

What About Unanswered Prayer?

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

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Several people asked questions about dealing with prayers that are not answered. Probably everyone who has prayed struggles with questions about why God doesn't grant some of our requests. I've spoken with enough people and heard enough stories about requests that God apparently didn't answer to know that this is a common question. Some people even point to an unanswered prayer as the time when they began to question their faith or even give up on it. "God didn't give me what I asked for then, so why should I bother to pray now?"

I've prayed for guidance for decisions and still haven't been clear on what was best when the time came to make the decision. I've prayed for healing and it hasn't come when or how I thought it should.

When our son Eric was little, up through about first grade, he got ear infections a lot. We spent a lot of time in the doctor's office with him. We gave him pain medicine, we gave him the prescribed antibiotics. But there were times when I thought for sure that God could simply heal him and take away the pain—especially when he woke up at night crying and we couldn't get him to the doctor until the next day. I had even read in one of Richard Foster's books how he had prayed for his child who had an ear infection and there had been an immediate healing (*Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* 230). So I prayed and believed. But as far as I know, Eric's ears never got healed immediately in answer to any of those prayers.

That bothered me. I wondered if there was something wrong with me or with my faith. I carried that disappointment and questioning around for a long time. Then, one day, in Sunday School or Bible study, Nancy was telling about Eric's sicknesses. Because of the ear infections, he had to have speech therapy for a few years. But she said she was grateful that his ears were not permanently damaged and that the infections were not worse than they were. And, because of the speech exercises, he learned to read early and well. I realized that God had answered those prayers—just not in the way or in the time that I thought God ought to.

There wouldn't be a problem of unanswered prayer if we didn't believe that God does answer prayer. We've heard others tell about how God answered their prayers. Even more important, we see in the Bible examples of prayers being answered. We hear great promises about prayer. Just think of some of Jesus' teachings:

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. (Mark 11:24)

So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. (Luke 11:9-10)

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (John 15:7)

Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. (John 16:23)

Those are bold promises that seem pretty wide open. Of course, there are some conditions. In their contexts, these promises are attached to some other realities. God calls us to have faith and to forgive others. Jesus encourages us to see God as a good parent who knows how to give his children good gifts and withhold dangerous gifts from them. In Matthew, when Jesus teaches the disciples how to pray, the context is the kingdom of God and living as people of the kingdom. To remain in Jesus means being connected to him, learning from him, allowing his word to be in us so we know what his will is. Praying in Jesus' name means to pray for what is consistent with his character. It means praying the kind of prayer Jesus would pray.

God has chosen to interact with the world and with us. Our prayers are one part of that interaction. God invites us into relationship with God and prayer is a key part of that relationship.

So those great promises don't just stand alone. They involve us in a relationship with God through Jesus. That relationship is the setting in which we pray consistently, not just in emergencies, and receive what God wants to give us.

Still, it's not always selfish prayers or emergency prayers that don't get answered. Sometimes, even when we are abiding in Jesus and are consistent in prayer, we make what seems to be a worthy request yet it apparently goes unanswered.

I did a quick survey of the Bible looking for unanswered prayers. Let's consider some of them.

In Exodus 33, Moses makes a request to the Lord: "Show me your glory." But the Lord doesn't reveal all his glory to Moses. He hides Moses in a cleft in the rock and passes by, allowing Moses just to glimpse the trailing edge of the Lord's glory. God didn't grant this request the way Moses asked, because Moses couldn't handle seeing the full glory of God.

In 2 Samuel 12, after David's sin with Bathsheba, she gives birth to a son. The child becomes ill and David fasts and pleads with God for the child, but the child dies. David then says, "I will go to him, but he will not return to me."

Job asks for an audience with God. He wants to tell God his complaint and ask God to tell him what he's done wrong. When God does appear and speak (chs 38-41), he doesn't give any explanation or answer Job's questions. Instead, God has some questions of his own for Job.

Several times in the Psalms, the writers feel forsaken by God. They ask why God doesn't answer their cries. They wonder how long God will remain silent.

There's an interesting scene in Daniel (10:12-14). Daniel has been seeing visions and having dreams, then asking God for their meaning. Messengers from God have come to Daniel with interpretations of the visions. In 9:23 it says, "As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given." But in 10:12-14, the answer has been delayed. When God's messenger finally arrives, he tells Daniel that God heard his prayer and sent the messenger in response. But the "prince of the Persian kingdom" (apparently some sort of demon) resisted God's messenger for twenty-one

days, until Michael, "one of the chief princes," (an archangel) came to help and fought off this Persian prince so that the messenger could get through to Daniel.

The prophet Habakkuk said, "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" (1:2). God seemed not to be doing anything about the violence and wickedness in the land. Then, when God does respond, it's not the answer Habakkuk was looking for.

Jesus himself, in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:36-42), prays that the cup of suffering he's about to endure might pass from him. He knew the plan, he knew what he had to do, still he hoped that possibly there might be another way. But this request to find another way was denied and Jesus submitted to the Father's will.

In 2 Corinthians 12 the Apostle Paul asks God three times to take away the "thorn in his flesh." There are dozens of ideas about what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. Whatever it was, he pleaded with the Lord to take it away. God didn't take it away, but he did answer Paul's prayer. Paul writes, "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" God can answer our prayers without granting all of our specific requests.

