

WHEN PRAYERS GO UNANSWERED

Luke 11:1-13

You've heard the saying: "God answers every prayer; but sometimes the answer is no." Yet, isn't hearing "no" preferable to hearing nothing? On three occasions, the apostle Paul pleaded with the Lord to remove a **"thorn in the flesh."** Some believe this 'thorn' was a serious eye disease; others, a recurring bout of malaria. Regardless, removing the infirmity would certainly have enhanced Paul's life, travels, and ministry. Nevertheless, God's answer was "no;" more specifically, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness,"** 2 Corinthians 12:9. Paul prayed. Paul received an answer. The answer was no.

But what of those times when God's people pray and pray and receive no answer? Has this ever happened to you? It happened to the prophet Habakkuk, who said, **"How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but You do not listen? Or cry out to You, 'Violence!' but You do not save? Why do You make me look at injustice? Why do You tolerate wrong?"** Habakkuk 1:2-3.

The Book of Psalms is filled with similar questions, often asked in anguish and perplexity. Like Psalm 6:3, **"My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long?"** Or Psalm 13:1-2, **"How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?"** Or Psalm 80:4, **"O LORD God Almighty, how long will Your anger smolder against the prayers of your people?"**

How long, Lord? Where are You, Lord? Why aren't You listening, Lord? Why aren't You answering, helping, acting, and delivering me, Lord? Many people of God have asked these very questions. And in the deafening silence of unanswered prayer, they've concluded that God must be sleeping or distant or disinterested; as stated in Psalm 44: **"Awake, O Lord! Why do You sleep? Rouse Yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide Your face and forget our misery and oppression?"**

Surely, you've felt this way. I have too. At times, the Lord has answered my prayers almost immediately. Yet, at other times, He has not answered for days, weeks, months, and even years. For seven years I pleaded with God to heal a troubled marriage. One night, feeling forsaken and forgotten, heartbroken and helpless, I walked from the parsonage to the nearby church building, and in the darkness lay down prostrate before the altar of God. "Please, God," I prayed. "Help me. You have the power. You can do anything." On that night, one of the worst nights of my life, I would have gladly preferred hearing "no" to hearing nothing at all.

When our prayers go unanswered, what should we think? How should we act? Should we give up? Should we surrender to despair and hopelessness? Should we accuse God of indifference—even worse, of breaking His promise; namely, that when we ask, we will receive; when we seek, we will find; when we knock, the door will be opened? No. Instead, when prayers go unanswered, we should ask ourselves what the silence of God may be teaching us.

First, when prayers go unanswered, could the reason be that we are instructing God instead of talking with God? For many people, prayer is like a soda machine. They visit the machine only when hot and thirsty. They drop in a few coins, that is, say a few words. They make a personal selection: Coke, Pepsi, Sprite; healing, money, marriage. And so long as the machine delivers the right product at the right time, they're happy. They hurry off, pleased and satisfied, until the next bout of heat and thirst. But let the machine provide the wrong result; or worse, let it provide nothing at all; they bang on the coin return with both fists and storm off, promising to never use that machine again—promising to never pray again.

Only, prayer is not a soda machine. And when it is treated like one—like a coin transaction in which we get what we deserve instead of getting what we don't deserve—why would God answer such a prayer? Would you?

Prayer is simply talking with God; talking about everything, every day. In fact, this is what Paul meant when he wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, **“pray continually.”** Pray when walking. Pray when musing. Pray when succeeding and failing; when grocery-shopping and alms-giving; when going to bed and going to work.

Yes, bring the biggest things in your life to God—your illnesses, financial struggles, marital troubles; your concerns about the chaos in the world and terrorist groups like ISIS and nuclear proliferation in North Korea and loss of a job or hope or loved one. Bring the big requests, because you have an infinitely big God. As stated in one of our hymns: “Thou art coming to a King. Large petitions with thee bring. For His grace and power are such, none can ever ask too much.” Lutheran Hymnal 459:2.

But also bring the little things to God: “God, thank You for that beautiful sunset and the recent rain. Thank You for the smile I received today from a complete stranger. Thank You for the opportunity to be here today at St. Luke's Lutheran with family, friends, and like-minded Christians. Thank You for the food on my plate and the clothes in my closet.” This is talking with God. Talking, not taking. Presenting, not presuming. And it doesn't matter if your prayer is fluently spoken or inwardly sighed. For according to Scripture, the Holy Spirit of God transforms even our deepest sobs and

inarticulate groans into the most eloquent of prayers, heard and understood and acted upon by the Almighty.

If prayers are going unanswered in our lives, perhaps the reason lies in the manner in which we are praying. Are we talking with God or instructing Him? Do we talk with God about everything or only when we need Him? Are we approaching God like a heavenly Father or like a soda machine?

Second, when prayers go unanswered, could the reason be that we are asking with the wrong motives? I read a humorous story recently about an elderly man who found a magic lamp on the beach. Delighted, the man rubbed the lamp vigorously until a genie appeared. “Because you have released me,” said the genie, “I will grant you one wish.”

The man thought for a moment, then replied, “Well, my brother and I had a terrible fight thirty years ago, and he hasn’t spoken to me since. I wish for his forgiveness.” The genie folded his arms, blinked, and said, “Done. Your wish is granted.” Then, studying the man, the genie added, “I’m puzzled by your request. Most people ask me for fame or fortune. But you asked for your brother’s forgiveness. Why? Is it because you are old and dying?” “Not at all,” said the man. “My brother is the one who is sick and dying. And he’s worth at least sixty million dollars. I wanted his forgiveness because I want his inheritance.”

