



BE  
Still.

# Why the results are delayed...

from Quiet Talks on Prayer

by S. D. Gordon

## GOD'S PATHWAY TO HUMAN HEARTS

**G**od touches men through men. The Spirit's path to a human heart is through another human heart. With reverence be it said, yet with blunt plainness that in His plan for winning men to their true allegiance God is limited by the human limitations. That may seem to mean more than it really does. For our thought of the human is of the scarred, warped, shrivelled humanity that we know, and great changes come when God's Spirit controls. But the fact is there, however limited our understanding of it.

God needs man for His plan. That is the fact that stands out strong in thinking about prayer. God's greatest agency; man's greatest agency, for defeating the enemy and winning men back is intercession. God is counting mightily upon that. And He can count most mightily upon the man who faithfully practices that.

The results He longs for are being held back, and made smaller because so many of us have not learned how to pray simply and skillfully. We need training. And God

## THOUGHTS AND READINGS FOR MEDITATION



Himself understands that. He Himself will train. But we must be willing; actively willing. And just there the great bother comes in. A strong will perfectly yielded to God's will, or perfectly willing to be yielded, is His mightiest ally in redeeming the world.

Answers to prayer are delayed, or denied, out of kindness, *or*, that more may be given, *or*, that a far larger purpose may be served. But deeper down by far than that is this: *God's purposes are being delayed*; delayed because of our unwillingness to learn how to pray, *or*, our slowness—I almost said—our stupidity in learning. It is a small matter that my prayer be answered, or unanswered; not small to me; everything perhaps to me; but small in proportion. It is a tremendous thing that God's *purpose* for a world is being held back through my lack. The thought that prayer is *getting things* from God; chiefly that, is so small, pitifully small, and yet so common. The true conception understands that prayer is partnership with God in His planet-sized purposes, and includes the "all things" beside, as an important detail of the whole.

The real reason for the delay or failure lies simply in the difference between God's viewpoint and ours. In our asking either we have not reached the *wisdom* that asks best, *or*, we have not reached the *unselfishness* that is willing to sacrifice a good thing for a better, *or* the best; the unselfishness that is willing to sacrifice the smaller personal desire for the larger thing that affects the lives of many.

We learn best by pictures, and by stories which are pen or word pictures. This was Jesus' favourite method of teaching. There are in the Bible four great, striking instances of delayed, or qualified answers to prayer.

*"Let my will be one with the Lord's,  
falling into that great stream as a tributary."*

"THE MANIFOLD GRACE OF GOD"  
1 PETER 4:10

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## FOR THE SAKE OF A NATION

Moses was the leader of his people. He is one of the giants of the human race from whatever standpoint considered. His codes are the basis of all Western law. From his own account of his career, the secret of all his power as a maker of laws, the organiser of a strangely marvellous nation, a military general and strategist—the secret of all was in his direct communication with God. He was peculiarly a man of prayer. Everything was referred to God, and he declared that everything—laws, organisation, worship, plans—came to him from God. In national emergencies where moral catastrophe was threatened he petitioned God and the plans were changed in accordance with his request. He made personal requests and they were granted. He was peculiarly a man who dealt directly with God about every sort of thing, national and personal, simple and complex. The record commonly credited to him puts prayer as the simple profound explanation of his stupendous career and achievements. He prayed. God worked along the line of his prayer. The great things recorded are the result. That is the simple inferential summary.

Now there is one exception to all this in Moses' life. It stands out the more strikingly that it is an exception; the one exception of a very long line. Moses asked repeatedly for one thing. It was not given him. God is not capricious nor arbitrary. There must be a reason. *There is*. And it is fairly luminous with light.

Here are the facts. These freed men of Egypt are a hard lot to lead and to live with. Slow, sensuous, petty, ignorant, narrow, impulsive, strangers to self-control, critical, exasperating—what an undertaking God had to make a nation, *the* nation of history, about which centred His deep reaching, far-seeing love ambition for redeeming a world out of such stuff! Only paralleled by the church being built upon such men as those Galilean peasants! What victories these! What a God to do such things! Only a God could do either and both! What immense patience it required to shape this people. What patience God has. Moses had learned much of patience in the desert sands with his sheep; for he had learned much of God. But the finishing touches were supplied by the grindstone of friction with the fickle temper of this mob of ex-slaves.

Here are the immediate circumstances. They lacked water. They grew very thirsty. It was a serious matter in those desert sands with human lives, and young children, and the stock. No, it was not serious: really a very small matter, for *God was along*, and the enterprise was of His starting. It was His affair, all this strange journey. And they knew Him quite well enough in their brief experience to be expecting something fully equal to all needs with a margin thrown in. There was that series of stupendous things before leaving Egypt. There was the Red Sea, and fresh food daily delivered at every man's tent door, and game, juicy birds, brought

down within arms' reach, yes, and—surely this alone were enough—there was living, cool water gushing abundantly, gladly out of the very heart of a flinty rock—if such a thing can be said to have a heart! Oh, yes it was a very small matter to be lacking anything with such a lavish God along.

*But they forgot.* Their noses were keener than their memories. They had better stomachs than hearts. The odorous onions of Egypt made more lasting impressions than this tender, patient, planning God. Yet here even their stomachs forgot those rock-freed waters. These people must be kinsfolk of ours. They seem to have some of the same family traits.

Listen: they begin to complain, to criticise. God patiently says nothing but provides for their needs. But Moses has not yet reached the high level that later experiences brought him. He is standing to them for God. Yet he is very un-Godlike. Angrily, with hot word, he *smites* the rock. Once smiting was God's plan; then the quiet word ever after. How many a time has the once smitten Rock been smitten again in our impatience! *The waters came!* Just like God! They were cared for, though He had been disobeyed and dishonoured. And there are the crowds eagerly drinking with faces down; and up yonder in the shadow stands God *grieved*, deeply grieved at the false picture this immature people had gotten of Him that day through Moses. Moses' hot tongue and flashing eye made a deep moral scar upon their minds that would take years to remove. Something must be done for the people's sake. Moses disobeyed God. He dishonoured God. Yet the waters came, for *they needed water*. And God is ever tender-hearted. But they must be taught the need of obedience, the evil of disobedience. Taught it so they never could forget.

Moses was a leader. Leaders may not do as common men. And leaders may not be dealt with as followers. They stand too high in the air. They affect too many lives. So God said to Moses:—"You will not go into Canaan. You may lead them clear up to the line; you may even see over, but you may not go in." That hurt Moses deep down. It hurt God deeper down, in a heart more sensitive to hurt than was Moses'. Without doubt it was said with *reluctance*, for *Moses' sake*. But *it was said*, plainly, irrevocably, for *their sakes*. Moses' petition was for a reversal of this decision. Once and again he asked. He wanted to see that wondrous land of God's choosing. He felt the sting too. The edge of the knife of discipline cut keenly, and the blood spurted. But God said:—"Do not speak to Me again of this." The decision was not to be changed. For Moses' sake only He would gladly have changed, judging by His previous conduct. For the sake of the nation—for the sake of the prodigal world to be won back through this nation, the petition might not be granted. **That ungranted petition taught those millions the lesson of obedience, of reverence, as no command, or smoking mount, or drowning Egyptians had done.**

It became common talk in every tent, by every camp-fire of the tented nation. "Moses

disobeyed,—he failed to reverence God;—he cannot enter Canaan." With hushed tones, and awed hearts and moved, strangely moved faces it passed from lip to lip. Some of the women and children wept. They all loved Moses. They revered him. How gladly they would have had him go over. The double-sided truth—obedience—disobedience—kept burning in through the years.

