Hebrew's a little unclear – but whatever the case, it was meant to honour Joseph above the others.

Now, as the song says 'Joseph's charm and winning smile failed to slay them in the aisles' and to be honest Joseph was a bit of a brat. He rubbed his status in their faces and then to make matters worse, he had this dream that he was going to be better than his brothers and then another dream that he'd be better than his whole family, parents included – and then he wouldn't shut up about it! "There are some things that you keep to yourself Joseph!"

That being said, it's still no excuse for what his brothers did; he came out to the field to check up on them and they grabbed him and tore off his robe and threw him in a pit with the intention of killing him. Then, when Midianite merchants came along, they came to their senses and said 'what are we doing, we

can't KILL our brother! Let's just sell him instead.' And so they sold off their brother to a bunch of strangers and off he went.

Imagine what Joseph was feeling at that point. Imagine how Joseph was praying at this point! 'Lord, deliver me from evil. Set me free! Let me go home!'

And yet, it seemed, that God was silent.

Chapter 39, Joseph was taken down and sold into the service of the captain of the guard – Potiphar. Things went pretty well for Joseph there until one day, Potiphar's wife decided Joseph was a prize she'd like to win and so she made every attempt to get him to lay with her.

Joseph though resisted her every advance and you can see in verse 9 there (39:9), Joseph says to her - 9 No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Gen 39:9 NIV).

Now aside from the fact that Joseph seems to be a pretty morally upright guy, why would Joseph resist her advances like this? I mean, some people will wait for God for a couple of days to answer their prayers and then say 'well, if God's not gonna answer my prayers, then I'm gonna do my own thing.' They feel entitled to an immediate response from God and if He doesn't answer to their beck and call they feel no further loyalty to Him. Joseph could very well have said 'well, if God's not gonna set me free, then I'm at least going to enjoy the parts of this disaster than I can and hook up with Mrs. Potiphar.' But he doesn't. Why?

I think it's because he remembers God's past faithfulness: the way He preserved him from death at the hands of his brothers; the way He made him master of the house and not a ship's galley slave, the love of his father. Joseph remember those things and says 'how could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?' His experience of God's PAST faithfulness is greater than the temptation of this PRESENT SITUATION and so he chooses to remain faithful to God.

And that's one way to persist in prayer when prayers seem to go unanswered – by remembering God's past faithfulness.

When we don't get immediate answers to our prayers, it's all too easy to think that God has forgotten about us. We have very short memories when it comes to God's grace. But if we look back and count our blessings one by one, we realize that God has been faithful before and that gives us hope that He will be faithful again.

I love the lament psalms for this – we've talked about lament psalms before - they have this pretty predictable structure and one of the things that you often find, when the psalmist is pouring out their hearts in a time of need, is a recollection of all the ways that God has helped them in the past.

Psalms 13 for example, the psalmist is pouring out his heart to God, saying God I need you to rescue me before I die! You can picture Joseph praying this psalm – 'How long oh Lord, will You forget me forever, how long will you hide your face from me' - It's all very doom and gloom until the end of the psalm – in the face of all of that, the psalmist says 'But, I will trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for He has been good to me.'

In the face of difficult times, in the face of unanswered prayers, the psalmist remembers God's past faithfulness to give him hope in the present situation.

And I think that that's one way for us to persevere in prayer too. We remind ourselves – God has helped us before; He will help us again. He may not be answering with the immediacy that we want but if we look back we see a trail of God's faithful help, time and again, and that gives us hope to keep on praying until the answer comes. So strategy number one to persevere in prayer – remember God's past faithfulness.

Strategy number two – go back to Genesis 39 again – I skipped over a part to get to Joseph and Mrs. Potiphar. Genesis 39:1 say:

1 Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there.

2 The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master.

3 When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did,

4 Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned.

5 From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field.

Even when Joseph was sold into slavery, God was there with him.

Now jump down again to verse 20 – because of Mrs Potiphar's false accusations, Joseph gets thrown in jail and yet look what it says –

20 Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. But while Joseph was there in the prison,

21 the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden.

22 So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there.

23 The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did (Gen 39:20-23 NIV).

Strategy number 2 to keep on praying in the face of unanswered prayer – remember God's invisible presence.

