

WEEK 5: Why doesn't God answer me?



This week, we are going deeper into the question we tackled last week about whether God “hears” our prayer.

The reality is that *almost* everyone—I would venture to say that it is everyone—has times in their life when they feel like God isn't listening.

So, we must be honest with people and help them consider the complex questions surrounding “unanswered” prayer.



This week's main reading is the well-known passage in which Paul admits that he struggled in his devotional life with God.

Key reading: 2 Corinthians 12.7-10

Therefore, to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. I pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away from me. 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. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Other readings for the theme are Matthew 26.36-41 (Jesus prays in Gethsemane and struggles to align with his Father's will) or Job 30.1-6 (Job wrestles with the seeming unfairness of God)



This passage of 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 is a profound text that has puzzled theologians and preachers for centuries. We see the Apostle in a moment of self-reflection, recognising that not everything in the Christian life goes exactly as we hope. His prayers for healing don't result in the healing he wants, and he is forced to consider things differently. Here are some key insights:

The Thorn in the Flesh:

The “thorn in the flesh” Paul talks about is unspecified, leading to various interpretations. It could be a physical ailment, a psychological struggle, or persecution. The lack of specificity allows this “thorn” to symbolise various forms of suffering that believers might experience today. We will return to this question later.

Suffering and Weakness:

Whatever it may be, Paul's thorn is a source of torment and weakness. Yet, he comes to understand that it is through this weakness that God's power is made manifest. This is a counter-intuitive message: in weakness, there is strength. In this way, we can consider these verses to be a meditation on suffering and weakness.

God's Grace:

The concept of God's grace is central to this passage. Despite Paul's pleas to remove his thorn, God responds, “*My grace is sufficient for you*”. This suggests that God's grace and strength are enough to sustain us in times of hardship and distress.

Humility:

The passage also addresses humility. The thorn prevents Paul from becoming conceited due to the “surpassingly great revelations” he has received. It reminds him of his constant dependence on God's grace.

This passage grapples with a seeming contradiction in the juxtaposition of weakness and strength. Counter-intuitively to the attitude of many, Paul “delights” in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties—for when he is weak, he is strong. This paradox underscores the transformative power of God's grace: it is in acknowledging our human frailty and surrendering to God's will that we find true strength.

These verses elevate the question we ask this week—why doesn't God give me what I am asking?—to a whole new level. Far from seeing God as some kind of heavenly dispensing machine, Paul sees the divine relationship as a journey of struggle, grace, and mutual companionship.

Interpretation and Practical Application

These verses in 2 Corinthians provide valuable insights into the nature of unanswered prayers, which we are helping people grapple with this week.

- **God is Sovereign:** Sometimes, unanswered prayer is not a result of our shortcomings but rather a manifestation of God's sovereignty. God has a plan that surpasses our understanding; sometimes, our prayers may not align with that plan.
- **His Grace is sufficient:** Despite Paul's repeated pleas for the removal of his thorn, God's response was not to remove the thorn but to provide grace. This teaches us that God's grace is sufficient for us even when our specific requests are not granted.
- **Strength in Weakness:** The passage underscores that God's power is made perfect in our weakness. When our prayers seem unanswered, we can experience God's strength in our weakness.

- **Purpose of Unanswered Prayers:** Unanswered prayers humble us, help us rely more on God's grace, and prevent us from becoming conceited. They can also refine our faith and draw us closer to God.
- **God's Timing and Ways:** God answers our prayers in His own time and His way. What we perceive as an unanswered prayer may be answered differently than expected.

These insights remind us that unanswered prayers are not necessarily a sign of God's disapproval or absence. Instead, they can be a part of God's larger plan for our lives, teaching us to rely on His grace and find strength in our weaknesses. Maintaining faith and trust in God's sovereignty is important, even when our prayers seem unanswered.



