

When Prayers Are Not Answered

Seek God's Heart

By Elizabeth Schmus

Sitting on a deserted park bench, I cried out to the Lord in anguish. Was it really my fault my parents divorced? What about when my baby died? Was that my fault? And my cancer? Was it my fault God did not answer yes to many other desperate prayers?

Earlier that week, the speaker at our women's Bible study shared a message on the topic of why God doesn't answer our prayers. While I'm sure she meant well, the overwhelming conclusion I heard was that we are the ones, in a variety of ways, who prevent the Lord from answering yes to all our prayers.

The weight of that was too much to bear. I took some time to get away and wrestle it out in prayer. As I sat on that bench, I had a lot of questions.

What the Lord so lovingly showed me that day changed my tears to gratitude and renewed my trust in Him. He reminded me of all the ways prayer brought me close to Him, how He was unmistakably with me in my darkest nights, and all the ways He provided for me in my deepest pain.

He drew me back to the Book of Job and reminded me that I wasn't there when He "laid the earth's foundation" (Job 38:4), and there was much I would never understand. But I will be there when He comes back to redeem all things:

"I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my

own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:25–27).

Higher Ways

This topic of unanswered or “ungranted” prayers brings up a lot of emotion for most of us. We all have disappointments and tragic losses that we begged God to heal or prevent. While God may not have said yes to all my prayers in the ways I longed for, prayer has drawn me close to Him.

As I practice praising Him in my darkest valleys, He teaches me more about His character, trades my worries for His peace, and brings me to a place of contentment in trusting that His ways are higher than my ways.

In what ways has the Lord drawn close to you as you pray? Ask Him what He wants to reveal to you about Himself, His ways, and His love for you. Is there anything else He wants to show you and teach you? The psalmist speaks of God’s desire to engage with us: “Because he bends down to listen, I will pray as long as I have breath!” (Ps. 116:2, NLT).

I am reminded of God’s higher ways in this passage of Scripture from the apostle Paul. He knew about waiting for answers to his prayers, agonizing to God over his longings and desires, and perhaps even wondering how his time spent in prison would ever advance God’s Kingdom. Yet, he trusted the ways of the Lord and the work of the Spirit:

Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God’s Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don’t know how or what to pray, it doesn’t matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That’s why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good (Rom. 8:26–28,

msg).

Great Questions to Ask

While there is no simple answer to why prayers go unanswered and no easy formula guaranteeing a yes, consider asking the Lord some of these questions:

1. Could God be taking a different or longer path to answering your prayer? I heard a story from some visiting missionaries who shared the gospel overseas with the same group of people for decades before they saw their first conversion. Home on furlough following that only conversion, they questioned if they should even go back. When they returned to the field the following year, their one convert had evangelized the rest of the village! The new Christians were now asking how to take the gospel to surrounding villages.

Practice perseverance because maybe His answer has just not come yet! (Luke 18:1–7; James 5:17–18; Eph. 6:18).

2. Is God asking you to play a part in answering your prayer? For years, I have prayed for the end of abortion. And then a few years ago I sensed the Lord inviting me to pray weekly in front of our local Planned Parenthood with a friend. He's brought us many opportunities to share and pray with women visiting this location. He's also given us the opportunity to support a teenage girl as she chose to embrace her unexpected pregnancy. We are also foster parenting as part of the solution.

Is the Lord inviting you to participate with Him in answering your prayer?

3. Is free will involved? Remember, God doesn't force His ways upon us. This is one of the most emotionally difficult "answers" to process. It represents our desperate prayers for the prodigals, for the addicted, and for those walking in destructive paths. We long for God to rescue those who may not

be willing to surrender to Him.

And yet, even in crying out to the Lord to change them in godly ways, we have a unique opportunity to experience the Lord's heart as He waits for all of us to lay down our wills to follow His.

4. Could it be that what you are asking for is not the best for you or for others? There's a great song by Garth Brooks called "Unanswered Prayers." He tells a story of running into his old crush at a football game years later. He was overcome with gratitude realizing if God had answered his high school prayers, he would not have the wife with whom he had built a life and family.

Maybe for you it was a job you didn't get but now you see God's hand in your work in ways you never could have predicted. Or maybe, like another country song, what He has not yet healed will turn out to be "the broken road" that leads straight to Him.

5. Could God be asking you to walk through something with Him in ways that will bring good? As a child, I was privileged to meet Joni Eareckson Tada at the premier of her movie *Joni*, which told the story of a diving accident that left her quadriplegic as a teenager. She became a hero to me as she honored the Lord in the midst of her pain and suffering. There is no one who has made Jesus look more attractive to me. If He can carry her through her life as she sings His praises, makes art, and serves others, then I can trust Him to carry me through as well.

Consider Joseph, sold into slavery by his own brothers and eventually left to rot in prison for not taking advantage of his boss's wife. How unfair! And yet, God took what was meant for evil and used it for good: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20).

6. Is the Lord allowing the enemy to attempt to dissuade you from walking with the Lord? This is incomprehensible to me—the idea that the enemy must ask the Lord for permission to test our faith. And yet that’s just what happened when Satan determined to torment Job enough to incite Job to curse God (Job 1:8–12). Satan could only go as far as God allowed him.

Peter was sure he would never deny Jesus, but Jesus gave him a glimpse into the cosmic battle: “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31–32).

If this is what is happening to you, take heart. You are in good company with Job, Peter, the other disciples, and many unnamed others through the ages. Embrace the test and allow the Lord to strengthen your faith.

7. Are there things in your life God wants you to examine? While there are a myriad of reasons God may be saying no—or not yet—to our prayers, there are also Scripture passages that point to our own issues that might get in the way. Please don’t fall into the same trap I did by letting any of these verses lead you into a pit of shame. But perhaps it is time to:

- confess sin (Isa. 59:1–2; Ps. 66:18)
- forgive others (Mark 11:25; Eph. 4:32; Matt. 6:12)
- strengthen your belief (Heb. 4:16, 11:1, 27; James 1:6–8)
- evaluate your motives (James 4:2–3, 6)
- treat others differently (1 Peter 3:6–7, 12)
- persist earnestly (Luke 18:1–7; James 5:17; Eph. 6:18; Ps. 116:2).

If the Lord reveals that any of these Scriptures apply to you, confess and receive His forgiveness. Then move forward in the confidence that Jesus loves you so much He already paid the

penalty for your sins on the cross.

Rest in Sovereignty

Ultimately, our unanswered prayers, like those of the psalmists and the example of Job, bring us back to the place of resting in God's sovereignty.

"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (Rom. 9:15–16).

So, trust in the Lord rather than in your own ways or understanding. God will direct you when you call upon Him (Prov. 3:5–6). I pray that as you wade through the confusion and heartbreak of your own ungranted requests, you will cling tightly to Him.

As you come closer to God, He comes even closer to you (James 4:8).

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