The Problem of Unanswered Prayer

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Jerry Sittser teaches history and religion at Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington. His wife, Lynda, homeschooled their four young children and was teaching a lesson on Native American culture. They decided, as a family, to visit a Native American reservation in rural Idaho. Jerry and Lynda loaded their children and Jerry’s mom into the family minivan to attend a real powwow. On their way home, while traveling a deserted country highway, they were struck head-on by a drunk driver. Jerry’s mother, wife and young daughter were killed on impact; three generations wiped out instantly.

Jerry and Lydia prayed each morning for God’s protection and mercy for their family. This fateful day twenty years ago was no different. So what went wrong? Why did their prayers seemingly go unanswered?

Jerry wrote a book three years later about his experience entitled, A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss. I commend this book to any of you wrestling with the aftershocks of debilitating pain and loss.

I don’t want, on this gorgeous summer day, to be something of a Debby-downer! Yet, there is no denying it; loss is a universal experience. No amount of amusement and blue sky forecasts can shield us from its sobering reality.

Anybody who has ever prayed has wrestled with the question of unanswered prayer. As C.S. Lewis writes in Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer, “Every war, every famine and plague, almost every death-bed, is a monument to a petition that has not been granted.” Maybe today, some of you wrestle with unanswered prayer.

The disciples ask Jesus, in our scripture lesson, “Lord, teach us to pray” (11:1). Jesus has just emerged from his daily quiet time, so, naturally, his disciples want him to teach them about prayer.

I can identify with their request. After all these years, I’m still a novice when it comes to prayer. Even the great St. Paul, a devoted man of prayer admits as much in his letter to the Romans: “We do not know how to pray as we ought” (8:26). The words of Thomas Merton come to mind, “There are not experts, only beginners in prayer.”

Jesus teaches his disciples to pray with a prayer. It is called the Lord’s Prayer. Most of you know the prayer in longer form.
Persistence is a virtue when it comes to prayer.

as it appears in Matthew’s gospel. Here in Luke, this 34-word prayer comes to us as a series of five petitions. The first two petitions ask for God’s name to be hallowed and God’s kingdom to come. The last three focus on matters of everyday concern—things like bread for the coming day, forgiveness and deliverance from trial.

Jesus follows up this prayer, in verses 5–8, with a parable about a man who knocks at his friend’s house at midnight requesting three loaves of bread, which would equate to an evening meal. His sleepy-headed friend is none too happy about this nocturnal interruption since his children are already tucked into bed and everyone is lights-out.

The key to this parable is found in verse 8: “I tell you though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man’s boldness, he will get up and give him as much as he needs.” The Greek word translated boldness in this verse is found nowhere else in the New Testament. Although it’s typically translated boldness or persistence, given its context, it may be more accurate to translate it as shameless. So, verse 8 would read, “On account of the man’s shameless audacity his friend will get up and give him what he needs.” Who knocks at a friend’s door in the middle of the night just to curb his appetite? I tell you, the guy is pushing the envelope here!

This same type of shameless audacity is also on display in Luke 18. Jesus tells a parable about a widow who pesters a judge to exercise clemency toward her accused son. The judge, in the end, concedes to her request on account of her nagging persistence (18:1–5).

Persistence is a virtue when it comes to prayer. How bad do we want what we ask for in prayer?

We may be reluctant to press for an answer in prayer for fear of coming off as presumptuous or demanding, even petty. But here, Jesus encourages us to pray this way. Jesus follows this parable, in verses 9–10, with a trilogy of comparable phrases: “Ask and you will receive, see and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you.” Since all three imperatives appear in present tense, the sense of these commands is to keep on asking, keep on seeking and to keep on knocking.

Some of us are intimidated by prayer. We have the impression that we must say the right words or fold our hands just so in order to be heard by God. If we don’t get what we want, maybe we’re not praying the right way.