In following years many a Hebrew mother told her baby, eager for a story, of Moses their great leader; his appearance, deep-set eyes, long beard, majestic mien, yet infinite tenderness and gentleness, the softness of strength; his presence with God in the mount, the shining face. And the baby would listen so quietly, and then the eyes would grow so big and the hush of spirit come as the mother would repeat softly, "but he could not come over into the land of promise because *he did not obey God*." And strong fathers reminded their growing sons. And so it was woven into the warp and woof of the nation—*obedience, reverent obedience to God*. And one can well understand Moses looking down with grateful heart that he had been denied for *their sakes*. The unselfishness and wisdom of later years would not have made the prayer. *The prayer of a man was denied that a nation might be taught obedience.*

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## THAT MORE MIGHT BE GIVEN AND GOTTEN

Now let us look a bit at the second of these, the portrait of Hannah the Hebrew woman. First the broader lines for perspective. This peculiar Hebrew nation had two deep dips down morally between Egypt and Babylon; between the first making, and the final breaking. The national tide ebbed very low twice, before it finally ran out in the Euphrates Valley. Elijah stemmed the tide the second time, and saved the day for a later night. The Hannah story belongs to the first of these ebb-tides; the first bad sag; the first deep gap.

The giant lawgiver is long gone. His successor, only a less giant than himself is gone too, and all that generation, and more. The giants gave way to smaller-sized leaders. Now they are gone also. The mountain peaks have been lost in the foothills, and these have yielded to dunes, and levels; mostly levels; dead levels.

It is a leaderless people, for the true Leader as originally planned has been, first ignored, then forgot. The people have no ideals. They grub in the earth content. There is a deep, hidden-away current of good. But it needs leadership to bring it to the surface. A leaderless people! This is the niche of the Hannah story.

The nation was rapidly drifting down to the moral level of the lowest. At Shiloh the formal worship was kept up, but the very priests were tainted with the worst impurity. A sort of sleepy, slovenly anarchy prevailed. Every man did that which was right in his own eyes, with every indication of a gutter standard. "There was none in the land possessing power of restraint

that might put them to shame in anything." No government; no dominant spirit. Indeed the actual conditions of Sodom and her sister cities of the plain existed among the people. This is the setting of the simple graphic incident of Hannah. One must get the picture clearly in mind to understand the story.

Up in the hill country of Ephraim there lived a wise-hearted religious man, a farmer, raising stock, and grain; and fruit, too, likely. He was earnest but not of the sort to rise above the habit of his time. His farm was not far from Shiloh, the national place of worship, and he made yearly trips there with his family. But the woman-degrading curse of Lamech was over his home. He had two wives. Hannah was the loved one. (No man ever yet gave his heart to two women.) She was a gentle-spoken, thoughtful woman, with a deep, earnest spirit. But she had a disappointment which grew in intensity as it continued. The desire of her heart had been withheld. She was childless.

Though the thing is not mentioned, the whole inference is that she prayed earnestly and persistently but to her surprise and deep disappointment the desired answer did not come. To make it worse her rival—what a word, for the other one in the home with her—her rival provoked her sore to make her fret. And that thing *went* on year after year. That teasing, nagging, picking of a small nature was her constant prod. What an atmosphere for a home! Is it any wonder that "she was in bitterness of soul" and "wept sore"? Her husband tenderly tries to comfort her. But her inner spirit remains chafed to the quick. And all this goes on for years; the yearning, the praying, the failure of answer, the biting, bitter atmosphere—for *years*. And she wonders why.

Why was it? Step back and up a bit and get the broader view which the narrow limits of her surrounding, and, shall I say, though not critically, also of her spirit, shut out from her eyes. Here is what she saw: her fondest hope unrealised, long praying unanswered, a constant ferment at home. Here is what she wanted:—a son. That is her horizon. Beyond that her thought does not rise.

Here is what God saw:—a nation—no, much worse—the nation, in which centred His great love-plan for winning His prodigal world, going to pieces. The messenger to the prodigal was being slyly, subtly seduced by the prodigal. The saviour-nation was being itself lost. The plan so long and patiently fostered for saving a world was threatened with utter disaster.

Here is what He wanted—a *leader*! But there were no leaders. And, worse yet, there were no men out of whom leaders might be made, no men of leader-size. And worse yet *there were no women* of the sort to train and shape a man for leadership. That is the lowest level to which a people ever gets, yes, ever *can* get. God had to get a woman before He could get a man. Hannah had in her the making of the woman He needed. God honoured her by choosing her. But she must be changed before she could be used. And so there came those years of pruning, and sifting, and discipline. Shall we spell that

word discipline with a final *g* instead of *e*—discipling, so the love of it may be plainer to our near-sightedness? And out of those years and experiences there came a new woman. A woman with vision broadened, with spirit mellowed, with strength seasoned, with will so sinewy supple as to yield to a higher will, to sacrifice the dearest *personal pleasure* for the world-wide purpose; willing that he who was her dearest treasure should be the nation's *first*.

