

When Will It Rain?

Why Doesn't God Answer Prayers?

James 4:1-17; Luke 13:1-9

Introduction

There's lots of things that a man from the city has to adjust to in moving to a rural community. In the year or so since we moved to the Lockyer Valley I've been learning about plants, animals, machinery, how long a working day is, and the list could go on. However, if there's one thing that a city person really needs to learn when moving to a rural area it is about rain and water. I'm still learning but I've certainly gained a greater appreciation or the need for rain and useable water. It has been one of my regular prayers for months for God to please send rain and I know our whole church and many other churches have been praying about this too.

Our prayers have continued because, while we've had some rain, God has yet to answer our prayers for the drought-breaking rain for which we've been asking. This has probably been the prompt for two of the questions which were asked. The questions were, "When will it rain?" and "Why doesn't God answer our prayers when we ask?"

I can't answer the first question, though the weather is looking more promising now than it has in a long time, but I will seek to answer the second question about why doesn't God answer our prayers?

To answer this question I'm going to start by giving an overview of some of Jesus' teaching on prayer which is relevant to this topic; second we'll consider the teaching from James as to why we lack things; and third we're going to reflect briefly on the complexity of God's acts.

Jesus' Teaching on Prayer

So then, we know that Jesus taught his disciples to pray the prayer which we now call "The Lord's Prayer" and we closed our prayer time with that prayer today.

However, Jesus also taught about prayer at other times, including through the use of parables. I particularly want to highlight this morning Jesus' teaching on prayer which is helpful in answering the question about God not answering prayer.

First, in Matthew 7:7-11 Jesus says,

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

The words we have for 'ask', 'seek' and 'knock' can also be translated as 'go on asking, seeking and knocking' and so we're not instructed to just ask as a once off. We are to keep on asking and trusting that it is God's character as a loving Father to answer our prayers in a way that is good for us and presumably this goodness includes good timing.

Second, in Matthew 6:5-8 Jesus says that his followers weren't to pray on street corners seeking public acclaim and nor were they to pray with lots of words, thinking that they needed big and special prayer to convince God. I would say about God not answering prayers in our current situation that it's not caused by either a lack of public prayer nor because we didn't use big enough words or have the right formula.

Third, we are told, such as in Matthew 21 and Mark 11, that a lack of faith, that is a lack of trust in God, can negatively impact our prayers and so we should consider whether we genuinely believe that God can and will answer our prayers.

Finally, in Luke 18 Jesus told a parable which is relevant to us,

And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" And the Lord said, "Hear what the

unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Now this parable is not associating God with being like the unjust judge. We're told explicitly that Jesus told this "parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart." This parable teaches that people should keep asking even when there is no immediate answer. Our prayers are to continue in faith. We are to remain trusting, even when we don't know when an answer will come.

So then, to summarise our highlights of Jesus' teaching on prayer as it relates to our prayers not being answered, we see that we are to ask, seek and knock and indeed to go on asking, seeking and knocking, trusting in God's love for us and his goodness, not trusting in the quality of our prayers or our techniques. We are to do this even when we don't receive an immediate answer.

Reasons Why We Lack (James 4)

Jesus mentioned that a lack of faith can influence the answers we receive to our prayers. Is that the only reason for a negative answer or a delayed response? The letter of James gives us further information and I'll highlight a few parts.

In chapter 4, James takes issue with the desire and motivation of people. "You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

So God does not answer the prayers favourably of people who are asking for selfish motives. James goes on to describe the coveting (the wrongful desiring) of the people as a "friendship with the world." For us, particularly as we've been praying about rain, I don't think we've been motivated by a friendship with the world but when God doesn't answer our prayers as we expect we're invited to examine our motives.

Do we ask for rain because we want there to be crops to feed people and provide good and right employment for ourselves and others? Or do we pray for rain

because without suitable rain we can't buy those fancy toys and gadgets which we've been eyeing off? Or without rain we can't go on that holiday which we hope will give our friends something to drool over on Facebook?

James contrasts this friendship with the world with humility and brings this to a head by referring to prayer again at the end of chapter 5, Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

The righteous person here is the person who is in a right relationship with God. When we don't receive answers in the way or in the time that we want it is not just good to examine our motives as to why we want something or not, it's also good to reflect on the way we view God. Are we truly trusting God as our Father? Are we resting humbly in what Jesus has achieved for us as the way to be right with God? Have we confessed our sins?

Again, I'm not wanting to say that God has not answered our prayers for rain or for other things because we arrogantly are trusting in ourselves and haven't confessed our sins, but we should take this situation as an opportunity to reflect on ourselves and our relationship with our Father.

Complexity of God's Acts (Luke 13:1-9)

Finally, sometimes the reason why God doesn't answer prayers in the way we hope or expect is because God's ways are higher and different to our ways. The reason why we had Luke 13 read to us is because when disaster strikes we often struggle to make sense of what's happening, similarly to how it is confusing when God doesn't answer our prayers.

When God doesn't answer our prayers we are inclined to ask, "Are we particularly sinful for this to happen? This appears to be what people were asking Jesus about in regards to two terrible troubles they had witnessed.

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

It doesn't appear that the victims of Pilate's attack or the victim of the collapse of the tower in Siloam were especially sinful but the survivors could learn a lesson from what has happened and make sure that they were in a right relationship with God. Both calamities and non-answered prayers mingle judgment and mercy. They are both punishment and purification. Suffering, and even death, can be both judgment and mercy at the same time.

Has God allowed the terrible drought we're experiencing to come to pass because of his judgement on humanity's poor treatment of the world? If we were created to rule over the creation, always knowing whose creation it is, then we've done a pretty poor job in caring for it.

However, what if, in the midst of the struggles which our communities are facing there was a move in the heart of certain people, prompted by the Holy Spirit, to recognise human's inability to truly change our hearts and solve such problems? If people responded to the drought, or the bushfires (or the floods when they come again), or whatever other calamity we experience, with a repentant heart and a crying out to God for mercy and for forgiveness which we don't deserve or earn, and so embrace what Christ has achieved for us, isn't that an act of mercy on God's part?

The final reason I can give you as to why God doesn't always answer prayers in the way or at the time that we would like is because God's ways are greater than our ways and God's ways often mix both judgement and mercy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, where do we go from here? Well, it's obvious that we shouldn't give up and stop praying. Rather, we should take this delay as an opportunity to reflect afresh on our own relationship with God as well as our motivation in asking for things. Likewise, when what we're experiencing is as widespread and damaging as this drought or similar calamity, we should pray that others would respond to the prompt of the Holy Spirit to make sure that they are right with God.

So let us go on asking, seeking and knocking while trusting in God's love for us and his goodness.

We're going to listen to a song now which is still very new to us. I ask you to remain seated for this song and use it as a reminder that even in the difficulties we face and the lack of answers for which we were hoping, that there is still growth and learning which God brings.

[Listed to Scars]