



practicing the way

prayer

Unanswered Prayer

Overview

Unanswered prayer is the source of doubt and despair for millions of people. And for good reason – it's confusing. Why is it that sometimes we pray and immediately our prayer is answered! But other times we pray and... nothing happens. Or why is it that sometimes we pray, and then we pray again, and then we pray again, and finally, after months, the answer to our prayer comes out of heaven? Why the delay?

How do we live in the waiting? And in the tension between Jesus' promise that "If you ask anything in my name, I will do it," and the reality of our experience with unanswered prayer? Really, the question is: How do we live in the liminal space of faith and doubt, hope and despair, expectation and frustration?

One answer is an ancient form of prayer called lament. In the middle of the Bible is a prayerbook called The Psalms. It's there to teach you and me how to pray. And over two-thirds of the psalms are prayers of lament - venting anger and rage and disillusionment and confusion and questions and frustrated longing to God, in a posture not of whining, but of worship.

As a general rule, Americans know very little about lament. So, this week, our goal is to learn, at least a little, about this ancient form of prayer.

Practice

1. Put away your phones or any other distractions, and get into a comfortable, but alert position.
2. Invite the Holy Spirit to come.
3. Draw to mind an unanswered prayer in your life.
4. With that unanswered prayer in your mind, read Psalm 79 (or another lament psalm of your choosing) out loud. Do your best to pray it, not just listen to it.
5. Then sit in silence for a few minutes, just thinking about and feeling the weight of lament in your own life, Community, or world. It can be lament over unanswered prayer or just emotional pain.
6. Pray your own "lament psalm" to God. Don't censor yourself. Flip the edit button to the "off" position and be honest with God.
7. End by singing a worship song or doing your best to express faith in God in the face of unanswered prayer.
8. Thank Jesus that he went through unanswered prayer and emotional pain in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross, and that he will lead and guide us through those kinds of moments.

We have three additional exercises that we think are helpful to learn how to lament. Pick one, or do all three, depending on your week and what you feel you're emotionally up for:

Exercise 1: Praying the lament psalms

- Pick out a lament psalm and use it as a "liturgy" to give voice to your prayers.
- Here's some great examples: Psalm 10, 13, 60, 79, or 80.
- Don't just read/pray it and move on. Sit in the discomfort and let God comfort you. Don't be scared to feel, even to feel deeply, and to meet God in that emotional pain.

Exercise 2: Writing your own lament psalm

- Get out a journal or scrap of paper and write your own lament psalm.
- Remember: prayer isn't a place to be good; it's a place to be honest. God already knows what's in your heart! And nobody else has to ever see this. Just write out all your dreams, doubts, hopes, fears, questions, confusion, disillusionment, disappointment, etc.
- Then pray your lament psalm to God.

Exercise 3: Journaling

- Get a journal if you don't already have one.
- Make a list of unanswered prayers in your life.
- Go over each one, just hovering for a moment, and see if the Spirit stirs anything in your heart.
- Write out how it feels to live with unanswered prayer. It's helpful to write your journal to God, like a letter, just getting everything off your chest.

Note: Again, feel free to just pick one of the three exercises.

Closing Questions

1. Any thoughts, creative ideas, or feedback on this coming week's Practice?
2. What's one area of unanswered prayer or lament in your own life?
3. What's a short list of unanswered prayers our community can continue to pray for?