Then followed months of prayer while the man was coming. Samuel was born, no, farther back yet, was conceived in the atmosphere of prayer and devotion to God. The prenatal influences for those months gave the sort of man God wanted. And a nation, *the* nation, the *world-plan*, was saved! This man became a living answer to prayer. The romantic story of the little boy up in the Shiloh tabernacle quickly spread over the nation. His very name—Samuel, God hears—sifted into people's ears the facts of a God, and of the power of prayer. The very sight of the boy and of the man clear to the end kept deepening the brain impression through eyeballs that God answers prayer. And the seeds of that re-belief in God that Samuel's leadership brought about were sown by the unusual story of his birth.

*The answer was delayed that more might be given and gotten.* And Hannah's exultant song of praise reveals the fineness to which the texture of her nature had been spun. And it tells too how grateful she was for a God who in great patience and of strong deliberate purpose delayed the answer to her prayer.

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## THE BEST LIGHT FOR STUDYING A THORN

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The third great picture in this group is that of Paul and his needle-pointed thorn. Talks about the certainty of prayer being answered are very apt to bring this question: "What about Paul's thorn?" Sometimes asked by earnest hearts puzzled; *sometimes* with a look in the eye almost exultant as though of gladness for that thorn because it seems to help out a theory. These pictures are put into the gallery for our help. Let us pull up our chairs in front of this one and see what points we may get to help our hearts.

First a look at Paul himself. The best light on this thorn is through the man. The man explains the thorn. We have a halo about Paul's head; and rightly, too. What a splendid man of God he was! God's chosen one for a peculiar ministry. One of the twelve could be used to open the door to the great outside world, but God had to go aside from this circle to get a man of different training for this wider sphere. Cradled and schooled in a Jewish atmosphere, he never lost the Jew standpoint, yet the training of his home surroundings in that outside world, the contact with Greek culture, his natural mental cast fitted him peculiarly for his appointed task to the great outside majority. His keen reasoning powers, his vivid imagination, his steel-like will, his burning

devotion, his unmovable purpose, his tender attachment to his Lord—what a man! Well might the Master want to win such a man for service's sake. But Paul had some weak traits. Let us say it very softly, remembering as we instinctively will, that where we think of one in him there come crowding to memory's door many more in one's self. A man's weak point is usually the extreme opposite swing of the pendulum on his strong point. Paul had a tremendous will. He was a giant, a Hercules in his will. Those tireless journeys with their terrific experiences, all spell out *will* large and black. But, gently now, he went to extremes here. Was it due to his over tired nerves? Likely enough. He was obstinate, *sometimes*; stubborn; set in his way: sometimes head down, jaw locked, driving hard. Say it all *softly*, for we are speaking of dear old saintly Paul; but, to help, say it, for it is true.

God had a hard time holding Paul to His plans. Paul had some of his own. We can all easily understand that. Take a side glance or two as he is pushing eagerly, splendidly on. Turn to the sixteenth chapter of Acts, and listen: "Having been forbidden of the Holy Spirit to speak the word in (the province of) Asia," coupled with the fact of sickness being allowed to overtake him in Galatia where the "forbidding" message came. And again this, "they assayed to go into Bithynia; and the Spirit of Jesus suffered them not." Tell me, is this the way the Spirit of God leads? That I should go driving ahead until He must pull me up with a sharp turn, and twist me around! It is the way He is obliged to do many times, no doubt, with most of us. But His chosen way? His own way? Surely not. Rather this, the keeping close, and quiet listening for the next step. Rather the "I go not up yet unto this feast" of Jesus. And then in a few days going up, evidently when the clear intimation came. These words, "assayed to go," "forbidden," "suffered not"—what flashlights they let into this strong man's character.