A. The Thorn in the Flesh

The "thorn in the flesh" mentioned by St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 has been a subject of much speculation and interpretation throughout Christian history. Here are some of the different understandings and speculations about what this "thorn in the flesh" could have been:

1. Some kind of **Physical Affliction:** One of the most common interpretations is that the "thorn in the flesh" was a physical ailment or illness that Paul suffered from. Some scholars suggest it could have been a chronic condition such as epilepsy, migraine headaches, ophthalmia, or some other bodily infirmity.
2. Some kind of **Spiritual Struggle:** Some scholars propose that the "thorn in the flesh" was a spiritual or psychological struggle rather than a physical ailment. This could include feelings of doubt, temptation, spiritual attacks, or inner conflicts that Paul experienced in his Christian walk.
3. A **Specific Incident** or Person: Some speculate that the "thorn in the flesh" could have been related to a specific incident or person that caused Paul distress or difficulty. This could include betrayal by a fellow believer, disagreements within the church, or unresolved conflicts with individuals.
- 4 **Persecution** or Opposition: Another interpretation is that the "thorn in the flesh" refers to the persecution and opposition that the New Testament tells us that Paul faced in his ministry. This could include resistance from religious authorities, hostility from those opposed to Christianity, or personal attacks on Paul's character and teachings.
5. **Symbolic Representation:** Some interpretations view the "thorn in the flesh" as a symbolic representation of the weaknesses and limitations inherent in human nature rather than anything specific. In this view, it represents the challenges and obstacles all believers face in their faith journey.

Despite various interpretations, the exact nature of the "thorn in the flesh" remains uncertain. Some scholars argue that the text intentionally leaves it ambiguous to convey a broader message about the nature of suffering, reliance on God's grace, and the power of Christ's strength in weakness.

B. "Unanswered Prayer"

Christians offer several reasons why it seems like God does not answer our prayers. Here's a selection I culled from around the Internet.

God Always Answers, But Sometimes We Don't Like the Answer: God always answers prayer, but the answer may not always align with our expectations. The answers could be "Yes", "No", or "Wait". Frustration often comes when the answer is not what we want.

Wrong Motives: James 4:3 suggests that when prayers are not answered, they could be asked with wrong motives.

Wrong Timing: Even when our motives are pure, God may not answer because the timing is wrong.

Wrong Request: Sometimes, God does not answer because the request is not in our best interest.

Unconfessed Sin: If there are unconfessed sins in our lives or if we are holding on to cherished sins, God may not answer our prayers.

Not God's Will: We must always seek God's will. If our prayers are not according to His will, they may not be answered.

Doubting: Doubt can hinder our prayers. James 1:6 suggests that we must believe and not doubt when we ask.

Rebellion: Living a continuous life of sin can lead to unanswered prayers.

Closing Ears to the Needy: Proverbs 21:13 suggests that whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered.

Lack of Fellowship with God: If our prayer life is non-existent and we never spend time in His Word, our prayers may not be answered.

Remember, these are beliefs held by some Christians and certainly do not represent all Christian views. But it's always beneficial to consider multiple perspectives when studying scripture.

Online resources

Thoughtful reflection from an Orthodox site

<http://www.st-marymagdalene.org/parish-blog/2023/1/18/why-doesnt-god-answer-our-prayers>

Here is a video from The Prayer Course (Holy Trinity Brompton), which tackles this theme:
<https://prayercourse.org/session/unanswered-prayer/>

A useful primer from a youth-orientated writer

<https://youthaliveportal.org/magazine/articles/why-doesnt-god-answer-our-prayers-the-way-we-want>

A blog I wrote about the thorn in the flesh

<https://medium.com/inspire-believe-grow/what-does-the-bible-mean-by-the-term-a-thorn-in-the-flesh-dd89cd7ea53>



"Unanswered petitions are not unheard. God keeps a file for our prayers--they are not blown away by the wind; they are treasured in the King's archives." (*Charles Spurgeon*)

For me, prayer is not so much me setting out a shopping list of requests for God to consider as it is a way of keeping company with God. (*Philip Yancey*)

"God is just as merciful in the things He does not allow as He is in the things He does." (*Andrea Sawyer*)

"A commitment to put God first and love and follow him supremely is necessary before God can grant out prayers without harming us. If we are living lives in which God does not have our highest allegiance, then we will use prayer, selfishly, simply to try to get the things that may be already ruining our lives." (*Tim Keller*)

It is far more comforting to think God listened and said "no" than to think nobody's out there. (*Mitch Albom*)

"I long for the personal detachment and faith I see worked out in Gethsemane. God alone is qualified to answer prayer, and at some point, we have to let go and trust God, who can transmute our self-focused requests into an unimaginably larger plan." (*Philip Yancey*)

Some unanswered prayers are only because God doesn't want to do something for us. He wants to do something through us. (*Bill Johnson*)

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 doesn't care. Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers (*Garth Brooks*)

We impoverish God in our minds when we say there must be answers to our prayers on the material plane; the biggest answers to our prayers are in the realm of the unseen. (*Oswald Chambers*)



This sermon outline is NOT offered as a prescriptive solution to the complexity of this topic. Most preachers will want to develop the sermon in their own way –and that is perfectly fine. However, if you want some inspiration or a "starting point", then you are welcome to use or adapt this one.