Sometimes we may not recognize the answer or we refuse to accept God's answer. There's a great story in Acts 12 about this. King Herod had executed the apostle James. This met with such approval that he went after the other apostles, arresting and imprisoning Peter. While Peter was locked up and heavily guarded, "the church was earnestly praying to God for him." And, an angel came into Peter's cell, put the guards to sleep and led him out to freedom. Peter went to the house where many people had gathered and were praying. He knocked on the outer entrance and a servant named Rhoda went to answer. She recognized Peter's voice and was so overjoyed she left him standing there while she went to tell the others that Peter was knocking at the door. "You're out of your mind," they told her. But he kept knocking until they finally opened the door and were astonished to see the answer to their prayers standing at their door.

We still want to know why God doesn't grant some requests. James gives one reason: "You do not have, because you do not ask God. When

you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (4:2-3). God isn't going to give us what we ask for if it's merely going to increase our selfishness. God is trying to teach us to seek his will and trust him.

Greg Boyd, in his book *Is God to Blame?*, lists several variables that affect the outcome of prayer (135-47). One is *God's will*. 1 John 5:14, 15 tells us that we can approach God with confidence knowing that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. "And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him." That's similar to what James was talking about. Boyd goes on:

Clearly, praying in accordance with God's will is a crucial variable in determining the outcome. It's important, however, for us to see that in the case of Jesus, "God's will" was not necessarily God's *ideal* will. It was rather God's will *accommodated* to the situation of a fallen world. Jesus' death grieved the Father, but it simply wasn't possible to save the world in any other fashion. The Father willed the death of his Son in the sense that he willed the reconciliation of the world *more* than he willed sparing his own Son. And Jesus willed to carry out his Father's accommodating will more than he willed avoiding the physical, mental and spiritual torture he was about to endure. (136)

We ought to pray for God to show us his will. We ought to study the Bible to learn God's will and what kinds of things are consistent with God's will. We need to surrender to God's will, whatever it is. We don't wait to learn God's will before we decide to do it—we commit to doing God's will whatever it may be.

Another variable in prayer is *human faith*. Often, after Jesus healed someone, he said, "Your faith has made you well." On one occasion, Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth and the gospel says, "He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith" (Mk 6:5-6). Jesus was limited by those people's lack of faith.

We need to be careful here. Some who believe that God's will is always to heal teach that whenever someone is not healed or a prayer is not answered it's because the person being prayed for lacks faith. An individual's faith is a factor, but not the only one. When we presume to tell someone that it's their lack of faith that keeps them from being well, we are just compounding their suffering.

Another aspect of faith's importance is that sometimes the effectiveness of prayer is related to the faith of the people praying for others, not the faith of those being prayed for. There were times when Jesus healed people whose faith is not mentioned at all—but their friends or someone else close to them had faith. The church is the community of faith. We can believe and pray for you when you feel like you can't believe and pray for yourself.

Also along this line, we don't have to have great faith to receive from God. Jesus said that having faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains. We don't need great faith because we serve a great God.

Human freedom is another variable in prayer. We can pray and should pray for each other. But when we are praying for changes in another person's life, we have to recognize that they still can choose how they will respond to God's grace and influence in their lives. Imagine a young man who is interested in a certain young woman. He prays that God will make her love him. Will God do that? No—she still has the freedom to choose. What if we could control other people through our prayers? Wouldn't that make for a lot of miserable people?

Think about praying for another person's salvation. That is God's will. But God allows them to respond freely to his grace and his offer of salvation. God won't override their will to make them choose him because we pray for them. Our prayers can increase the influence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life, but God still allows each person to say yes or no to his influence and call.

Sin is another variable in prayer. Again, we have to be careful not to accuse people of harboring sin when they are sick or things are not going well for them. But we do need to recognize that, in general, sin does hinder our praying. If the essence of sin is separation from God, how can we get

close to God if we're hanging onto sin? How can we pray according to God's will if we're intentionally ignoring or disobeying God's will? This doesn't mean we have to be sinless in order to pray—otherwise we could never pray. But it does mean we need to be honest with God about our sin and be willing for him to take it from us.

When Bob Tuttle moved from southern California to Tulsa to teach at ORU, it wasn't long before he got walking pneumonia. He says, "You have no idea how embarrassing it is to teach at Oral Roberts University and have walking pneumonia!" Every day he had students telling him they were praying for him and asking if he was healed yet. Finally, one night, in frustration, he said, "God, it wouldn't take a lot of time out of your busy schedule to do a healing number on me. If there is anything separating me from you, show it to me and it is yours. I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired!" He fussed at God all night and nothing happened. He was still coughing and wheezing.

A few nights later, he had a dream. In the dream, there's a light in the shape of a man standing next to him. Tuttle is reaching, grasping, trying to pull that light into himself. But that's not how you get light. The dream was so frustrating that he woke up screaming. After Tuttle got the family back to bed, God spoke to him. He says, "God speaks to me by giving me insights that are bigger than I am." The insight God gave was: "Lie back. Get quiet. In the silence that is you, allow my Holy Spirit to plumb some new depth of your experience and to reveal to you some area of life not yet given to me. In your willingness for me to have it, I will take it from you."

Tuttle finally got quiet enough to listen. He became aware of an area of his life that he'd been holding back from God. He said, "Lord, I'm willing for you to take it." He went to sleep and woke up the next morning without a wheeze. The pneumonia was gone (I've heard Bob tell this many times. A version of the story is in *Help Is on the Way* 71-72).

God's timing is another factor in prayer. God may withhold an answer until we want God more than we want the answer. Let's focus on the kingdom of God, let's abide in Jesus and allow his word to abide in us, let's get to know Jesus so that we know what he is like and can pray in his name according to his character, let's get to know God's will, let's come to the

place where we want God simply for who God is. Then we can pray with greater confidence for the things God wants to give as part of that kind of relationship with him.

There's one prayer that God will always answer: "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner."