

His Kingdom or My Comfort Praying?



Longtime Presbyterian minister, Dr. Wilbur Chapman (early 1900s) was 26 when called to be pastor of Wanamakers Church in Philadelphia. His first Sunday, an old gentleman came up to him and said, “you’re much too young to be the pastor of such a fine church as this.” Chapman thought the guy was a kook. But the gentleman went on to tell him that he had decided to pray for him, that the Holy Spirit’s power would fall on him each time he stepped into the pulpit. And he had another man who would pray with him.

Chapman report that those two men soon turned into 10, the 20, then 50, and finally more than 200 men who gathered each Sunday morning before services and pray for the Holy Spirit’s enablement. Over the next three years the church saw 1,100 people come into the kingdom—more than 600 of them men.

Somewhere along the line churches have lost sight of what they should be praying for! Today, most churches’ prayers are almost exclusively for needs within the body. Prayers that each person’s life would get back to normal. Seldom are there prayers that cry out for the fullness of Jesus Christ to come upon a body, for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit onto a church, that Joe’s life would glorify God and people would be drawn to Christ as he walks through this difficult time, that our youth would desire to be filled with the Holy Spirit. No, we stay focused on the “little answerables” that have upset

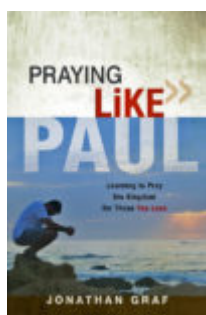
our people's ease in life. No thought is ever given as to "God what do you want to do in this situation in Bill's life"; no our prayers are always, "Get Bill out of this!"

I'm struck by the prayers of Paul. Even though he had many people with life and death needs under his care, Paul—at least in the prayers we see in Scriptures—never prayed for a logical answer to a specific need. (His own request that his thorn in the flesh be removed is the closest he comes; but God said, "no," so he stopped asking.) Instead, Paul focused on spiritual fruit and spiritual growth issues.

For the Roman believers, who were undoubtedly suffering intense persecution, Paul prayed "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13). No "Get them out of this!" Paul knew the Holy Spirit would draw people to Christ if they saw believers go through tough times with a sense of hope, joy and peace.

How do you pray when faced with a situation in your life or in the life of another? Do you simply default to "get them out of this" mode? Or do you recognize that God wants to do something in and through this situation in someone's life. Spiritual growth, maybe. Glory to His Son, maybe. Growing the kingdom, maybe. Maybe we and our churches would see more kingdom growth if we changed the way we prayed.

Jonathan Graf is the president of the [Church Prayer Leaders Network](#) and the publisher of [Prayer Connect](#) magazine.



To read more about praying kingdom prayers, we recommend Jon's book [Praying Like Paul](#).

The Unwanted Gift of Unanswered Prayer

By Eleanor Shepherd



As the train sped through the French countryside in early February 2013, I spent my time praying for my son repeatedly. "Lord, You can do anything. Please keep John safe as he travels this weekend."

I felt restless. I even doubted that God was hearing my prayers. But I was compelled to seek Him on behalf of my son.

That Sunday night we were traveling on the high-speed train from Valence, in the south of France, back to our home in Paris.

Although my body was in France, my mind and heart were in North America with our children. John, then studying in Boston, had driven to Montreal that weekend to attend a conference and visit his sister Elizabeth. I was worried because I knew road conditions could be treacherous in winter.

The next morning, during my morning prayer time at home, my heart tightened when the phone rang. Our daughter Elizabeth, calling from Montreal, said that John had been in a car

accident. Stunned, I listened to her report. John's vehicle had hit black ice and rolled over. His neck was broken from the impact. John was paralyzed.

My prayers had not been answered.

During the following months, a kaleidoscope of emotions jumbled together with questions. I tried to understand why God did not answer my prayer. What if I had prayed in a different way? What if my prayers had focused on surrendering to His sovereignty more than insistent pleading? Would it have made a difference?

Certainty in the Answer

All of us, at one time or another, have experienced unanswered prayer. We have poured our hearts out to God with a desired outcome, only to find God not answering the way we had hoped. Some of us struggle even now, trying to understand why God has not intervened and responded to a long-standing prayer of our hearts.