Relax already. I’ve logged lots of time recently playing with our grandsons Luke and Wesley. Luke the four-year-old, is big into Thomas the Train. One vehicle in his arsenal of trains is a red fire engine called Fiery Flynn, who can run on
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- Garth Brooks

both road and rail. His job is to fight fires in the land of Sodor. Fiery Flynn comes equipped with a mechanized voice that announces, “Stay back, stay calm.” I can’t count the number of times I’ve heard those words in the last few weeks. Don’t be immobilized by saying or doing the right thing. “Stay back, stay calm.”

Jesus invites us to pray boldly. He invites us to pray about anything and everything. We don’t have to approach God with fear and trepidation. Ask boldly; shamelessly, as it were. We can feel secure in the Father’s love. We can be bold.

There is a story told about an early American settler who came to the banks of the mighty Mississippi River. It was early winter and the surface of the river was coated with ice. Since there was no bridge and night was falling, the man bent down on all fours and began to crawl, seeking to evenly distribute his weight so the ice wouldn’t give way. Halfway across the river, he heard the sound of singing behind him. Out of the twilight came a man driving a horse-drawn sleigh, pulling a load of coal over the surface of the ice.

While he is crawling on his hands and knees, this other, who is pulling a load of coal with horses and sleigh, is upheld by the same ice. Some of us approach prayer in the same manner. We creep on the promises of God when we could be standing on God’s promises.

Frederick Buechner writes in his book, *Magnificent Defeat*, “If we are seeking God’s power, I know one thing to say. Perhaps it is not the only thing, but it is enormously important: ask for it. There is something in me that recoils a little at speaking so directly and childishly….Ask and you will receive….If you have never known the power of God’s love, then maybe it is because you have never asked for it—I mean really asked, expecting an answer.”

In the last portion of our passage, verses 11-13, Jesus likens asking in prayer to fathers who give good gifts to their children. “If a son asks for a fish, will his father give him a snake? If his son asks for an egg, will his father give him a scorpion?” If earthly fathers know how to give good gifts to their children, how much more will God lavish gifts on those who ask?

So, what about this little matter of unanswered prayer? Perhaps you’ve heard it said there are three answers to prayer: yes, no and wait. I would hasten to add a fourth answer to prayer: you’ve got to be kidding. Looking back on my life now, I’m thankful God has not granted me all the silly requests I’ve made in prayer. It’s neither safe nor right for God to grant us all our silly requests. I recall a line from a song sung by Garth Brooks: “Some of God’s greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.”
Pray boldly. Yet, pray loosely.

Prayer doesn’t work like a cosmic vending machine. You put your money in and out comes what you want. It doesn’t work this way.

Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane for this cup of suffering to pass from his life. Yet, he also finds it in his heart to pray, “Not my will, but yours be done.” Here’s another instance when Jesus’ prayer teaches us how to pray. When we pray for God’s will to be done, we’re asking God to align our will with God’s good and gracious purposes. Our goal in prayer is not so much to ask for things but rather to cultivate a relationship of trust with God. We need to center our prayer in words like “make me” rather than “give me.” Make me, Lord, one of your faithful followers.

This would explain the last verse in our passage: “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?” (11:13). At first glance, Jesus’ reference to the Holy Spirit seems to come out of nowhere. But as God’s will is mediated through the Holy Spirit, then asking for the Spirit’s presence is one sure way to align our will with God’s will.

Madeline L’Engle writes: “What happens to all those prayers when not only are they not “unanswered,” but things get far worse than anyone ever anticipated? Surely the prayers have sustained me, are sustaining me. Perhaps there will be unexpected answers to these prayers, answers I may not even be aware of for years. But they are not wasted. They are not lost. I do not know where they have gone, but I believe God holds them.”

Pray boldly. Yet, pray loosely. Stay open to the possibility that God’s will may be unlike anything you could have ever imagined. Hold your expectations in prayer lightly. Let go; let God.

Let go; let God.