Open by acknowledging that the question of unanswered prayer is tricky. There are no easy answers. Something mysterious and unknown about God's nature will always exist. Everyone here today struggles with this subject.

However, while we can't know everything, we can gain insights from our passage today that can help and comfort us in our spiritual journey.

1: Perception of Prayer Our perception of unanswered prayer often stems from our human expectations. We expect God to answer in a certain way or within a certain timeframe. However, God's ways and timing are not ours. His answers may be "Yes", "No", or "Wait". We often feel frustrated when the answer is not what we want. It's important to align our expectations with the reality of God's sovereignty and wisdom.

2: Purpose of Prayer Prayer is not just about asking for things. It's about cultivating a relationship with God, aligning our will with His, and growing in faith. Sometimes, unanswered prayers serve a purpose. They can humble us, help us rely more on God's grace, and prevent us from becoming conceited. As we see in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, Paul's thorn in the flesh was not removed despite his pleas, but it served a purpose in his life.

3: Power in Prayer: Even when our prayers seem unanswered, prayer has power. As Paul learned, God's grace is sufficient, and His power is made perfect in our weakness. When our prayers seem unanswered, we can experience God's strength in our weakness. This understanding can transform our perspective on unanswered prayers.

The challenge for the week is to reflect on your prayer life. Consider the prayers that seem unanswered. Ask yourself: Are my expectations aligned with God's sovereignty? Am I seeking His will above my own? Can I find His strength in my weakness?

Remember, even when it seems God doesn't hear our prayers, He is always with us, working for our good and His glory.



Suggested Hymns and Songs

STF	H&P	
518	436	Father, hear the prayer we offer
342	252	All hail the power of Jesus' name
471		Lord, I come to you
250	141	Jesus calls us o'er the tumult
347	255	Crown him with many crowns
437		When the music fades
113	28	O worship the king
322	257	How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
636	685	O love that wilt not let me go
		O Lord, hear my prayer (Taize)

Call To Worship

From the rising of the sun to its setting,
From the breaking of dawn to the fading of twilight,
Let us gather in this sacred space,
Where heaven and earth embrace.

In the stillness of this moment,
We sense the presence of the Divine,
In whom all creation finds its rest.

O Holy One, be our guide,
In this hour of worship and praise,
May our spirits be lifted,
And our souls refreshed in Your grace.

Prayers of Approach and Penitence

Call to Worship

Brothers and sisters,
as we gather in this sacred space,
let us lift our voices and hearts in unity,
acknowledging the presence of our God
who hears our every cry.

**May our worship be pleasing to You, O God,
as we lift our voices in praise and adoration.
Amen.**

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father,
As we gather in Your presence today,
we come with hearts burdened and voices yearning to be heard.
We cry out to You, knowing that You are our refuge and strength,
our ever-present help in times of trouble.
Open our hearts and minds to Your presence,
and may our cries reach Your ears,
bringing comfort, guidance, and peace.
Amen.

Prayer of Confession

Merciful God,
We confess that there are times when we feel unheard,
lost in the noise of the world
and the depths of our struggles.
Forgive us for the moments when we doubt Your presence
or hesitate to cry out to You.
Help us to remember that You are always near,
ready to listen to our every plea.
Teach us to trust in Your unfailing love
and to find solace in knowing that You hear us,
even in our silence.
Amen.

Kyrie Confession

Let us now humble ourselves before the Lord in confession,
acknowledging our need for His mercy and grace.

For the times when we have failed to cry out to God in our distress,
let us pray to the Lord, saying:
Lord, have mercy on us,
and forgive us for our silence.

For the moments when we have doubted God's presence
amidst our trials and tribulations,
let us pray to the Lord, saying:

Christ, have mercy on us,
and strengthen our faith.

For the times when we have neglected to listen
to the cries of those around us who are in need,
Let us pray to the Lord, saying:

Lord, have mercy on us,
and teach us to love as You love.

