

Surviving the Undertow of Unanswered Prayer

Psalm 69:13-21, 29-36

An *undertow* refers to a hidden current near a shore, pulling just below the surface of the waves, moving in a different direction than the current on top of the water.

Psalm 69 points to something in the spiritual realm that can result in an unseen pull deep within our emotional wellbeing. This psalm addresses unanswered prayer. It can subtly begin to tag us when God does not answer our prayer like we have requested.

This psalm is one of the top three psalms most quoted in the New Testament (psalm 22, psalm 110, then, psalm 69).

Some of the citations are messianic prophecies related to the sufferings of Christ. It is staggering when one realizes that one part of our Lord's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane was unanswered. At first, He asked the Father to remove the cup of suffering that was coming His way. After all, He did not deserve the suffering that was about to take place. He then, however, went on to ask that the Father would not answer according to His emotional preferences but according to the Father's will.

Since the Father is not under obligation to answer any of our prayers the way we would prefer, how do we survive being pulled under by emotional reactions to a delay or even a denial of our request?

Lifeguards at the beach usually recommend one simple strategy for surviving a rip tide or a rip current. Rather than trying to fight the strong undercurrent pulling one seaward, they suggest swimming sideward to the right or to the left. The width of the current is usually quite narrow.

In Psalm 69:13-21 and 29-36 David demonstrates how to swim out of a strong undercurrent pulling away from the Lord simply because He does not answer us the way we would like.

First, let's review the text itself. As you read through this passage, look for patterns or escape strategies that would relate to waiting upon the Lord after you have asked Him for something over and over again.

13 But as for me, my prayer is to You, O Lord. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of Your steadfast love answer me in Your saving faithfulness.

14 Deliver me from sinking in the mire; let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters.

15 Let not the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the pit close its mouth over me.

16 Answer me, O Lord, for Your steadfast love is good; according to Your abundant mercy, turn to me.
17 Hide not Your face from Your servant, for I am in distress; make haste to answer me.
18 Draw near to my soul, redeem me; ransom me because of my enemies!
19 You know my reproach, and my shame and my dishonor; my foes are all known to You.
20 Reproaches have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none.
21 They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.

29 But I am afflicted and in pain; let Your salvation, O God, set me on high!
30 I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving.
31 This will please the Lord more than an ox or a bull with horns and hoofs.
32 When the humble see it they will be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive.
33 For the Lord hears the needy and does not despise His own people who are prisoners.
34 Let heaven and earth praise Him, the seas and everything that moves in them.
35 For God will save Zion and build up the cities of Judah, and people shall dwell there and possess it;
36 the offspring of His servants shall inherit it, and those who love His name shall dwell in it.

Now, if you are currently struggling over the Lord's response to a certain prayer, then swim with me out of that strong channel of water in the same direction David swam when he was going through a difficult time in his personal life.

Confirm the Proper Address to the Throne of God, 69:13

But as for me, my prayer is to You, O Lord...

I read an interesting article in the online version of the Smithsonian Magazine that stated Benjamin Franklin published a list of 800 names in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of residents in Philadelphia who had not picked up their mail. Of course, the Mail Recovery Center (previously, Dead Letter Office) was not officially established until 1825. In 2014 the US Postal Service published that they received 88 million items at the MRC.

What happens to prayer requests that are not properly addressed? I don't know the answer to that question, but what I do know from this text is that David wanted to make certain during his crisis that he lifted up his petition with the proper address.

David sent his prayer addressed with two important features: addressed to a Person and appealing to His position. It is possible to become so obsessed with the substance of our request that we totally forget that we are actually talking to a real Person. He also humbled himself before the One he called, "Lord". I think he David knew that he was God's servant and could not force the Almighty to do anything.

Wait for the Appropriateness of the Time of God, 69:13

...At an acceptable time, O God...

Sometimes we become frustrated or disillusioned with prayer if the Lord does not move as quickly as we wish. We assume that a "no" for now is a "no" forever. But this isn't true. God's timing is always perfect, and He will take our desire and sync it with His broader agenda. We have to trust His timing when it comes to His answers to our prayers.

For example, Paul was asking the Lord for guidance on his mission trip described in Acts 16:6 and following. The Lord closed the door for Paul to go into Asia Minor at that particular time. Can't you just hear Paul wrestling with this divine decision that was cross-thread with his human desire. "Why, Lord? Don't You love the people of Asia Minor?"

I am so glad that Luke recorded Acts 19:10 so that we might see one example of God's perfection in timing. Luke wrote, *"This continued for two years, so that all the resident of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."* What was once a "no" answer to Paul's prayer for Asia, later became a "yes". Isn't it interesting that two years in the will of God is more fruitful than many years outside of His will?