When it seems to us as though God is not answering our prayers, it is all too easy for us to think that God has for some reason abandoned us; He's left us alone and we're on our own to fend for ourselves.

These passages in Joseph's story show us that that's just not true. God may not have answered Joseph's prayer to take him home or deliver him from jail, but God was with Him every step of the way. He stumbled along beside him on the trip to Egypt; He lay beside him those lonely nights in a foreign land; He stood beside him as he stood his ground against Mrs. P. And I would even take it a step further to say that God was at work every step of the way. Did you notice in chapter 39 how often it said 'God

gave him favour in the eyes of Potiphar, of the jailer, soon in the eyes of the Pharaoh, God blessed all that he did.' Not only was God present with Joseph, God was working behind the scenes to make Joseph prosper, even in the midst of these difficult circumstances.

When we go for stretches without answers to our prayers, we need to resist the temptation to believe that God's left us on our own and remember God's invisible presence with us. Even though we don't sense Him doesn't mean He's not there. Nicky Gumbel writes:

"This is a sign of Christian maturity... when we continue to believe in God's love even when we don't see it or feel it. As we believe in the sun even when it is not shining, we continue to believe in God's love even in times of darkness when we don't feel his love."ⁱ

In the chemo ward, in the unemployment line, in the darkest and loneliest places, God is there and God is at work. Remind yourself of that to keep on praying, even when it seems like nothing's happening. Remember God's invisible presence.

First – remember God's past faithfulness. Second – remember God's invisible presence and finally, the third strategy: Long story short, God takes Joseph out of jail and puts him in front of Pharaoh who has himself had dreams. God shows Joseph through these dreams that there's a massive famine on the way and Pharaoh makes Joseph second-in-command and puts him in charge of a national food reserve to get them through the seven years of famine that are coming.

As it happens, this famine is so severe that it has reached back to Israel and Joseph's family who end up in Egypt looking for food. Joseph recognizes them but doesn't reveal his identity until he finally gets the whole people of Israel there into Egypt to survive the famine that would have killed them back home.

When their father died, Joseph's brothers began to fear that Joseph would pay them back for what they did to him and yet how does Joseph respond? Genesis 50:20 - 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. (Gen 50:20 NIV).

The brothers are looking at things from the human perspective; Joseph is looking at things from God's perspective and realizing that God's purpose in the end was good.

That's strategy number three – remember God's benevolent purpose.

I'm sure that at many times in his Egyptian life, Joseph would have said – 'God, why are you making me suffer through this? Why can't I just go home?' And yet if God had answered that prayer, Joseph would not have been in Egypt, the famine would have wiped out him and his family and the Saviour Jesus would never come through the line of Judah. Whether or not he realized it before, in the end, Joseph understood that God's purpose was ultimately for good.

It's just like Pastor George's favourite verse – Jeremiah 29:11 - 11 For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jer 29:11 NIV).

God's plans are never to hurt us or to harm us; God's plans are always for good. If God doesn't answer our prayer, it's not because He's trying to withhold something from us or do something bad to us, it's because He has something better in store for us than what it is that we are praying for. God always

answers the prayers that we would pray if we knew everything He knew and He is always working for good.

If we remember God's benevolent purposes, that will keep us from doubting Him when He doesn't answer prayer as quickly as we'd like. We can rest in the knowledge that the answer is coming and that that answer will be the best thing for us from God's sovereign, wise, benevolent point of view.

Strategy number three for persevering in prayer – remember God's benevolent purposes.

So – 1 – remember God's past faithfulness. 2. Remember His invisible presence and 3. Remember God's benevolent purposes.

Let's take a minute and work this into our hearts.

Getting ready for this morning, I thought about each of you and the unanswered prayers that you might be praying. Some of you are praying for healing, for family or friends, for temporary illnesses or long-term ones. Some of you are praying for salvation for a family member or friend or a spouse. Some of you are praying for work or wisdom in retirement. Some of you are praying for a family member who is mixed up in less than ideal stuff. Some of you are praying for healing in a broken relationship or uncomfortable situation. And it may be that you need to KEEP praying over those things.

How do you keep praying when the answer's not coming?

1. Remember God's past faithfulness. Look back at the span of your life. Has God ever failed to help you? It may be that in the moment we don't get the answers we want, but on God's timeline He always answers prayer.