Collect

Heavenly Father,
You invite us to come to You in prayer, just as we are.
Help us to desire that connection with You each day,
We long for Your presence in our lives.
When we cry out to You, may we feel Your nearness,
And find peace in knowing that You hear us.
In Jesus' name, we pray,
Amen.

Intercessions

Gracious God, we come before You with hearts full of longing for Your blessing upon our church community. May Your Spirit dwell richly among us, guiding our steps and illuminating our path. Grant us wisdom and discernment as we seek to serve You and one another faithfully. Strengthen the bonds of fellowship within our church family so that we may be a beacon of Your love and grace to all who encounter us.

Lord hear us
Lord, graciously hear us.

Loving God, we yearn to witness Your mighty work in our world. Open our eyes to see Your hand at work in the beauty of creation, acts of kindness and compassion, and moments of reconciliation and healing. Fill us with hope and expectation, knowing that You are constantly at work, bringing about Your purposes in both seen and unseen ways. Help us to be instruments of Your peace and agents of Your love, that Your kingdom may come and Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Lord hear us
Lord, graciously hear us.

God of all goodness, we lift our local community to You, praying for signs of Your activity to abound. Inspire and empower us to be Your hands and feet in this place, bringing light to the darkness and hope to the hopeless. Bless our efforts to care for the marginalised, support the vulnerable, and build bridges of understanding and unity. May Your kingdom come into our midst, transforming lives and renewing our shared sense of purpose and belonging.

Lord hear Us
Lord, graciously hear us.

Compassionate Healer, we bring those who need physical, emotional, or spiritual healing before You. Comfort them in their pain and suffering, and grant them Your peace that surpasses all understanding. Strengthen their bodies, minds, and spirits, and grant them the assurance of Your presence with them in their time of need. We also pray that their caregivers may be filled with compassion, wisdom, and strength as they offer support and care. May Your healing power be made known, bringing wholeness and restoration to all in need.

Lord hear Us
Lord, graciously hear us.

Ever-present God, as we seek to connect with You in prayer, we acknowledge our need for Your presence in our lives. Quiet the distractions that pull us away from You, and help us to find moments of stillness and solitude where we can commune with You in intimacy and trust. Renew our spirits and refresh our souls as we pour out our hearts before You, knowing You are always near and ready to listen. May our prayers be a source of strength and comfort, drawing us closer to You and deepening our relationship with You daily.

Lord hear Us

Lord, graciously hear us.

Sending Prayer (Benediction)

Eternal God,
As we depart from this time of worship,
may the echoes of our cries continue to resonate in Your presence.

May we carry with us the assurance that You are a God who hears,
a God who cares,
and a God who answers prayer.

Renew our faith and strengthen our resolve
to cry out to You in every season of life,
knowing that You are always listening.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ,
our Lord and Saviour.

Amen.



Prayer Activity: Music Meditation

Play calming instrumental music and let yourself be swept away in prayerful meditation, letting the music guide your thoughts and emotions.

The choice of music must be your own—choose something which resonates with you rather than something chosen by someone else. This might be worship or sacred music for some, but it does not necessarily need to be so.

- Find a comfortable space to sit or lie down where you won't be disturbed.
- Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths to relax your body and mind.
- Allow the music to wash over you, focusing on its melodies and rhythms as you enter a state of prayerful meditation.
- Offer prayers or intentions silently as you listen, allowing the music to deepen your connection with our Lord.

Prayer Activity: Reflecting on Art

The following is a script to help the congregation meditate on a painting which portrays the Gospel reading suggested for today—the agony of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

You will need to obtain a high-quality image of Andrea Mantegna's "The Agony in the Garden." The Wikipedia page has a high-resolution version. The image is in the public domain so you can use it freely.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agony_in_the_Garden_\(Mantegna,_London\)#/media/File:Andrea_Mantegna_036.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agony_in_the_Garden_(Mantegna,_London)#/media/File:Andrea_Mantegna_036.jpg)

Print copies or project the image on a screen so people can view it as you read through the following script.

Let's take a moment to reflect on a significant event in Jesus' life—the night he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. To help us imagine this scene, picture a painting by Andrea Mantegna called "The Agony in the Garden."

In this painting, we see three of Jesus' closest disciples—Peter, James, and John—sleeping on the ground. Their brightly coloured clothes make them stand out against the night. They are exhausted and unable to stay awake, even though Jesus asked them to keep watch with him. This scene might resonate with us, as we sometimes find ourselves tired and unable to be present when someone we love needs us the most.