What provides a glimmer of hope for me is the way Jesus prayed, as recorded in Hebrews 4:15: "We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin."

As God, Jesus is sovereign, yet He also knows what it is like to contend with the challenges we face—even unanswered prayers.

I think of Jesus, kneeling in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32–42). I note His transparency. He does not pretend that He easily embraces the suffering that threatens Him. He is honest and says to the Father, "If it is possible, don't let this happen to me! Father, you can do anything. Don't make me suffer by having me drink from this cup" (v. 36, CEV).

These words of Jesus take me back to my urgent prayers on that train in France. I had prayed that God would protect John from any harm that might come his way.

But Jesus concluded His prayer in the garden, telling His Father, “Do what you want, and not what I want.” Perhaps Jesus could say that because He had the absolute certainty that what the Father wanted was best for His Son—and for everyone impacted for all eternity.

In fact, after praying in the garden and then facing His accusers, Jesus was certain that the choice of the Father was the right one. When Peter drew a sword to defend His Master, Jesus confidently told Peter to put it away. Jesus confronted Peter with a question that revealed His determination: “Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?” (John 18:11). He spoke out of His clear-sighted understanding that this is the way it must be.

Faith-building in Unanswered Prayers

What can we learn from Jesus’ example about dealing with our “unanswered” prayers? We discover that unanswered prayers build faith.

One day Donna, my friend in another ministry, said to me, “Have you ever noticed that when a person comes to Christ, it seems like their prayers are answered so often, yet as they continue on their faith journey, the answers become less frequent?”

After further discussion, we concluded that this is one way the Lord enables Christians to grow in their faith. If all our prayers were answered without fail in just the way we desire, we would eventually take God for granted and fail to value all He does for us. We would be tempted to treat God like a vending machine, expecting to receive whatever we ask for. The result would be a shallow faith. In fact, we would be placing

our faith in the effectiveness of our prayers rather than trusting God for whatever way He might choose to answer.

Understanding that God does not always answer the way we expect Him to, forces us to go deeper. We then must ask ourselves hard questions: Have we lost our connection with Him? Does He have other plans for us? What is going on?

It forces us to intimately engage with God in even more fervent prayer.

Strength in Surrender

Questions and reflection teach us to trust confidently that God is in control of our lives, even if we do not understand what is happening. He always gives us a choice. We can hold onto our demands, or we can surrender them to Him and allow Him to work out all things for our good. The answers might not immediately bring happiness or satisfaction, but God always acts for our good (Rom. 8:28).

A statement I heard in a sermon once has remained with me: "You never know how much faith you have until it is tested." One way our faith is tested is that God doesn't always answer our prayers the way we believe He should. While it is evident that Jesus fully embraced the Father's will for Him, it wasn't easy. In fact, He struggled so intensely in Gethsemane that, according to Dr. Luke, His "sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44). As Jesus took upon Himself all our sins, He knew what was ahead: not only the agony of His torture and crucifixion but the fear of abandonment by His Father. He was saying yes to something beyond anything we can imagine.

Our yes to His will, even when it leads us to suffering, pales in comparison. Yet, like Jesus, we would prefer another option. God may not change the circumstances He permits, but He will not force us to accept that this is part of His will.

Our strength is found in our relinquishment.

Answers in Time!

Now, more than 15 years after John's accident, adjustment to his new life as a quadriplegic has been extremely difficult. Some of my prayers have remained unanswered. Others not. After about eight years, John told me he had finally dealt with his anger over the accident. That was a huge answer to my prayers.

However, throughout his lengthy struggle to find employment, we did not find an answer as quickly. Three years after the accident John went back to school and completed his MBA from Harvard Business School. But a well-educated young man, finding himself seemingly unemployable because of physical limitations, needs huge amounts of courage to keep going each day.

God continues to answer this prayer. John has used his time profitably. He has scoured all the journals and books available about spinal cord injury. At his own expense, he developed an online program to help people with spinal cord injuries. Currently John is working to achieve the academic credentials needed to speak and to teach people with serious long-term diseases some ways they can live and thrive.