But there is much stronger evidence yet. Paul had an ambition to preach to the *Jerusalem Jews*. It burned in his bones from the early hours of his new life. The substratum of "*Jerusalem*" seemed ever in his thoughts and dreams. If he could just get to those Jerusalem Jews! He knew them. He had trained with them. He was a leader among the younger set. When they burned against these Christians he burned just a bit hotter. They knew him. They trusted him to drive the opposite wedge. If only *he* could have a chance down there he felt that the tide might be turned. But from that critical hour on the Damascus road "*Gentiles—Gentiles*" had been sounded in his ears. And he obeyed, of course he obeyed, with all his ardent heart. *But, but—those Jerusalem Jews!* If he might go to Jerusalem! Yet very early the Master had proscribed the Jerusalem service for Paul. He made it a matter of a special vision (Acts 22:17-21), in the holy temple, kindly explaining why. "They will not receive of *thee* testimony concerning Me." Would that not seem quite sufficient? Surely. Yet this astonishing thing occurs: Paul attempts to argue with the Master *why* he should be allowed to go. This is going to

great lengths; a subordinate arguing with his commanding general after the orders have been issued! The Master closes with a peremptory word of command, "*depart*. I will send thee far hence (from Jerusalem, where you long to be), to the Gentiles." That is a picture of this man. It reveals the weak side in this giant of strength and of love. And *this* is the man God has to use in His plan. He is without doubt the best man available. And in his splendour he stands head and shoulders above his generation and many generations. Yet (with much reverence) God has a hard time getting Paul to work always along the line of His plans.

That is the man. Now for the thorn. Something came into Paul's life that was a constant irritation. He calls it a thorn. What a graphic word! A sharp point prodding into his flesh, ever prodding, sticking, sticking in; asleep, awake, stitching tent canvas, preaching, writing, that thing ever cutting its point into his sensitive flesh. Ugh! It did not disturb him so much at first, because *there was* God to go to. He went to God and said, "*Please take this away*." But it stayed and stuck. A second time the prayer; a bit more urgent; the thing sticks so. The time test is the hardest test of all. Still no change. Then praying the third time with what earnestness one can well imagine.

Now note three things: First, *There was an answer*. God answered *the man*. Though He did not grant the petition, He answered the man. He did not ignore him nor his request. Then God told Paul frankly that it was not best to take the thorn away. It was in the lonely vigil of a sleepless night, likely as not, that the wondrous Jesus-Spirit drew near to Paul. Inaudibly to outer ear but very plainly to his inner ear, He spoke in tones modulated into tender softness as of dearest friend talking with dear friend. "Paul," the voice said, "I know about that thorn—and how it hurts—it hurts Me, too. For *your* sake, I would quickly, so quickly remove it. But—Paul"—and the voice becomes still softer—"it is a bit better for *others*' sake that it remain: the plan in My heart *through you* for thousands, yes, unnumbered thousands, Paul, can so best be worked out." That was the first part of what He said. And Paul lies thinking with a deep tinge of awe over his spirit. Then after a bit in yet quieter voice He went on to say, "I will be so close to your side; you shall have such revelations of My glory that the pain will be clear overlapped, Paul; the glory shall outstrip the eating thorn point."

I can see old Paul one night in his own hired house in Rome. It is late, after a busy day; the auditors have all gone. He is sitting on an old bench, slowing down before seeking sleep. One arm is around Luke, dear faithful Doctor Luke, and the other around young Timothy, not quite so young now. And with eyes that glisten, and

utterance tremulous with emotion he is just saying:—"And dear old friends, do you know, I would not have missed this thorn, for the wondrous glory"—and his heart gets into his voice, there is a touch of the hoarseness of deep emotion, and a quavering of tone, so he waits a moment—"the wondrous *glory-presence of Jesus* that came with it."