In contrast, we see Jesus alone, kneeling on a rock and praying. He is deeply distressed because he knows the suffering he will soon endure. He prays, asking God if there is another way, but ultimately says, "Not what I want, but what you want." In this moment, Jesus's unwavering trust in God, even when faced with immense fear and pain, is a testament to his faith and strength.

Take a moment to reflect on a time when you felt alone in your struggles. How did you respond? Did you turn to God for strength, or did you try to handle it all by yourself? Jesus' prayer teaches us that asking for help and expressing our fears and desires to God is okay. But it also reminds us to seek God's will above our own, prompting us to consider our responses to challenges.

As we look at the painting's background, we see a city that looks like Jerusalem. It's a reminder of the events that will soon unfold—Judas betraying Jesus and the soldiers coming to arrest him. How do we respond when we see betrayal or injustice in our lives? Do we stand firm in our faith like Jesus, or do we sometimes waver?

Above Jesus, a group of angels hold symbols of his suffering—a cross, a column, and a whip. These remind us of the pain he will endure. It's a powerful image of the cost of love and obedience. Reflect on your own life: are there sacrifices you are being called to make to follow God's will? Are there challenges you need to face with courage and faith?

Let's pause here and think about how we can trust God more in our own lives. How can we find the strength to say, "Not what I want, but what you want," especially when it's difficult? What are the areas of our lives where we need to surrender to God's plan?

[Pause for silent reflection]

As we end this meditation, let's hold onto the image of Jesus in the garden. He was not alone in his suffering, and neither are we. He shows us how to trust God, even when scared or in pain. Let's ask ourselves: how can we support others in their struggles, staying awake and present for them, as Jesus asked his disciples to do?

Ice Breaker Questions

If you could choose one person from history to invite to this group to help us understand prayer better, who would it be and why?

or

If you could have any Biblical character pray for you, who would you choose and why?

or

If you could send a prayer request via a song, what song would you send and why? (You could ask people to sing a line from the song or play a bit of it from Spotify from their phone)

Discussion Questions

1. In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, Paul speaks of his "thorn in the flesh" that was not removed despite his prayers. How does this passage challenge or reinforce your understanding of prayer and God's response?
2. Paul describes God's response to his plea as, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." How does this idea of sufficiency and power in weakness affect your view of unanswered prayers?
3. How do you reconcile the idea of a loving God with the experience of seemingly unanswered prayers or prolonged suffering?
4. Do you believe there is a difference between God not hearing prayers and not answering

them the way we want? Why or why not?

5. Can you share a personal experience where you felt your prayers were not being heard? How did that impact your faith journey?

6. What role do you think timing plays in God's response to our prayers? How do we cope with the idea that answers may come in unexpected ways or times?

7. How can we maintain faith and hope when it feels like God is silent or distant? What strategies or scriptures help you during these times?

8. What impact do you think sin or a lack of faith might have on the perception that God isn't hearing our prayers? How do we balance this with the understanding of God's unconditional love?

9. In what ways can the experience of being part of our church community help us navigate the feeling that our prayers are not being heard? Can you give an example?

Creative Bible Study

Bible Verse Exploration

Divide participants into pairs and assign each pair a different Bible verse about prayer.

Give the pairs 15 minutes and ask them to explore the context and meaning of the verse and how it relates to the theme of unanswered prayers.

Have each pair present their findings and discuss how the verses collectively provide a broader understanding of prayer in the Bible.

Key Scriptures for Reference

- Psalm 66:18: Reflect on personal barriers to answered prayer.
- James 4:3: Discuss the motives behind prayers.
- 1 John 5:14-15: Explore the importance of praying according to God's will.
- Matthew 6:5-8: Consider Jesus' teaching on sincere prayer.
- Romans 8:26-27: Discuss the role of the Holy Spirit in prayer.

The idea for this study is to create an engaging and reflective Bible study that helps participants understand the complexities of prayer and deepen their relationship with God

Prayer Mapping

1. Provide a large piece of paper or whiteboard.

2. Ask participants to write down their prayers and times they felt unheard.

3. As a group, "map out" possible reasons for perceived unanswered prayers, such as personal sin, God's timing, or greater purpose. *(There are extra resources in the section under "Research" above that will help with this conversation. Check out section B, "Unanswered Prayer.")*

Discussion

Discuss the different reasons mapped and how they align with biblical teachings. Reflect on how understanding these reasons can impact their prayer life.