

When we talk about prayer it's important to acknowledge that there are prayers where we plead with God; yet it seems as though he remains silent – and these times can be the most challenging when it comes to how we keep on in the faith.

The apostle Paul knew what this was like (and we should remember Jesus understood this as well in the Garden of Gethsemane). Paul, writing to the church in Corinth wrote about what he described as a thorn in his flesh, **three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.** (2 Corinthians 12:8)

Very often when our prayers go unanswered, we assume there's something wrong with us. Our faith hasn't been strong enough, we didn't pray in the right way, we're being punished for something in our past, or maybe something we're still doing today. We always assume the problem is with us. We haven't been good enough to warrant God's intervention in our lives.

In this section of 2 Corinthians where Paul talks about his struggles with unanswered prayer it's in the context of defending himself against the accusation that he wasn't as good as other preachers, Christians, he wasn't as eloquent, nor had he been blessed by God in the same way they had.

His defence against these accusations was to list his achievements, his qualifications. He talked about his racial purity; he was a true child of Abraham. Indeed, in Philippians 3:5 Paul described himself as a Hebrew of Hebrews, a pharisee no less and faultless before the law. If Paul's Jewishness, his place among God's chosen people was to be examined, then he was telling us there's no reason for God not to answer him.

Paul continued with this defence against the accusation that he was in some way inferior, not up to the mark, not a good enough Christian. He listed the number of times he'd been beaten, or hungry or in prison, cold and naked. If this willingness to suffer for the gospel wasn't enough, then he talked about an incredible experience where he was given a vision of heaven, of glory and of God – something he described as **being caught up to the third heaven.** (2 Corinthians 12:2)

Not only was Paul the model Jew, not only had he suffered for the gospel, but actually – God had been pleased enough with him to give him this unique experience. All of this on top of the wonderful things God had done through Paul, the healings, the conversions, the escapes from prison and of course people being raised from the dead.

Surely there was nothing about Paul that would hold God back from taking this thorn – and yet as far as we know, he lived with it all of his days.

The first thing we need to say about unanswered prayer is this: It is not a sign that God is displeased with us, or that we are in some way inadequate, or God is unable to work in us. Here was Paul with one of the greatest Christian CV's known to man and he lived with this thorn in his flesh.

So, if Paul's thorn wasn't a punishment from God, then maybe it was something he was over exaggerating about. Maybe it was only something minor, a sore toe, a minor ailment or just an irritating inconvenience.

The text doesn't seem to back this up. The word used for thorn is also used to describe the nations that weren't driven out of the promised land by the Israelites. Moses described them as a ***barb in your eyes or thorn in your side***. (Numbers 33:55)

This is more than a mere irritant. Also, the way in which Paul describes this thorn is in the present tense. This means that he's saying something more than he had or has a thorn in his side. He's saying that he has had and continues to have this thorn. It was an ongoing problem. This wasn't a sporadic bout of depression, or periodic pain – this was ongoing and chronic in nature, debilitating even. Paul described it as a messenger from Satan, tormenting him, in verse 7. Elsewhere in Acts he talked about Satan preventing him from doing what he planned.

This was something that impacted how Paul lived and carried out his ministry.

We may well be living with a thorn in our side, an illness physical, emotional or mental, guilt about the past, a feeling of inadequacy that there are so many other better Christians out there and we have prayed, and prayed, and prayed (three times, or maybe more) and nothing seems to change and so we buy into this idea that because we are weak, because we are less able – so we have been forgotten by God.

We've just watched Joe Biden pull out of the presidential race because he was perceived as being to weak, less able than his opponent. Now that Kamila Harris has entered the election there's more of a focus on Donald Trump's seemingly incoherent ramblings.

This is all because we have been conditioned to believe that to be successful, to be taken seriously we need to be almost perfect, and this translates into the Christian world. We think if we are to be taken seriously in our faith then we can't have things, thorns in the flesh, dogging us. We really ought to be able to present a better image of Christianity.

The problem with this line of thinking is that God did in fact answer Paul's prayer – he didn't remove his thorn, but he did answer the prayer. ***My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness***. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

In today's world, Paul may well have been asked to step aside just as President Biden was asked to step aside. It seems he was being told the church needs someone stronger, with fewer afflictions.

Think through some of the most famous stories in scripture, stories like Gideon preparing an army to face the Midianites. He assembled an army of some 32,000 men to fight a Midianite army of some 135,000 men. We might well think the odds were already stacked against Gideon, but God made him reduce the size of his army to just 300. We know the story of men lapping or cupping water with their hands.

The reason for such a dramatic reduction was to ensure there was no room for Gideon or Israel to boast in their own strength. God created a situation where he and he alone could receive the glory.

This is exactly the same thing that was happening in Paul's life. If Paul had been impressive, if he had been a great leader, great speaker, strong and physically fit – the tendency would have been to give him the glory.

God's power, God's strength, his incredible capacity for the unbelievable was most clearly displayed because of Paul's weakness. The thorn than Paul described as limiting where he could go and what he could do only served to make the gospel even more widely known, it gave the gospel a bigger impact on peoples lives.

The sufficiency of God's grace that comes with our unanswered prayers is the way in which our situations, grief, illness, limited capacity of any kind – the unlikeliness of the role that has been thrust upon us, or the feeling of being out of our depth in the situation we find ourselves. The sufficiency of God's grace is that he enables the gospel to be preached, talked about despite who we are or what we are.

His grace ensures the power of the gospel is made known in lives throughout our community despite our weaknesses, or even because of our weaknesses. It is in how we continue to find the capacity to worship through grief or illness, to keep looking to Christ when all logic says we should be looking elsewhere.

This is the sufficiency of God's grace. And so this morning we finish with this: take hope, regardless of our situation, how we feel, despite our weaknesses because it is in our weakness, in our disappointments, in our fears and hardships that the power of God is made known and so don't be embarrassed about unanswered prayer, but rejoice in the strength of God's grace that accompanies the silence.