

THE SOCIETY OF UNANSWERED PRAY-ERS

By Paul Penno Jr.

October 29, 2011

Have you been praying for a certain blessing, and the answer seems never to have come? You have been persistent in prayer, as Jesus tells us to do (we “ought always to pray, and not to faint,” Lk. 18:1), and still the answer has not come.

You have asked Him to show you what might be wrong, what might be hindering your prayers (Peter says that if a man doesn’t treat his wife right his prayers will be “hindered,” 1 Pet. 3:7), and God has not told you of anything wrong that might be “hindering” the answer. The Holy Spirit does not convict you of failure to do any known duty, even though you kneel before God and beg Him to notice you and to instruct you. Still you ask Him for that special blessing and it doesn’t come.

Welcome to Job’s “Club,” the Society of Unanswered Pray-ers. You are not alone. The Prime Member is Jesus Himself. He prayed “with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that He feared,” but still He had to go to the cross and die (cf. Heb. 5:7).

The next verse reminds us that “Though He were a Son,” yet He had to learn the lessons of life as we do “by the things which He suffered.” But for sure He does not want you to duplicate the agony He suffered on the cross, nor even the agony which

Job suffered. There is an answer to your perplexity and disappointment.

What do you do when prayer after prayer seems to go unanswered? Sometimes it seems that the more you pray, the more elusive is the answer you seek. God has foreseen that problem and directs us to His Word, the Bible, to find understanding. That is how the Father spoke to His Son at His baptism in the Jordan River—by quoting two Old Testament texts together, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17; Ps. 2:7; Isa. 42:1). A wise writer has said the words that the Father quoted to Jesus that day are spoken to us as well (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 113).

Thus, your first step is to believe that you are His “beloved” child in whom He is “well pleased.” When you pray, you MUST believe that (Heb. 11:6; James 1:5, 6). Many unanswered prayers are “prayed” in dark unbelief. It’s not that the Father is mad at you, no; the problem is that your dark unbelief breaks the connection. You pray “in Jesus’ name,” don’t you? Well, that means that you identify with Him in your praying. You MUST, no matter how it stretches your faith to believe it, and to say it.

Second, you grasp the truth that Jesus went through the exact experience you have had of seemingly unanswered prayers. It was on His cross—when He cried out, “Why have You forsaken Me?” He said, “The servant is not greater than his lord” (Jn. 13:16). Don’t resent tasting of His experience!

Third, you learn as Jesus did, to believe God in total darkness. You may ask, “Why must I learn

When we think of what Jesus has saved us *from*, we want to say the biggest “Thank You” we can think of, because He could never have saved us this way unless He had already died our second death for us. And that’s just what He did when He died on His cross. The death He died was hell itself, *the real thing*.

Many people don’t see this, and that’s why they don’t give themselves to Jesus to live for Him. But now you *do* see it, don’t you?

I thank my brother for saving me from going to “sleep” when I was a child, in the first death. But now I thank Jesus because He saved me from the second death, and I tell Him that I am glad to obey Him and give Him my whole life.

Won’t you choose to do the same?

THAT lesson?” The answer: God is preparing you to endure throughout the “time of Jacob’s trouble,” when the only “light” will be that generated by your own personal faith in God’s word, as it was with Christ on His cross. You could never endure through that without this special pre-trial training.

Fourth, as you pray for more and more blessings yet to come, you never forget the ones you have already received. The greatest is that He has already saved you from the eternal grave that the second death means. That is an essential part of genuine faith—that constant realization that you are as one “alive from the dead” (Rom. 6:13).

The general idea the human race has about God is that He is far away. Jesus seems elusive, and “believers” often feel alone. Prayer appears to be unanswered, and they wonder, Does the One who says He is our Savior really care?

There was a man and his wife who had this problem in a big way. They had worship in their home daily for months and years, yes, decades. But the critically important answer they had prayed for a thousand times seemed more impossible every day that passed.

Finally wife gave up. “The Lord has it in for me,” she told husband; “I’m the problem. God will never answer our prayers as long as I pray. I’m too sinful for any prayer to be answered! It’s hopeless. Count me out. This marriage just won’t work.”

