

9 DECEMBER 2018

The Consolation Prayer, otherwise known as the unanswered prayer – the prayer without a finale.

We read in Luke 2 of two people, probably very elderly, who had prayed for a long time – without any answer.

This week, the **consolation prayer** guides us in how to pray when we see no answer, when there is no finale. We are to pray and wait, to pray and worship, to pray and fast, to pray and give thanks, to pray and trust. To pray and surrender the outcome to God.

Luke 2:22-38

22 When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”[a]), 24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

29 “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss[c] your servant in peace.

30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”

33 The child’s father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

36 There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. 38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Almost every week we’ve heard from people sharing their struggles and wins in their prayer-life. It is hard to know what to say when prayer is not answered. One of the reasons we encourage each other with stories of answered prayer is that it is easy to forget those and remember instead the times when it seemed that God was far away and wasn’t listening.

Jane & Anthony and their family have a niece who is known as a miracle baby after she survived major complications as a young child. But they had to go through the agony of watching their grandson die shortly after being born – despite their prayers and the prayers of many others.

Alison and I have much to celebrate and thank God for in our family. But we went through a similar distress watching our niece die of a brain tumour in her twenties.

We thank God for the good things of course, but we (Flowers, Pollards) prayed into these difficult times, many people prayed, and the answer we sought didn't seem to come.

The hardest pastoral issue for me – when people feel that God has abandoned them or gone silent, or doesn't care..

Matt or Hannah or Tania – how shall we pray for them? Or others close to you?

Simeon and Anna give us one particular model.

Their prayer was for the salvation of their people, for the redemption of Jerusalem.

It is this type of prayer:

- the Kurdish people
- Rohingya refugees from Myanmar
- The people living in the Eastern Ukraine battle zone

We don't feel that pain in our lives – and we should thank God every day for that – our cries are often more personal and specific – but they are still a heartfelt, agonising cries.

Simeon and Anna's ancestors had prayed for centuries – and they had seen nothing that constituted an answer. Simeon and Anna had prayed for decades, without seeing the outcome they sought.

What did they do? How did they respond to praying for what seemed impossible, what seemed unanswerable, what seemed destined to fail? How did they cope with what seemed to be unanswered prayer – generation after generation?

How do we respond?

The Why Question

Often, our reaction to bad things happening or to what we think is unanswered prayer is, "Why?" or, often, "Why me?". It is a natural question. Do you recognise who cried out?

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?

Psalm 22:1 – Jesus, quoting the Psalmist.

Alison says, when asked that question, "What would be a good answer?" Why am I suffering? Why did that person die? Why did I lose my job? Why are we a stateless nation? Why am I being persecuted or bullied?

Is there an answer that would make it OK? Keep you happy?

Of course there isn't. So when you feel that pain, yes, you can cry out, just as Jesus did, "Why?" – but don't base the rest of your life waiting for an answer. There isn't one.

There is no satisfactory answer to the "Why" question because we cannot see with the eyes of God.

So the only response is Jesus' words, "Into your hands I commit my Spirit". I surrender myself to you and I surrender the outcome to you.

A slightly different question, what would the answer look like?

The anatomy of prayer:

- What you are praying for – what you visualise, the specifics of what you asking for
- How you pray (we'll come back to this).
- The outcome.

To what extent do you think we can, by defining exactly what we want to see happen, control all the outcomes of this world? Can we persuade God to answer our prayers exactly? Alongside everyone else's and then be entirely satisfied with a perfect outcome?

Of course we can't – prayer isn't about defining or controlling the outcome it is about entering into God's plans for our lives and expressing the desire of our hearts and then surrendering the outcomes to him.

Consider Simeon and Anna:

Verse 30, "My eyes have seen your salvation" – Simeon praying for the salvation of his nation, for liberation from oppression.

Verse 38. Anna connecting the small child with the redemption of the city.

They are looking at **a tiny baby boy**. How is that an answer to their prayer?