Lean upon the Attributes of the Character of God, 69:13, 16

*...in the abundance of Your steadfast love answer me in Your saving faithfulness.
Answer me, O Lord, for Your steadfast love is good; according to Your abundant mercy, turn to me.*

When you wait for an answer from God, it can help if you lean upon the character of God. Let's examine verses 13 and 16 and pull out the amazing attributes upon which David was focused while he waited upon the Lord to come through for him.

the _____ of God
the _____ of God
the _____ of God
the _____ of God.

What did you find? I noticed David taking a magnifying glass and looking at the love of God, His faithfulness, His goodness and His mercy. What other character qualities would you add to this list from what you have learned about the Lord? _____

Look for an Answer in accordance with the Kindness of God, 69:13, 16-17, 33

*...in the abundance of Your steadfast love **answer** me in Your saving faithfulness.*

***Answer** me, O Lord, for Your steadfast love is good; according to Your abundant mercy, turn to me.*

*Hide not Your face from Your servant, for I am in distress; make haste to **answer** me.
For the Lord **hears** the needy and does not despise His own people who are prisoners*

We may not know when the Lord will answer our prayers, and we may not agree with how the Lord answers our prayers, but we can have assurance that He has revealed in scripture that He does indeed hear and answer prayer.

In the Bible the Lord often invites us to talk with Him about life. In Jeremiah 33:3 God says, *"Call to Me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known."* This invitation comes with an explanation. His answer will be beyond our understanding.

Think for a moment about the various answers that we may receive from the Lord. For example, He may answer with something quite different from what we had originally requested. Or, He may flat out tell answer with a no. If you have been a parent, then you know the validity of not giving children everything and anything that they ask for. It wouldn't be good for them.

Like we saw earlier in this study, He also sometimes requires that we wait for the answer. It will come, but it will come later than what we prefer. I suspect that some answers will come either in Heaven or after our lifetime. Could verse 29 be a reference to eternity rather than next week? Did David express to the Lord in verse 36 that even if the answer came after his life it would be ok with him?

Expect Assistance through the Intervention of God, 69:14-15

Deliver me from sinking in the mire; let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters.

Let not the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the pit close its mouth over me.

The core principle behind prayer is that we are asking God for His intervention into life. As was stated already, He may not intervene anywhere near the way that we had assumed. But, here is the deal. If we ask Him, He will be on our side. We can expect His help if we cry out to Him.

There are a few verses that you need to have on your short list when trouble comes knocking. It is comforting to know that God is with us, but it is also a tremendous blessing to know that He is for us. Some of these "ally verses" are found in Psalms like this passage. Psalm 56:9 says that the Lord is for us. Psalm 118:6-7 also states that He is for us. Psalm 124:1-2 speaks of the same promise that God is actually for us. Romans 8:31 asks a very good question, *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"*

Rest in the Assurance of the Awareness of God, 69:19, 21, 29,

¹⁹ You know my reproach, and my shame and my dishonor; my foes are all known to You.

They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink. But I am afflicted and in pain; let Your salvation, O God, set me on high!

There is a temptation to equate a delay in answering our prayer with ignoring the disaster in which we are praying. This is not a true assessment. Just because the Lord does not pull us out of the dilemma does not mean that He is ignoring the pain and the hurt that we are going through.

When Jesus was on the cross, the pain He endured was horrendous. Was the Father unaware of His hardship and pain? He knew the suffering that His Son was going through. God is omniscient, meaning that He is aware of everything, or all-knowing.

Hagar represents those who have traveled down a broken road. She learned something about God in Genesis 16:13-14. She learned through all of her suffering that the Lord had seen all that had taken place, the good, the bad and the ugly. She called Him, "*You are a God of seeing.*" She went on to say of Him, "*Truly here I have seen Him who looks after me.*"

Friend, God knows all that has taken place in your life also. He is aware of the difficult times that you are going through and have been through. This is why Jesus said we are wasting our time worrying when He already knows what we need (Matthew 6:32).

Sing with Gladness in Adoration of God, 69:30-32, 34

*I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify Him with thanksgiving.
This will please the Lord more than an ox or a bull with horns and hoofs.
When the humble see it they will be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive.
Let heaven and earth praise Him, the seas and everything that moves in them.*

If one reads this psalm from beginning to end, it is clear that David had not yet received an answer to his prayer. Not much had changed in his circumstances, still looking at the same old problems.

So how did you swim out of the rip tide, David? He chose to swim perpendicular to the shoreline of God. He wanted to see the Lord take away all of his problems and deliver him out of the dangers that he was facing. So, his choice was to praise the Lord in the meantime.

Did you catch the decision to praise in verse 30? David says, "*I **will** praise the name of God with a song; I **will** magnify Him with thanksgiving.*" He isn't depending on his feelings to open the door to praise. David determines to use his will to start worshiping the Lord.

He looks around and sees the positive impact that praising will have on others who are watching his response. When they see him focus on God, it will make them glad (v. 32). He knows that he was created to magnify the Lord, so this pleases his Maker (v. 31). All of creation is designed to honor the Creator, so why not roll with it. He chooses to swim to the side when he cannot swim away from his problems.