Husband decided to do just that—ignore her, press on without her. No longer did two kneeling join their hearts in earnest, soul-stretching, believing prayer together. They had always loved

each other but now became so alienated that they together dis-believed that God had made them “one.” The farness-away-from-God idea had destroyed their happiness, both of them.

It meant God had a problem on His hands because He had chosen this particular husband to be “the father of all who believe” in Him throughout all time; and here they were, two stumbling along in depressed unbelief. Wife was just as important a link in God’s plan as he was. Husband could never overcome unbelief until wife did also. (Her name, incidentally—Sarah).

God called Abraham to be our example in faith—he was to be “the father of the faithful.” And his wife was to share that honor of prestige in faith. Their marriage was to result in seven grand blessings for the world, most of all, that “in thee shall all families [homes, marriages] of the earth be blessed [made happy]” (12:2, 3). But their own happiness turned out to be a long time coming. So long, in fact, that both husband & wife thought the only way they’d find it was to break their marriage vows—that is, to let a third party in on their marriage.

In that marriage of Abraham and Sarah you have all the elements that make for alienation and divorce as we know it today: (a) disappointment with the marriage and with each other; (b) a wife who is bitter and alienated and angry with God (read Gen. 16:2); (c) a husband who is all too ready to grab the excuse to find some happiness in the “other woman” (read vs. 4, how he “went in” to Hagar, the comely younger woman).

have everlasting life” (John 3:16, KJV). The death that people die now is not what that word “perish” means. When people die now it’s just like when at night you say, “Good night, see you in the morning.”

There is another kind of death—that’s what the Bible says is “the second death” (Revelation 2:11; 20:14). *And that is what it means to “perish.”* At the end of the great “thousand years” that are yet to come, the wicked people will be judged, and they will “perish” in the lake of fire. No resurrection from that—ever. They will just be gone forever. That’s what “hell” will be.

It’s not because God will be extra angry with them; He does not hate them. He still pities them. But they themselves have made their choice to “perish.” God won’t force them to change their minds. They don’t want to live forever in God’s kingdom. They actually want to be separate from Him and separate from His kingdom. And so, God must give them what they really want. It sounds crazy, and it is, but Jesus says that “anyone who hates Me loves death” (Proverbs 8:36). Can you imagine that?

That is what Jesus has actually saved you and me from. Take a deep breath; that is proof that Jesus has saved you from that second death because if He had not saved us from it, we would all be dead right now in it. So don’t ever think that Jesus has done nothing for you!

All this means that God intends that the life you and I have today shall be the beginning of everlasting life. And it will be so, if we “walk with Jesus.” He is not “I-want-to-be-your-Savior.” He is your Savior! Now don’t push Him away.

He was so glad that his big brother saw him disappear beneath the water, and he rescued him. Because he did that for him, he became his “savior” from drowning. So really he owed his life to his brother!

Now, what has Jesus done for you?

The Bible tells us that He is “the Savior of the world.” It sounds nice to say that, but what does it mean?

We are all a part of the world, so what the Bible really says is that He has saved *us*. But what has He saved us from? What can you thank Jesus for?

No person in the world today has actually seen Jesus, but He is a real man, and He is also God. But for sure He is one of us and He belongs to us. The reason why we can’t see Him like we see any other person is that He is much greater than any other person. Billions of people would want to see Him (and they will see Him some day soon), but it wouldn’t be fair for Him to show Himself only to you or me. So everybody looks forward to seeing Him *in person* when He comes the second time. But when we do see Him we will thank Him, because He has *already* saved us from death.

But that’s not the ordinary kind of death that He has saved us from. It’s not the death that has happened when there’s a funeral.

Jesus tells us that a funeral isn’t about the real thing. When a person dies now, he simply goes to sleep until God’s resurrection day, when he will come up again. Jesus said that God “so loved *the world* that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not *perish*, but

But the happiness and personal fulfillment still didn’t come. In fact, read the story and you’ll find they waited 25 years before they could realize the married happiness they had been wanting and felt that God had promised them. Then the blessing finally came with the birth of Isaac, just in time to save them from the bitterness that old-age marriage failure always brings:

(1) Abraham humbly repented of his sin—which was more than mere lust; his sin was the darker one of unbelief (faith makes it impossible to yield to the temptations of lust); (2) Sarah repented of her anger against God because Heb 11:11 says that “through faith Sarah received strength [finally!] to conceive.” The punch line of truth in this memorable marriage is: *Believe* the promise that God gave you of happiness in your marriage, and that believing will give you endurance and a rich reward that indulgence with a third party could never bring you.

