



BROADCAST TALKS

# Praying Your Way Through Life's Challenges

by Barry C. Black



C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE

**Barry C. Black** is the 62nd Chaplain of the United States Senate. He was elected to this position on June 27, 2003, becoming the first African American to hold this office. Prior to coming to Capitol Hill, Chaplain Black served in the U.S. Navy for over twenty-seven years, ending his distinguished career as the Chief of Navy Chaplains. The Senate elected its first chaplain in 1789. Chaplain Black is a native of Baltimore, Maryland and an alumnus of Oakwood College, Andrews University, North Carolina Central University, Eastern Baptist Seminary, Salve Regina University, and United States International University. Chaplain Black is married to the former Brenda Pearsall of St. Petersburg, Florida. They have three sons: Barry II, Brendan, and Bradford.

The following is adapted from a talk given at the C.S. Lewis Institute's Annual Fundraising Banquet, April 19, 2018, at the Fairview Park Marriott in Falls Church, Virginia.

BROADCAST TALKS presents ideas to cultivate Christ-like thinking and living. Each issue features a transcription of a talk presented at an event of the C.S. Lewis Institute.



“Though dark the way, still trust and pray.  
The answering time will come.”

— Mary Wingate

**I**n 1987, my mother was in a coma. I entered the hospital and, claiming the promises of James 5:16, anointed her, fully expecting her to recover. I prayed the prayer of faith, for the sick to be restored and even for their sins to be forgiven. When the doctor told me that my mother had died, he startled me. I fully expected God to answer my prayer and it seemed that He did not.

How do we deal with the silence of God? How do we deal with unanswered prayer? What should be our response when we claim a Bible promise but it does not seem to be fulfilled? What should we do when God says nothing? The challenge of unanswered prayer may lead us to experience a dark night of the soul when we are buffeted by the winds of cynicism and despair. But, nearly everyone in their lifetime will encounter what seems like unanswered prayer.

The truth is, God always answers prayer. He just sometimes does not give us the answer we want. The Bible says, that His thoughts are as high above our thoughts as the heavens are above the earth (Isaiah 55:9). If we always understood what He was doing, we would be as smart as God. Sometimes, God does not say yes to our requests because we are asking for something that does not even exist. We are like the mother of James and John in Matthew, chapter 20, who wanted her sons to have a place of honor, to sit on the right and left of Jesus in his kingdom.

Jesus gently responded to her request by telling her she didn't know for what she was asking, that those seats of honor were chosen by God, not by Him. That is so true of much of our intercession.

The first way to deal with unanswered prayer is to make sure that we are praying correctly. Luke 11:1: "One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When He finished, one of His disciples said to Him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.'" It is interesting that they did not ask Him how to teach or preach. They never said, "Master, teach us how to heal or how to exercise demons." They saw a causal connection between the Savior's prayer life and His power and asked Him, "Teach us to pray."

How much do you know about prayer? 2 Peter 3:18 says: "...you must grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. All glory to him, both now and forever! Amen." A part of this growth involves learning how to pray more effectively. 2 Peter 1:5-6 says, "In view of all this, make every effort to respond to God's promises. Supplement your faith with a generous provision of moral excellence, and moral excellence with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with patient endurance, and patient endurance with godliness."

What did Jesus teach his disciples about prayer? He told them to pray in solitude, and the Father who sees in secret would reward

them openly. Jesus set the example, according to Mark 1:35, “Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray.” When we pray in solitude, we are more likely to hear the whisper of God’s still small voice, “after the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper” (1 Kings 19:12). Perhaps this is why we are admonished in Psalms 46:10, “Be still and know that I am God.” It is perhaps not coincidental that when God spoke to the boy Samuel (1 Samuel chapter 3), the child was resting on his bed. Find a solitary place to pray, your prayer will be more effective, more likely to bring an answer.

