

WHEN PRAYERS GO UNANSWERED

BY E. KENT ROGERS

Few people I know complain of a shortage of difficulties and trials in life. Regardless of creed or caste, life hands us plenty enough trouble. But for Christians, among the most grievous of all challenges we face is when God seems silent, distant, unconcerned. Our prayers go unanswered. We may wonder if they are heard at all. We may get pushed to a place where we begin to doubt if God actually loves us, or if God exists. These are among the darkest, loneliest and most distressing times we face as followers of Jesus Christ.

There are many kinds of prayers; some are relatively petty. We pray for a business venture to succeed, a hassle free flight, or the like. Other prayers stem from the deeper, more altruistic aspects of our being, given to us by God. For example, we may pray for a loved one to be relieved of a terminal illness, addiction, or depression. We may pray for improvement in our marriage. We may pray that God helps us improve ourselves and overcome our own weaknesses. And though we may pray for these things consistently over a long period, sometimes nothing changes or improves. God seems to have forgotten to rain down His presence and love onto us. Our spirit is suffering a period of drought. But it is not that God has moved away from us or stopped loving us. Drought of the spirit is caused by a blindness or inability to sense God. Our minds lack the spiritual lens, the truth; we need to see God (*Apocalypse Explained* 481).

What is going on at these times? Why are we left feeling so alone? What purpose is God achieving in our seeming abandonment? Near the end of I Kings, we read a story of a contest to end all contests. We might call it the War of Lords, or the Battle of the Gods. The setting is at the end of a three-year drought. Yahweh Himself has arranged for the contest. He tells

His prophet Elijah how it is going to go. The worshippers of Baal are to erect an altar to Baal and place a sacrifice on it. Elijah repairs an altar of Yahweh and places a sacrifice on it. Elijah then has a trench dug around the altar and enough water poured onto the sacrifice and altar to fill the whole trench. Whichever God or so-called god is able to bring fire down from heaven and burn the sacrifice, that God shall be proved the true God. Elijah gives the worshippers of Baal a head start. At the crack of dawn, they pray and pray to Baal. They shout and dance themselves into a frenzy in their petitions to Baal. "Oh Baal!" they cry out as loud as they can till the sun goes down. They even go so far as to cut and slash themselves in hope that Baal will honor their self-sacrifice and bring down fire from heaven. But Baal remains silent.

It is now dusk. It is Elijah's turn. He calls out to Yahweh, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Immediately Yahweh responds by sending a fire so fierce that the stones are split, the sacrifice is utterly consumed and the water is instantaneously immaterialized. The winner is undeniable: Yahweh.

When we hear this story, our instinct is to rejoice and think, "Yes, that's my God, the Lord. He always wins." We place ourselves on the victor's team. And in some sense, yes, Yahweh is our God and Yahweh does always win. But not infrequently, we misunderstand the true nature of our God, Yahweh. And it is at these times that life seems so dark and scary.

The word "Baal" means "lord." Strangely, it is this very word, lord, that is invariably substituted for the Hebrew letters YHWH (Yahweh) in almost all translations of the Bible. In our prayers and conversations, we also use that word, Lord, when we mean our God, YHWH. The word Lord is synonymous with Master and the chief characteristic implied in that word is Power or Powerful. Although all power is inherent within, God's true name, YHWH, does not chiefly, denote power, but Reality or

Existence or Being. YHWH means, “Who is Being” or “The I Am.” (*Arcana Coelestia* 7636).

At the end of His Sermon on the Mount as well as elsewhere Jesus said, “Not all who call out to Me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will be received.” And anyone who has petitioned God and felt that stony silence in return can testify that at times, this is true. We call out, “Lord, Lord” but our words are not received.

When the worshippers were dancing around the altar, shouting, and cutting themselves, they were calling out, just as if we do today, “Oh Lord! Hear our prayers!” The only thing that was different was the language they used. We might be tempted to think that our minds and hearts are in a different place than the Baal worshippers, because, after all, we are thinking of YHWH, and not Baal.

But when we are trying to get God to change reality according to our will, even when our will seems right and good, it is power that we are seeking and power that we are worshipping— as our Lord, Master, or Baal. We make ourselves disciples of Baal, power, when our worship stems from concern for self and the world (*Apocalypse Explained* 160). Power does describe an aspect—an important aspect—of YHWH. He is omnipotent. But He is so much more. His chief aspect is not power but Love (*True Christian Religion* 43). This is what He showed us when He took on the form of a human being and walked among us as Jesus Christ. He had a singular message and command—“Love others as I have loved you.” His life’s story in effect says: “I am totally willing to suffer and die for the sake of loving and helping you.”

The word “Lord” is not the problem. “Throughout heaven [Jesus Christ, Savior of the world] is acknowledged and worshipped as Lord, since He has all power in heaven and on earth” (*Arcana Coelestia* 14). But when we say or think the word Lord, it is important to think of Jesus Christ and His essential

quality and message—love.