If you are a true child of Abraham, make up your mind: you will be just as tempted to unbelief as he was; but by the grace of Christ you can overcome as he (and Sarah!) did.

So, you say you feel cold, empty, that your faith is dead? Here is the jump-start cable: thank God He has saved you “in Christ” from the second death. If that doesn’t rev you up, nothing under heaven will. You will have new understanding of your seemingly unanswered prayers.

Let’s notice several possibilities: (a) God may be working hard to give you a “yes” answer but He cannot force the will of some person who may be “withstanding” Him; that’s what happened about

one of Daniel's earnest prayers (cf. 10:13). If that's what's happening, you can be sure that the dear Lord is as merciful to you as He was to Daniel, and He will impress your heart with the conviction of truth. He will save you from discouragement.

(b) The answer may be in process, and it just takes more time. This could be true if you are praying for a loved one. Remember that on the cross Christ accomplished something for "every man," which makes it possible for Him to treat "every man" as though that person has never sinned (see Mt. 5:45)—Christ has already died that person's second death, and therefore He treats him/her just as though that person is going to be saved. This is the meaning of that interesting phrase "legal justification."

Now, you do the same; treat that person as though you fully expect that your prayers are already answered, and that person is going to be saved just as you are. Draw a "circle" that includes that person inside. Don't say, "Oh, that person is far from being ready!" The closer you come to Jesus the more of His skill and wisdom you will share, because you will have "the mind of Christ" (Phil. 2:5).

Jesus Christ said that God is His Father; that's easy for us to believe. But He also said that God is our Father, too; and that's our problem to believe. Can everybody in the world, the bad as well as the good, call God their Father? Or does He bear that relationship only to the righteous?

When you think you've been very good it's easy to pray the Lord's prayer which begins, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name . . ." and you go on

Angels are His "ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation . . ." (Heb. 1:14). But their ministry is not to do things that those "heirs of salvation" should do themselves. The Father's will never "be done in earth as it is in heaven" until His own people get busy and do it. A prayer that will always be answered is this, "Father in heaven, what do You want me to do?" It may be a phone call that you have shied away from; to make the call will require laying self aside!

It may be a letter that you have been impressed that it is your duty to write; that too will require a denial of self. It may be a personal visit likewise that you need to make.

Welcome to the joyous thrill that is yours when you know you have done what the heavenly Father wants you to do. That means you have become a fellow-laborer with Him!

Can you think of a higher honor you could have but that—as the holy angels all step aside in deep respect to you as you DO what the Father has appointed you to do?

A little boy didn't know how to swim. But *he* wanted to paddle around in the lake. His brother was six years older, and he knew how, and he wanted to try to teach his younger brother.

They didn't know it, but the city had done some dredging in that lake. You couldn't see the deep dredge holes, of course. Suddenly he fell into one of them. It seemed like stepping off a cliff. He just went right down like a stone. Everything got dark.

honors you in His recognition of you as a child of His Father. You are a member of “the family of heaven” (Eph. 3:15), closer to Him who is on the throne than any angel in heaven can be.

(2) You are already “adopted” (1:4, 5). An adopted child in a family is a member of the family, not on probation; he is secure in his new relationship although he may not realize it. He may be a naughty adopted child (such kids are often naughty simply because they are not sure that their adoption is genuine—they try to test its reality). They need to learn the truth of their adoption into the earthly family through the avenue of understanding their adoption (and ours!) into the heavenly “family.” Oh how precious is the truth that earthly family happiness depends on first appreciating our adoption into “the whole family in heaven and earth” (Eph. 3:15).

(3) The blessed New Covenant gospel implants that solid confidence into the hearts of family members and children. Let’s not confuse our situation with any Old Covenant teaching in our family. Let’s not employ fear as our method of imposing control; some heart-broken, tearful prayer of humility will do father and mother (and adoptive parent) worlds of good. The Lord does love you and your children, natural and adopted; He is working. Let Him work!