Jesus also told His disciples to let their words be few; prayer involves listening as well as speaking. Unfortunately, too many of us stay in the transmit mode. The priest Eli told the boy Samuel, that when you hear God’s voice, respond by saying “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:10). Too many of us reverse this sequence and declare, “Listen Lord, for your servant is speaking.” When Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane as He headed toward Calvary, He uttered a focused and sustained prayer repeatedly: “Father if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will but your will be done.” The greater the number of words, the greater will be the probability of uttering something that is not sanctified. Proverbs 10:19 puts it this way, “Too much talk leads to sin. Be sensible and keep your mouth shut.” Jesus challenged his disciples to not pray with verbosity or repetitiveness but with brevity and power.

So, after I structure my prayer life around solitude and brevity, what should I do when God remains silent? Keep on praying. As 1 Thessalonians 5:17 enjoins, “pray continually.” Matthew 7:7 resonates with this notion: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” That is the key to a breakthrough: persevering in prayer even when it seems God is not listening.

We see Elijah turning this key in 1 Kings Chapter 18. Elijah wanted to end a drought that had lasted 3½ years. He sent his servant out to see if there were any clouds in the sky, and prayed. The servant returned and declared he saw nothing. Elijah persevered; he continued to send his servant to look for a cloud ... and continued to pray. Not two or three or five or six but seven times. When the servant returned the seventh time, he declared, “I see a cloud about the size of a man’s hand.” And soon, the sky was black with rain. Elijah knew that his perseverance had paid off. When God says nothing, continue to pray.

When God says nothing, surrender to His will. This is what Jesus did in Gethsemane repeatedly declaring “Let your will be done.” We should desire God’s will because He knows what is best for us. As Romans 8:28 reminds us, God is working for the good of those who love Him. How dare the creature tell the Creator what to do. In Isaiah 45:9 the prophet put it this way: “Should the clay speak to the potter?” We should learn that God’s way is best for us and He will never lead us astray when we trust in the unfolding of His loving providence.

Jesus left us an example of surrendering to God’s will ... and He knew what it felt like to experience unanswered prayer. The Bible tells us that Jesus was tempted in every way that we have been tempted. Hebrews 4:15 says “This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same tests we do, yet he did not sin.” So He understands the anguish of unanswered prayer. Luke 6 tells us that Jesus prayed all one night, asking God to guide Him in the selecting of His apostles. Jesus chose Judas and Peter and 10 other men who would one day forsake Him and flee. Jesus did not receive the answer to His prayers that He may have hoped for. Nonetheless, the Savior surrendered to the Father’s will.

A third way to deal with unanswered prayer is to avoid praying selfishly. Jesus taught His disciples to use the plural pronoun in the

“Our Father” of Matthew 6. It is our Father not my father. It is give us this day our daily bread, not give me. It is forgive us our debts, not forgive me my sins. It is lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. It is an unselfish prayer.

Perhaps this kind of unselfishness is alluded to in Jeremiah 45:5 when we are challenged with these words, “Do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not.” When we avoid praying selfish prayers we are using Jesus as our role model. He is the amazing one who “ever lives to make intercession for us” (Hebrews 7:25). When we pray for others, we increase the likelihood that God will not only answer that prayer but bless us for praying that prayer. God once said to Abraham (Genesis 12), “I will bless those who bless you.” Position yourself for greater blessings by praying unselfishly.

And never forget that in prayer, we find an antidote for despair. In Luke 18:1, Jesus tells the parable of “the Persistent Widow.” He illustrates the need for constant prayer and offers examples of diligent persistence.

How magnificently Jesus harnessed the power of prayer while dying for our sins on Calvary. When we are tempted to despair, by God's grace, let us follow the example of Christ and pray. Even when God seems to say nothing, we know that He is listening and in due season will answer our prayer.



The C.S. Lewis Institute was founded in 1976 and endeavors, in the legacy of C.S. Lewis, to develop disciples who will articulate, defend, share, and live their faith in Christ in personal and public life.

From its inception, the Institute has been inter-denominational, has worked closely with a variety of churches and sees itself as a servant ministry, assisting churches and pastors in making disciples of Jesus Christ. This takes the form of discipleship programs, area-wide conferences/seminars, pastor fellowships and resources in print and on the web.



C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE

8001 Braddock Rd, Suite 301  
Springfield, VA 22151  
703.914.5602  
[cslewisinstitute.org](http://cslewisinstitute.org)