

How to Handle Unanswered Prayers

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Hi, I am Dr. Andrew Swafford, it is great to be with you. Let's begin in prayer as we raise the question of the topic of how do we think about, how do we deal with, what feels like our unanswered prayers?

Opening Prayer

In the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit, amen. Father, you have known us from all eternity. You have loved us into existence. You have brought us to a time such as this and for this. But Lord we just ask you to come into our hearts to make your presence known, because sometimes we don't experience your presence sometimes we feel like you are far. We know you are never far, but help us bridge the gap between our heads and our hearts. We ask all this through Christ our King and Lord, amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit, amen.

Luke 18: 1-8

So unanswered prayer. Let's maybe before we dive headlong into that, let's just look at one parable Jesus gave us about prayer. This is from chapter Luke. I'm sorry, chapter Luke, the gospel of Luke 18:1-8. I'll go ahead and read this. "And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray," to pray always. "And not lose heart." He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor regarded man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Vindicate me against my adversary.'" "For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her or she will wear me out by her continual coming.'"

That, wear me out, in Greek, it's "hupopiazō". You know what it literally means, it literally means to punch in the face, to give a black eye. Wear me out is way too weak for this widow. In the parable this widow's not just gonna keep coming and pestering him, like this widow's gonna punch him in the face. Very, very vigorous language here from our Lord Jesus Christ. "I will vindicate her or she will wear me out," or punch me in the face, "By her continual coming! And the Lord said, Hear what the unrighteous judge says and will not God vindicate his elect to cry to him day and night?"

In other words what Jesus is saying is if this wicked judge would do this, how much more the true and living God, if we persist in prayer. "And will not God vindicate his elect who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily! Nevertheless," there's an ominous tone here at the end. "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

That word, faith, "písti" in Greek, "emunah" in Hebrew, it's not just belief, it's not belief-ism. What some scholars have suggested that when Paul, or here, Jesus, when they use the word "písti", when they use faith, sometimes a better word is allegiance, fidelity. In other words it's not just a head thing it's a way of life thing. Are we living a life of faithfulness, of allegiance to Christ our divine King, and one of the ways we do that is to persevere in prayer. Think about the story of Jacob. Think about when he wrestled with the angel, wrestled with the Lord in Genesis 32, and he wouldn't let go until God blessed him. Are we willing to wrestle with the Lord, hold him, not let him go, until he blesses us?

The Lord Calls us to Pray Always

Think about our Lord's words in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7, "Ask and you will," you know, "Seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you." "What man of you, which one of you, if your son asks for a loaf of bread gives him a stone, if he asks for fish gives him a serpent, how much more your Father in heaven who loves you." This is the truth. Our Lord calls us to pray always. Our Lord tells us if we ask, if we seek, if we knock, we will find, we will find, alas, but it doesn't always feel that way, right? We need to know, we need to firm up our conviction, that prayer is efficacious.

Prayer does something, whether we feel it or not, it does something otherwise our Lord wouldn't speak as he does, he wouldn't teach as he does. Prayer is efficacious. God can do all things directly if he wants to, but he loves to work through what we call secondary causes. He loves to bring about the evangelization of nations through people like you and me who share the gospel. He loves to use creatures, and especially us, and the angels and the saints, and he loves the saints' prayers and their intercession to be the vehicle by which he does what he does. All of this dignifies the creature and it's not because God needs it, but it's how he matures us and elevates us and really just gives us this amazing dignity to share in his work, to share in his life, to share in his kingdom. Your prayers are efficacious, my prayers are efficacious. They move mountains, they make the world go round, but we may not always feel that or experience that.

A Part of the Story

The thing is we have to realize, we have to realize, that our lives are like looking at a paragraph, like a single paragraph of a great novel. Imagine having one paragraph of "Lord of the Rings," or one paragraph of pick your favorite novel, if you had that one paragraph and nothing else to go on you wouldn't really have any idea the full extent of that character in that paragraph, or those characters, or where this is going. Our lives, in light of eternity, are like that single paragraph. And I think we have to admit there are many things, there are many things on this side of heaven we will never fully understand. Prayer works, prayers efficacious, but we also know that we see through a glass darkly, we see a single paragraph of a much wider novel that the divine author is writing. And you and I are part of this story, our works are part of this great story, our prayer is part of this great story, and our role, our mission, mysteriously, this will be left unfulfilled unless you and I answer that call and prayer is one of the most profound ways we answer that call.

Prayer must be Purified

Another thing we need to say is, whether we want to admit this or not, our prayer often needs to be purified, purified. As Saint Thomas Aquinas would put it, "The chief and most fundamental thing we should be praying for is union with God," is union with God in this life and the next. Saint Thomas says of the, Our Father, that it's the most perfect prayer because not only does it ask for what we should ask for, but it asks for those things in the order in which we should ask them and so it begins with God. Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, and then it turns to us.