If our prayers are going unanswered, could we be asking for something with the wrong motive or wrong desire—asking for something contrary to God’s will? The apostle John wrote these important words: **“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: 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,”** 1 John 5:14-15. And the apostle James wrote in his epistle: **“When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures,”** James 4:3. God has not yet answered my prayer about winning the Powerball lottery, despite my assurances of the enormous sums of money I would donate to church.

Are we praying for something out of selflessness or selfishness; with the right motives or the wrong ones; in conformity with God’s will or our own will? These are important questions to ask when addressing unanswered prayers.

Third, when prayers go unanswered, could the reason be unconfessed sin? Unconfessed sin is unquestionably related to human pride. And we know how God feels about human pride. Simply recall the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, Luke 18; two men who went into the temple of God to pray. The Pharisee stood in the

bright spotlight of his own righteousness and prayed: **“God, I thank You that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”**

By contrast, the Publican stood at a distance, in the shadows. So great was his shame and guilt and consciousness of sin that **“he would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ ”** (The Greek is literally “the” sinner, as if there were no other.) According to Jesus, it was the Publican who went home justified and forgiven. It was the Publican whose prayer God heard and answered.

The psalmist wrote in Psalm 66:18-20, **“If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld His love from me.”** If a person has no regard for that which God wants, should such a person expect God to regard what he wants?

Fourth, when prayers go unanswered, could the reason be that we are asking for something harmful or painful to us? When my sons were small, I gave them a variety of gifts: Legos, video consoles with video games; bicycles, popsicles, clothes, books, hats, sports equipment—at one time or another, probably half of the inventory at TOYS R US.

In retrospect, I made mistakes. Yet, as a father who loved his sons and wanted only the best for them, I always tried to give good gifts and to avoid harmful gifts. I never substituted dynamite for firecrackers. I never exchanged milk from a cow for milk of magnesia. Nor would you.

And so Jesus told His disciples: **“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you, then, though you 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!”** Luke 11:11-13.

Our heavenly Father is committed to our eternal welfare and eternal salvation. He sees and foresees what we cannot. In His love and faithfulness, He will never give us anything that could prove injurious to our faith. Never. And for this, we should thank Him instead of accusing Him of sleepy indifference or heartless capriciousness.

I told you earlier about the seven years I prayed for God to save my troubled marriage. He didn't. Many decades later, however, I realized that by not saving that marriage the Almighty saved me from even greater grief. Not long after my unwanted

divorce, my ex-wife died of breast cancer—at the tender age of thirty-eight. God saw that tragedy coming. I did not.

Fifth, when prayers go unanswered, could the reason be that God is teaching us to be persistent prayers? You know the Bible story as well as I do; Matthew 15:21-28, the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman, who came to Jesus for help. “**Lord, Son of David,**” she prayed, “**have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.**” And what did Jesus do? He ignored her. “**Jesus did not answer a word,**” Matthew 15:23. There you have it in black and white, chapter and verse: the problem of unanswered prayer.

When Jesus did answer, His first response was “no.” He told the woman, “**I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.**” Undeterred, the woman came and knelt before the Savior, pleading, “**Lord, help me!**” And again he answered “no,” saying, “**It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.**” To which the woman replied, “**Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.**” And Jesus said, “**Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.**”

I ask you: Why did Jesus keep walking away? Because He wanted the woman to follow. Why was Jesus silent? Because He wanted the woman to speak to Him. Why did Jesus set up so many obstacles before answering her prayer? Because He wanted to make this woman’s faith a great faith. And when our prayers go unanswered—when God seems to be silent or to walk away or to rebuff our petitions—His intent is the same. He wants our faith to be a great faith.

Sixth and finally, when prayers go unanswered, could the reason be that God is teaching us that He can never come too late? And here I would simply direct you to the death of Lazarus and the cemetery outside of Bethany, Israel. When Lazarus became ill, his concerned sisters, Mary and Martha, asked Jesus for help. They prayed. Jesus received their petition, but then purposely waited two days before traveling to Bethany—waited long enough for Lazarus to die. And when Jesus finally arrived in Bethany, both Mary and Martha approached Him with the same assessment of the effectiveness of prayer: “**Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.**”

‘Lord, if You had been here; if You had been doing what You should have been doing; if You had answered my prayer when I started praying—none of this would have happened.’ Mary said it. Martha said it. I’ve said it. You’ve said it. “Oh, how cruel You are, Jesus. Oh, how heartless You are, Jesus. You refused to answer my prayer.”

And yet, the very opposite was true. According to John 11:5, Jesus delayed going to Bethany—not because He was disinterested or heartless, but because He loved

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Because He wanted to show them that Almighty God can never come too late to answer prayer. And show them Jesus did, when He stood before the sepulcher of dead and buried Lazarus and with three words called Him to life. **“Lazarus, come forth!”** These siblings from Bethany learned that a delayed answer to prayer does not mean a never-answered prayer. And you and I need to learn this same lesson.

So, dear friends, when prayers go unanswered, don't accuse God of deafness or indifference or heartlessness. Ask yourself the questions raised today: “Am I talking with God or instructing God? What are my motives in praying? Am I going God's way or my own way? Am I asking for something helpful or harmful? Is God teaching me to give in or press on? Is God showing me He cannot answer my prayers or that He can never come too late to answer my prayers?”

This I know. The promise of Jesus is absolutely true: **“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; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.”** Matthew 7:7-8.