If Divine Love is YHWH's primary characteristic, Divine Wisdom must be His second (*Apocalypse Explained* 1124, *True Christian Religion* 43). God has a plan and the plan is good. God knows what He is doing. If this is not true, than all the love in the world and heaven will not be enough. Only in context of His Divine Love and Divine Wisdom does his Divine Power take its proper position (*True Christian Religion* 56). His power is to create angels out of mere mortals. His power is to save sinners. His power is to bring joy and love to hearts that are riddled with sorrow and despair, rage and fear. His power is to evolve love within the human heart and within human society. In short, His is the power to save (*True Christian Religion* 56).

When something goes terribly wrong in our lives; when something does not go according to plan; when our prayers and petitions fall on deaf ears, it is human to reach the point of anger. "Lord!" we may cry out in utter despair, "You hate me! Lord, You have abandoned me. Lord, You don't exist, do You?" In one sense, in this last idea, we have finally reached the hard-learned truth—that Lord whom we have been petitioning no more exists than does Baal.

This is not a happy, warm message, but it also is not condemnatory. By putting ourselves in the shoes of the Baal worshippers, I certainly do not mean to evoke guilt or shame. My hope, in fact, is to share a certain peace and relief from that awful feeling of abandonment and separation from God. In the story, the Baal worshippers are slaughtered. Elijah, the good person, then asks God please to give him death because, frankly, he has had enough of life. God sends him up to a mountain to witness a wind so strong it splits apart rocks. YHWH says that He is not in that wind. Next, there is a terrible earthquake, shaking the foundations of the earth. YHWH says that He is not in that earthquake. Next, a fire destroys and consumes

everything in its path. YHWH says that He is not in that fire.

Finally, there is a still small voice. This can be translated a delicate whispering voice (*New Spirit Filled Life Bible NKJV* text notes for I Kings 19:12). In the original language, the word translated 'small' literally means pulverized or crushed. YHWH says that He is that whisper. In the nitty-gritty of our day-to-day lives, love is so tiny, so delicate and fragile. Someone cuts us off, a wave of anger rises and love is forgotten. We face a financial crisis and love is drowned in the sea of worries. Selfish lusts and desires beat and thrash love in the back-alley of our mind. Almost everything seems more powerful than love. Even simple boredom and routine have an evaporating effect on love. We see our spouse every day and forget what an amazing human being she is. We see our kids every day and forget how precious they are. Love is so small, so delicate, so fragile and crushable.

In Jesus, we see this. He did not bring down fire from heaven. He did not call on His legions of angel warriors. He did not speak back to His accusers. He did not even step down from the cross. He was crushed by the hate of humankind. However, while love seems so small and so frail, love is in fact, invincible. Love is omnipotent because God is Love. This is the bedrock doctrine and fundamental tenet of Christian faith. It is the true message of Easter.

So what do we do about these challenges to faith, when life seems cruel and God seems silent? Even in this story, we may wonder how the God of love would have the prophets of Baal slaughtered. Could not a simple conversion ceremony have sufficed? Likewise, we may wonder why a loved one must suffer so terribly with cancer, with alcohol, with depression, with loneliness or something else. This sermon is not going to answer these questions. Rather, this sermon is here to offer a simple, but effective spiritual remedy, which we can employ when we face these times of deep despair.

God's plan for us is that we love one another. That is the plan. This sermon is offering that spiritual remedy. What do we do when our loved one is debased by heroin; what do we do when our own body is devastated by debilitating pain; what do we do when God does not answer our pleas for escape from our personal hells? We keep on trying to love, because that is the true God. The God that does not answer us and does not give us what we want—that is Baal. It is good to get so frustrated with this false god that we give up on that lord. When we do, it is as if the prophets and worshippers of Baal that are living inside of us are made no more. They are slaughtered. It is important to note that YHWH did not order the slaughter of the prophets of Baal. Elijah himself ordered that. However, our true God, YHWH, bends human mistakes into healing for others (*Divine Providence* 281, 240). This story helps to heal us and bring us into states of love. We are happier. We make others happier.

No matter what is happening or not happening in our lives, our goal is to love. Our peace is in loving. Our freedom is in loving. Our eventual happiness is in doing the exercises of love. When we seek to use God as a means to power, we are going to be enslaved by the false god of power, Baal. Seeking power makes us slaves. God's name is YHWH; we might say life or reality or even as is. Often, we do not like this God. Life is not often easy. Reality is not usually as comfortable as a stiff drink, or an hour drone into the TV, or a plunge into fantasy. Often we want power to change reality more than we want to love reality. But God is the Author of reality as it is. It is the best possible plan for us. It is the ever-unfolding flower of pure love. Although this is easy to say, it is almost impossible to feel at times.