So often, my friends, I mean I'm guilty to, we think of prayer as the divine ATM machine. We begin with our needs, our concerns, our wants, our wishes, maybe not just about ourselves, but our loved ones, but there's a danger of being more in love with the gifts than the giver of those gifts and so we have to be open to the ways in which our prayer itself needs to be purified.

Prayer Transforms Us

The other thing that's also true about prayer is prayer changes us. We'll come back to this at the end, but prayer changes us. It's not simply about bringing something about that we wanted to see happen. Persevering through prayer, if you and I persevere through prayer, if we are consistent, if we do this even when we don't feel like it, we will be changed, we will never be the same, prayer changes us. So prayer becomes an efficacious way by which we participate in God's work for his providence that he mercifully and graciously wills to bring things about through our prayers, but it also transforms us, it's also part of the way in which he matures us in the process.

The Story of Saint Augustine

I want to maybe take you through a saint, actually two saints, where this dynamic is so powerfully on display. I want to take you into the world of Saint Augustine and his mother, Saint Monica. Saint Augustine was born in 354 in North Africa, in what is modern-day Algeria. Saint Augustine, if you don't know his story, is absolutely worth knowing his story. I love sharing it with my students because he's so much like so many of us. I mean he clearly struggles with a deep, deep vanity, ambition, pride, I want to be someone, I want to be someone important, someone that people talk about, that they respect, that they admire, chasing those, those gods in those ways and struggles with lust. He's famous for his looking back upon his prayer, earlier in life he's like, I realized that I was saying Lord, make me chaste, but I was really saying, Lord, make me chaste, but not yet, not yet. He had a child out of wedlock, I mean he really, he really embodies the fact that every saint has a past and every sinner has a future. But there's this dynamic in Book V of the "Confessions" where he's telling his story, between him and Monica, and he's a professor at this point in Carthage, in North Africa, and he is fed up with his students. He's fed up with, they don't always pay the teacher and this and that, and he's basically going to jump ship for Rome.

And it's amazing how the Lord is weaving all of these different dynamics into his providence, even dynamics of sin, or imperfect love. Because he wants to go to Rome because he wants to be somebody, he wants to be great, he wants to be famous, he wants to be known, he wants to be admired, respected, all his same vices are taking him to Rome, but our Lord is going to use that to bring about something more than what Augustine at this point has in mind. So Saint Augustine, for example, says, "In secret, you Lord, were using my own perversity to set my feet upon the right course." And so he talks about how he's going to leave Rome and you're going to see it a moment he actually lies to his mother, Monica. He lies to her and basically leaves without her even knowing it, she knows he's thinking about it. "She went bitterly to see me go and followed me to the water's edge clinging to me with all her strength in the hope that I would either come home or take her with me. I deceived her with the excuse that I had a friend whom I did not want to leave until the wind rose and his ship could sail. It was a lie, told to my own mother, and to such a mother too."

And he goes on and he speaks about first the waters of baptism that he eventually would receive. "This was the water that would wash me clean and halt the flood of tears with which my mother daily watered the ground as she bowed her head praying for me." So Monica knew the waywardness of her son for a long time and prayed constantly that the Lord would bring him back. "But she would not go home without me and it was all I could do to persuade her to stay that night in a shrine dedicated to Saint Cyprian not far from the ship. During the night, secretly, I sailed away leaving her alone to her tears and her prayers. And what did she beg of you, my God, with all those tears if not that you would prevent me from sailing, but you did not do as she asked you then. Instead, in the

depth of your wisdom, you granted the wish that was closest to her heart. You did with me what she had always asked you to do. The wind blew and filled our sails and the shore disappeared from sight. The next morning she was wild with grief pouring her sighs and sorrows in your ear because she thought that you had not listened to her prayer, but you were letting my own desires carry me away on a journey that was to put an end to those same desires. And you used her too-jealous love for her son as a scourge of sorrow for her just punishment. For as mothers do, and far more than most, she loved to have me with her. And she did not know what joys you had in store for her because of my departure."

The Feeling of Unanswered Prayers

So he's, and Monica's a great saint, and he is so endearing, I mean to Monica, especially by the, he loves his mother so much, but he recognizes here that some of her love wasn't perfect, that part of what Monica wanted was just to have Augustine with her and that mysteriously, even though she prays, and wants, and desires in the moment for Augustine, for her son not to leave. In the end it was only Augustine's departure, to Rome and then Milan, where he comes into contact with Saint Ambrose and eventually all the obstacles to his conversion are removed and becomes this great saint, and doctor, and bishop of the church.

Monica feels like her prayers were not answered here. Why did Augustine leave? Why did he lie to me? Why is he this wayward son? And yet, and yet it was through a process that Monica could not see in the moment, that Monica had no idea of through this departure, and through God's providence, that God ultimately answered Monica's prayers, Saint Monica's prayers, but not in the way, or the moment, that she thought he would. And again it's nice to see because we know the end of the story of Saint Augustine and we don't always know the end of our own stories, or the end of the stories of those for whom we pray, our loved ones, but we see through a glass darkly and we don't see the whole picture.