Does the Lord need humans to do things that He wants done “in earth as it is in heaven”? When we pray the Lord’s prayer, we are confessing that His will should be done in earth as it is in heaven”; but who is to accomplish that?

through it, “Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us. . . . and do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil . . .” (Matt. 6:6ff,).

But when you have made a mess of your life, done wrong, and you know you are condemned as a selfish sinner, and as an “unprofitable servant” you deserve to be “cast out into outer darkness” (25:30), can you pray the Lord’s prayer? Can you say “My Father who is in heaven . . .”?

That is exactly what the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came from heaven to teach us to say: He came as “the friend of . . . sinners” (11:19), and He invites “all” of us to “come to [Him]” and find the relief which is salvation from ourselves (11:28-30).

There is a cosmic Enemy who would deter us from coming and from praying the Lord’s prayer; perhaps you are sitting somewhere handcuffed, you know why; you even sense the condemnation of all humanity. You know “they” would “cast [you] into outer darkness” and hope you stay there forever. Now you face the greatest battle of your life, your battle of eternity: will you believe that the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ is your Father, that “out of the depths [you] have cried to [Him], O Lord. . . . If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You” (Psalm 130:1-4). Yes; and it’s your job (and our job) to believe it!

Pray the Lord’s prayer from your heart in your dungeon, and that will prove that you have been adopted as a child of God (read Rom. 8:15!).

Everybody in the world is invited to pray the Lord’s Prayer, which addresses God as “our Father which

is in heaven” (Matt. 6:9). That’s because the Father gave His Son Jesus to be “the Savior of the world” (John 4:42); He is that already. You don’t have to do anything to make Him become your Savior. What you have to do is to welcome Him for what He already is, to receive Him for what He already is—your Savior.

Have you ever been crushed, broken in heart, humiliated? Felt that Heaven was closed against you, your prayers were unanswered? You’ve been stoned (like Stephen in Acts 7, that is!)? You were *persona non grata* at the throne of God? The most difficult place to endure ostracism is in the church that you love, because church fellowship sensitizes the most delicate and painful of human emotions.

There are several Bible characters who can serve as Encouragers of such who suffer: (1) Joseph, sold as a slave by his own brethren, opposed ten to one, discarded like a piece of junk, wept broken-hearted at his prospects. But behold his magnanimity toward his “brethren” and his forgiveness of them (Gen. 45:1-8).

(2) David, hunted like a wild beast by the “anointed” king of Israel, Saul. When “the anointed of the Lord” wants to finish you off, you have reason to feel tempted to think God has forsaken you. How could God be with you when His chosen, “anointed king” is against you? Some when they have this sad experience give up in despair and commit a kind of spiritual suicide, which they must not do. They should give serious study to the psalms of David written when he was so bitterly persecuted by king Saul (there are many!). God saw fit to preserve

these psalms, knowing that some people throughout history would have a similar experience to David. For example, read Psalm 4, 5, 6, 9, 11, etc. On and on! And then we have the psalms of David written when he was plagued with the results of his own sin (suffering even more difficult to endure!), such as 3 (when he fled from his own son Absalom), 7 (when Cush the Benjamite cursed him as he fled), 32 and 51, his penitential psalms, etc. With only one exception (Ps. 88), in his psalms of discouragement, David always ends up with his choice to “come boldly unto the throne of grace” and trust the Lord to care for him. All the psalms that begin in the minor key end up in the major key; only #88 is in the minor key throughout.

(3) Then there is Number Three: Jesus. Never was anyone more humiliated, heart-broken, insulted, condemned, as He was—by His own people. Taking our place, suffering all that we are called upon to endure, He cried out (as we often do!), “My God, why have You forsaken Me?” If your soul is tempted and you feel driven to discouragement, “consider Him who endured such contradiction of sinners against Himself, lest you be wearied and faint in your mind” (See Heb. 12:3). And don’t forget, do as He did: pray for your tormentors!

You are not worthy, you have no merit of your own. You cannot save yourself, but you can thank Him for saving you. That’s happiness!

Something happens deep inside your soul when you come to Him in that prayer of thanksgiving:

(1) You feel deeply humbled (but not humiliated; there’s a great difference). You sense that He