Even the good person, Elijah, longed for death. He did not like reality as it was. Even Elijah was forgetting that God is not big power, but frail, fragile love. No matter what reality is dishing out, our job is singular, same and simple, to love in each moment, the best we can. That is what it means to be a follower

of Christ. That is what it means to be a Christian. This idea is not grand or even that appealing. But it does refocus our mind onto the real God, and His real message to us—love others. And in those very dark times when God seems absent or even cruel, it is comforting to realize that we have been petitioning the wrong lord without even knowing it. In those dark times, usually we will realize that we have not been seeking first and foremost to love others, but rather we have been seeking God to do something to suit our will and personal idea of what should happen in life.

Now let us look at the bad people in the story—Ahab and Jezebel. This pair is said to be the worst of all Israelite history. In Kings, Ahab was spurred on by his wife Jezebel. I was dumbfounded to find out what their names mean. Ahab means, Friend of the Father. And Jezebel means Chaste. These two joined together in unholy matrimony bred the most rampant and flagrant worshipping of Baal that Israel had ever seen or would see. And it is so squeamishly true in our lives too. “God, Father! I am Your friend! From my youth I have loved You and served You! I am chaste! Please, O Lord, answer my prayers. Fulfill my petitions!” And the unspoken subtext is “I am good! I am deserving. Give me Your power to wield.” Our rational has been wed to our selfish desires and in this state we misperceive ourselves as good when of course God alone is good (*Apocalypse Explained* 1146, 160). From a self-righteous state of mind, we are praying to power, to Master to Baal. And mercifully, YHWH does not respond to prayers offered up to that name.

He allows us to cut ourselves in service to this Baal until we despair of that false “Lord” We stop crying out, “Lord, Lord!” and start remembering our real duty—to keep loving in the moment, no matter what reality happens to look like. It is no easy task, but it is the only task. And there is something

comforting in having a focused goal. The false prophets are killed. The rain finally falls from the heavens. We hear the fragile little voice, “love one another.”

In this, we see one aspect of meaning in the idea that YHWH is the “Father” of Jesus the “Son.” Reality, or Life as it is, brings about states of Love in our heart. The Father in the Old Testament is a scary, terrifying depiction of God. But from that comes Jesus, a most humble, beautiful depiction of endless, tireless love. Life as it is, is often terrifying and lonely. But after wrestling with it long enough and frequently enough, God begins to plant that holy seed, Love into the human heart. We begin to see that all of our jockeying for position and power, all of our effort to gain material security. All of our attempts to strong arm God into doing things our way are simply pointless. In the final count, the only thing that matters is loving the people God brings into our lives.

We can see this “Father-Son” relationship. But we can take it deeper as well. After that seed of Love is planted in our hearts and minds, we come to see that YHWH’s reality is in fact pure love. It is what produced love in our heart. So in one sense, Love is the essence of the Father, and the Son is the ability to see that love in life around us. The Son is the Truth or ability to perceive reality accurately (*Arcana Coelestia* 7499). And it is not a very difficult leap to see that in essence both the Son and Father are therefore one--Love. As Jesus said of Himself, I and the Father are One (John 10:30). Jesus called Himself the I AM (John 8:58). We can say it this way: The Truth is Life is Love.

It does not matter if our spouse is kind or cold. Our job is to love. It does not matter if the trip we have planned for months was ruined by rain. Our job is still to love. And in the loving, we begin to feel a certain peace and joy. The ups and downs of reality no longer matter all that much because they are inconsequential to our job. We begin, as it were, to ascend above

the earth in a chariot of fire. The fire is God's love made real in practice, and the chariot are the ideas derived from that love and practice which sustain us and allow us to feel God with us. We just keep being lifted up on the simple, singular, same and soft task of loving others to the best of our ability in each moment, as it is, in the name of our true and visible God, Jesus Christ. We are not good. We are not chaste. We are not friend of the Father. We are just lucky to be given the chance to try to love. And that is the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. It is His chariot.

Editorial

LAYING DOWN YOUR LIFE.

Memorial Days abound round the world. Monuments and memorial observances move us to tears as we recall the sacrifices of those in uniform who risk death and injury for the sake of their country. Many recall their own experiences, and how close they came to paying the ultimate price, making the ultimate sacrifice. The reason we are moved, is that it is the greatest love: "Jesus said, Greater love hath no one than this that one lay down his soul for his friends" (John 15:13). "Who does not remember and love the man who, from the zeal of love for his country, fights with her enemies even unto death that he may thereby deliver her from the yoke of servitude?" (*True Christian Religion* 710).

This means that the love of serving in the military has nobility, because it is a likeness of the Lord's love, when He said, "I lay down My life for My sheep...I lay down My life that I may take it again" (John 10:15, 17). Not only do these words recall the Lord's Passion of the Cross (*True Christian Religion* 709:3) but also remind us of the doctrine involved in the Passion: namely that the Lord "by His own power united His Divine Essence to His Human Essence through temptations" (*Arcana Coelestia* 3381, cf 1663, 1668, 1690 *passim*). "led the Human