They saw Jesus – they didn't see the answer they were looking for - what would the answer look like? A mighty warrior on a huge horse at the head of an army.

Verse 27 *Moved by the Spirit*

Verse 38 *She came up to them ... why? Same – moved by the Holy Spirit.*

Their prayers were not so controlled by trying to define the outcome that they couldn't see what was being revealed to them.

This was not what they were expecting – but the Holy Spirit revealed enough of His purposes to them – it didn't look like the answer and they had yet to see any outcome to their prayers for salvation and redemption – and yet that they were able to celebrate and give thanks.

The answers to our prayers will always look incomplete and different from what we imagine.

SUMMARY - THE WHY AND THE OUTCOME

- There is no satisfactory answer to the "Why" question because we cannot see with the eyes of God.
- The outcome will always look incomplete and different from what we imagine.

SO HOW DO WE PRAY WHEN THERE SEEMS TO BE NO ANSWER?

1. Pray and wait – verse 25, *He was waiting for the consolation of Israel*
We've been learning about how much of prayer is waiting have we not?
Waiting 400 years.
Simeon & Anna waiting all their lives

Are you in a posture of waiting when it comes to prayer? Or is it not only a specific outcome but a specific timescale to which you are working? Maranatha – come soon – but we wait too.

2. Pray and worship – verse 37, *she never left the temple but worshipped night and day*
Alison, about going through a time of great loss a few years ago, speaks of how God called her

into a posture of worship.

For Anna it meant going to the temple, where God dwelt. For us it means a posture of kneeling before God in obedience and honour. It means gathering into the household of God, it means singing songs of worship - but it is a decision to face toward God and not away from Him.

Where will you be found when you are praying for what seems the impossible or when the outcome doesn't go as you have desired? Are you in a posture of worship?

3. Pray and fast – verse 37, *she never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying.*

This is one of the reasons we fast (Matt, Monday/Tuesday) – it accompanies prayer, it is part of waiting and worship. There is something about denying ourselves the comforts of the flesh as we seek to engage with God in the realms of the Spirit.

If you are praying for something, in what way are you fasting?

4. Pray and thanks – verse 28, *Simeon praised God saying...* verse 38, *Anna ... gave thanks to God and spoke about the child*

As we pray, and worship, and fast .. God will reveal some of his ways and his purposes to us. When he does, even when they are incomplete or puzzling components of an answer to prayer, let us lift up our hands, let us speak out to others and let us bear witness to what he has revealed and give thanks.

Are your eyes open to see what he is doing, ears open to hear what he is saying, hands open to receive what he is giving to you? Even when it doesn't look like you imagined?

I am praying for this and I am giving thanks for this. Are you giving thanks amidst the praying and the crying out to God?

5. Pray and trust

They have prayed, fasted, worshipped, waited. They know what is the cry of their heart – the salvation of Israel and the redemption of Jerusalem – and despite the long wait, the silence and the darkness, they continue to pray because they trust that one day God will bring about the answer in one way or another.

(verse 25, 29ff and verse 37, 38)

Simeon's and Anna's posture and their declarations reveal their trust.

Trust is going out on a limb.

They are not sure of what it will look like, they never get an answer to their "why" questions, but they trust God enough to keep praying.

They trust God enough to believe when they see Jesus – they go out on a limb, again, because they have waited and listened and trusted the revelation they received.

SUMMING UP

The consolation prayer guides us in how to pray when we see no answer, when there is no finale. We are to pray and wait, to pray and worship, to pray and fast, to pray and give thanks, to pray and trust.

That is not a promise that we will get the answer to our prayer – we may never, or at least not until the Lord returns. But we may, and we may have cause for rejoicing like Simeon and Anna.

Where will you be found when the going gets tough in prayer – when the answer is not what you wanted or when there seems to be no answer at all?

Pause

Let us pray and then let us leave the outcome up to him.

Let us encourage one another to
wait for God,
worship God,
fast for God,
give thanks to God
trust in God,

And surrender the outcome to God.

David Flowers

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