And so out of the experience came a double blessing. There was a much fuller working of God's plan for His poor befooled world. And there was an unspeakable nearness of intimacy with his Lord for Paul. *The man was answered and the petition denied that the larger plan of service might be carried out.*

## SHAPING A PRAYER ON THE ANVIL OF THE KNEES

The last of these pictures is like Raphael's Sistine Madonna in the Dresden gallery—it has a special room all to itself. One enters with a holy hush over his spirit, and, with awe in his eyes, looks at *Jesus in Gethsemane*. There is the Kidron brook, the grove of gnarled knotty old olive trees. The moon above is at the full. Its brightness makes these shadowed recesses the darker; blackly dark. Here is a group of men lying on the ground apparently asleep. Over yonder deeper in among the trees a smaller group reclines motionless. They, too, sleep. And, look, farther in yet is that lone figure; all alone; never more alone; save once—on the morrow.

There is a foreshadowing of this Gethsemane experience in the requested interview of the Greeks just a few intense days before. In the vision which the Greeks unconsciously brought, the agony of the olive grove began. The climax is among these moon-shadowed trees. How sympathetic those inky black shadows. Yet they were not black enough. Intense men can get so absorbed in the shadows as to forget the light.

This great Jesus! Son of God: God the Son. The Son of Man: God—a man! No draughtsman's pencil ever drew the line between his divinity and his humanity, nor ever shall. For the union of divine and human is itself divine, and therefore clear beyond human understanding. Here His humanity stands out, pathetically, luminously stands out. Let us speak of it very softly and think with the touch of awe deepening for this is holiest ground. The battle of the morrow is being fought out here. Calvary is in Gethsemane. The victory of the hill is won in the grove.

It is sheer impossible for man with sin grained into his fibre through centuries to understand the horror with which a sinless one thinks of actual contact with sin. As Jesus enters the grove that night it comes in upon His spirit with terrific intensity that He is actually coming into contact—with a meaning quite beyond us—coming into contact with sin. In some way all too deep for definition He is to be "made sin". The language used to describe His emotions is so strong that no adequate English words seem available for its full expression. An indescribable horror, a chill of terror, a frenzy of fright seizes Him. The poisonous miasma of sin seems to be filling his nostrils and to be stifling Him. And yonder alone among the trees the agony is upon Him. The extreme grips Him. May there not yet possibly be some other way rather than *this—this*! A bit of that prayer comes to us in tones strangely altered by deepest emotion. "*If it be possible—let this cup pass*." There is still a clinging to a possibility, some possibility other than that of this nightmare vision. The writer of the Hebrews lets light in here. The strain of the spirit almost snaps the life-thread. And a parenthetical prayer for strength goes up. And the angels come with sympathetic strengthening. With what awe must they have ministered! Even after that some of the red life slips out there under the trees. By and by a calmer mood asserts itself, and out of the darkness a second petition comes. It tells of the tide's turning, and the victory full and complete. *A changed petition this!* "*Since this cup may not pass—since only thus can Thy great plan for a world be wrought out—Thy—will*"—slowly but very distinctly the words come—"Thy—will—be—done."

*The changed prayer was wrought out upon His knees!* With greatest reverence, and a hush in our voices, let us say that there alone with the Father came the clearer understanding of the Father's actual will under these circumstances.

True prayer is wrought out upon the knees alone with God. With deepest reverence, and in awed tones, let it be said, that *that was true of Jesus* in the days of His humanity. How infinitely more of us!

Shall we not plan to meet God alone, habitually, with the door shut, and the Book open, and the will pliant so we may be trained for this holy partnership of prayer. Then will come the clearer vision, the broader purpose, the truer wisdom, the real unselfishness, the simplicity of claiming and expecting, the delights of fellowship in service with Him; then too will come great victories for God in His world—although we shall not begin to know by direct knowledge a tenth of the story, until the night is gone and the dawn breaks and the ink-black shadows that now stain the earth shall be chased away by the brightness of His presence.

Our ordinary views of prayer are not found in the New Testament. We look upon prayer as a means of getting things for ourselves; the Bible idea of prayer is that we may get to know God Himself. It is not so true that "prayer changes things" as that prayer changes *me* and I change things. God has so constituted things that prayer on the basis of Redemption alters the way in which a man looks at things. Prayer is not a question of altering things externally, but of working wonders in a man's disposition.

— OSWALD CHAMBERS