I remember when we left our last church, that last day, in the midst of all the hugs and tears and frustrations, I said to one of the elders, 'In six months, a year from now, I'll be able to look back at this and realize that God knows what He's doing.' I've been here seven years now; God knew what He was doing. He's helped us in the past; I know He'll help us now. Remember God's past faithfulness and keep on praying.

2. Remember God's invisible presence. As you wait for God's answer, it may feel as though you are alone. Like the heavens are closed up and God wants nothing to do with you. That's just not true. God has this habit of working behind the scenes when we don't even see it, preparing things to give us the answer He knows that we need in the time that He knows that we need it. Remember that God is with you and He will never fail you or forsake you; so remember His invisible presence and keep on praying.

And 3. Remember God's benevolent purpose. As we wait for God to respond to our prayers, it can be easy to get discouraged or frustrated or disappointed. It can be easy for us to think that God is withholding something good from us. But again, that's not true. God is working for good, no matter what the circumstance. It's Romans 8:28 – in all things, God works for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

As you pray and wait for His answer, fix in your heart this truth – that God is working for good. That God is ultimately working for your wellbeing, to prosper you, to give you the answer to the prayer you would

pray if you knew everything that He does. God will not arbitrarily harm you; His plans are always for good. So remember His benevolent purposes and keep on praying.

If you are waiting on God's answers and feeling your energy falter, prime your faith pump. Remember God's past faithfulness; remember God's invisible presence; remember God's benevolent purpose. That'll get your prayers flowing as you wait for God's good answers.

Now I don't usually do this because I think that the Bible is all that we need but I want to give the closing word to another authority – a great wise man – a sage of our age – Garth Brooks. (Believe me, I'm just as shocked as you are that I'm quoting Garth Brooks). But I think he's got this right.

Getting ready for today I found this song he sings called 'Unanswered prayers.' In it, he tells a story about going to a football game with his wife and running into a high school sweetheart that he prayed over and over again that God would give him as his wife. God did not answer that prayer and in the song, Brooks reflects on the fact that he's happy that God didn't. In His wisdom, God worked things differently and Brooks wouldn't want it any other way.

In the chorus he sings –

Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers
Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs
That just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean he don't care
Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers

God knows what He's doing. Garth Brooks knows it. Joseph knows it.

Remember God's past faithfulness, His invisible presence and His benevolent purpose and keep on praying.ⁱⁱ

2 CORINTHIANS

*9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.
10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.
(2Co 12:9-10 NIV).*

BENEDICTION

ⁱ Nicky Gumbel, quoted in Greig, Pete. *God on Mute* (p. 169, ft. 4).

ⁱⁱ Many people went to visit Margaret, and when they did, they would often express great sadness for her predicament. "You've had such a very tough life," they would say, "and now this . . ." as if "this" (by which they

meant cancer of the throat) was the worst thing imaginable. Margaret soon got so used to this well-meaning assessment of her situation that she wrote her standard response on a piece of scrap paper. I think it's probably one of the most courageous declarations of faith in Jesus that I have ever seen: "This is not the worst thing to ever happen! Cancer is so limited. It cannot cripple love, shatter hope, corrode faith, eat away peace, destroy confidence, kill friendship, shut out memories, silence courage, quench the Spirit, or lessen the power of Jesus."

Greig, Pete. *God on Mute* (p. 106). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

"I must ask, very gently," writes Francis Schaeffer, "how much thought does [our identification with Christ] provoke? Is it not true that our prayers for ourselves are almost entirely aimed at getting rid of the negative at any cost rather than praying that the negatives be faced in the proper attitude?"¹¹

Greig, Pete. *God on Mute* (p. 107). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

"This is a sign of Christian maturity," writes Nicky Gumbel. "When we continue to believe in God's love even when we don't see it or feel it. As we believe in the sun even when it is not shining, we continue to believe in God's love even in times of darkness when we don't feel his love."⁴

Greig, Pete. *God on Mute* (p. 169). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

"What we perceive as unanswered prayers are often the greatest answers. Our heavenly Father is far too wise and loves us far too much to give us everything we ask for. Someday we'll thank God for the prayers He didn't answer as much or more than the ones He did" (Mark Batterson in *The Circle Maker*, https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/66179.Mark_Batterson).