God is at Work

There is far more to prayer than just asking for things. It's okay, he loves it when we ask him for things, he really loves it when we continue asking for things. Monica never gave up. Monica is like that widow in in Saint Luke's gospel, Monica never gave up. And Saint Augustine absolutely believes that it was through her prayers that he was given, in the end, the grace of conversion. Prayer is efficacious, it is efficacious, it brings about dramatic things in God's prophets. It may not come about when we want them to, it may not come about how we want them to, we have to recognize that we, and this is what hope's all about, hope is not this kind of flippant naive optimism that things will inevitably get better. They might, they might, but fundamentally hope is this deep and abiding sense that despite appearances to the contrary, God is at work, God is at work,

and evil will not and cannot ever have the last word. But hope ultimately also has a deep sense that I am not made for this life that God is my ultimate end and so the object of my hope is not simply things in this life. I can hope for them, insofar as they lead to my eternal salvation, and that's the purification of our prayer. And we don't see all that God sees, but God will give us what we need to make it to our ultimate end. And that ultimately is also the same prayer, as hard as this is, that we should have for our loved ones that they may have what they need to reach their ultimate end in heaven. That's what it's all about. That's what it's all about.

And I really want to say a word to the mothers out there, fathers too, but Saint Monica's so dear to mothers, grandmothers, who maybe have sons, or daughters, or grandsons, grandchildren, who have walked away from our Lord, walked away from the church, walked away from the faith. On the one hand, do not beat yourself up, do not look in the past, do not play the woulda, coulda, shoulda, there's nothing good that's going to come from that. Eyes forward, eyes ahead, do not ever stop praying for your children. Be there for them and realize that God's time, and God's ways, they may well need somebody else to step into their lives, somebody else to confirm what you've been saying.

Saint Monica had to wait a long, long time, but in the mystery of God's providence we have this incredible story of these two great saints. Don't beat yourself up, just surrender, and one of the most powerful prayers I came across about providence, we often think of providence as just the future, it went like this, "I surrender to your loving providence, the past, the present and the future." Surrender the past, surrender it to God's providence, give it to him, he's the only one that can do something about it. You're not going to help anything by just beating yourself up. He loves you, he's proud of you, and he loves your children.

Screwtape Letters

I want to end with a quote from C.S. Lewis, "Screwtape Letters." And this is Screwtape, the uncle demon, is writing to this nephew demon about how to seduce this human person, this human being, and it just reiterates the fact that there's more going on than we can see. There's more going on in our lives, there's more going on in our works, there's more going on in our prayer than we realize. Prayer cannot be measured by how you and I feel. Prayer cannot be measured by simply the earthly consequences that we see. There's far more going on. There's, in prayer the demons tremble.

Listen to Screwtape here and he's simply saying that when a person, I'll just read it, "Do not be deceived, Wormwood, our cause, the demonic cause, is never more in danger than when a human no longer desiring, but still intending to do our enemy's will," that is God's will. "Looks around upon a universe from which every trace of him seems to have vanished and asks why he has been forsaken and still obeys."

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In other words, we think that our spiritual lives are doing the best when we're at those spiritual highs and we sense God's nearness and God's closeness. What Screwtape says in here, from the demonic point of view, that we actually may well be growing and being transformed far more during our low points when we feel like God is distant because what's happening is God is maturing our love.

We've come to loving him for who he is and not simply for what he does for us and how he makes us feel. It's fine and wonderful to ask him for things, but there's another level of intimacy just to sit in his presence, just to be in his presence. That's really the mystery of prayer is to speak heart-to-heart with our Lord, to be in his presence, and to be changed from glory unto glory in that moment, to waste time with God. It's never really wasted, it's never really wasted, this is some of the most profound and important moments of our lives.

So when things haven't worked out as you wanted them to, or haven't worked out for your loved ones as you wanted them to, and even things like elections and this and that, do not let that steal your peace that lets the devil win. Keep on praying. Be like Jacob don't let go of the Lord. Be like this widow who relentlessly, even punching this unjust judge, how much more our Lord and Savior, how much more our heavenly Father.

Don't give up, don't ever give up, more is happening than you can see or feel and as we pray we become like the one we worship. We take on his complexion, we take on his loves, we take on his hopes, we see as he sees and we begin to love our loved ones in his love, which deepens and purifies our love. This is never easy, but there's just a glimpse, a glimpse into the deeper truth of what's going on. I will pray for you, please pray for me. I will pray for your journey. Thank you for your witness. Thank you for your love. Thank you for your, yes, and thank you for your perseverance even if it's not perfect. As C.S. Lewis once put it, "We'll get no credit for leaving a question blank, but we'll get effort for making a sincere effort to the end." A sincere effort to the end. I will pray for you, God bless. May the Lord bless and keep you this day, and always, God bless.