The Gift in Unanswered Prayer

Is unanswered prayer really a gift? At first it seemed like an unwanted gift, but after my initial disappointment in my prayers for John, I discovered something even greater. When we surrender our prayers—and the answers—to God, He uses the seemingly unanswered prayers:

- to develop faith
- to test that faith and refine us as our faith holds
- to discover that His strength is ours through our

willing relinquishment to His sovereignty

- and to find our joy in His plans and purposes for us in our imperfect situations.

As difficult as it has been to go through this faith test surrounding John's accident, I'm learning that we can confidently ask God for the desires of our hearts, and we can rest assured that His answer, in His time, is part of His perfect plan for our lives.

ELEANOR SHEPHERD served as a Salvation Army officer for 30 years in Canada, Bermuda, and France. She is the author of *More Questions than Answers*, and *Sharing Faith by Listening*, which won The Word Guild Award in the Christian Leadership category.

This article appeared in *Prayer Connect* magazine. To access more articles like this we encourage you to [subscribe to Prayer Connect](#).

Spiritual Awakening at Arizona State University



About five years ago, the Sentinel Group, directed by George Otis, Jr., began working with a small ministry in Tempe, AZ, called LoveASU. Comprised of intercessors, ministry workers, and students, the group had been inspired by Transformations videos to pray for spiritual awakening on the campus of Arizona State University (ASU).

In recent months, this university has been in the grip of a spiritual awakening. United prayer is a major factor behind these developments. After several tough years, during which campus ministries tended to go their own way, things changed in the fall of 2017. Instead of the usual two to three ministries coming together before God, prayer events at the local Campus Christian Center experienced a three-fold increase in intercessory participants.

Last year, a dozen ministries united behind a 40-day prayer focus, during which petitions were lifted day and night from within a tent erected near the main campus square. The initiative was so fruitful, the ministries decided to continue the effort over the balance of the academic semester. In fall 2018, the tally of participating ministries and campus churches reached 17. A fresh 56-day campaign drew prodigals, atheists, Muslims, New Agers, and students suffering from depression. In addition to witnessing numerous conversions, healings, and deliverances, the intercessors also watched God begin to move among the university faculty and administration.

One of the more significant breakthroughs involved the school's Interfaith Council of Religious Advisors. For years, the woman directing the council was motivated to establish ASU as a model of the global interfaith movement. As time went by, her attitude toward Christians hardened, and ministries found their access to campus facilities severely limited.

Faced with this opposition, students and ministry leaders began to pray that God would either change this woman's heart or install someone more sympathetic.

Within a period of weeks, this woman disappeared from the Interfaith Council. Today, the council is headed by the son of a Baptist minister. Even more dramatic has been the departure from the university of an atheist professor who routinely packed out an auditorium on campus by bringing in atheist luminaries such as Richard Dawkins and the late Stephen

Hawking.sentinelgroup.org

Transforming winds have also been coursing through the university's athletic department. In late 2018, more than 100 Christian student athletes attended an all-sport gathering in the men's football facility, worshiping, praying, and listening to inspirational messages. An estimated 20–30 football players have turned their lives over to Jesus in recent months. As one student athlete told Otis, "The identity of ASU is being flipped."

–GEORGE OTIS, [The Sentinel Group](#), adapted from a Nov. 15, 2018, email.

Faith on Trial

Strength under Tension

By Dana Olson



Bummer. After all, it was the Fourth of July—and instead of sitting at a picnic table eating a burger, I was sitting on an exam table in the heart hospital's ER, waiting.

For weeks I had noticed odd symptoms. Previous tests had shown

nothing (or so I thought). But now, after my heartbeat went from “marching band snare drum” to “funky jazz drum solo,” I landed on this bench, awaiting results from high-tech picture-taking. The young ER doctor looked perplexed as he entered. “Tell me about this mass on your spleen.”

“I don’t know anything about my spleen,” I replied, stunned. Apparently previous testing had shown an obvious abnormality, but I had not been notified due to office error.

Uncertainty followed. My “busy pastor” schedule was cleared, more tests conducted, consultations held. Multiple diagnoses were considered as I alternated between my own bed at home and a woefully inadequate hospital bed. Finally, a fuzzy picture became clear: non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma cancer and an extensive blood clot. My life changed dramatically.

Prayer Lessons

In the three years since, many have asked what I learned from hearing the C word, going through surgery, and experiencing rapid hair loss. It’s taken a while to figure that out.

I preached two out of every three Sundays during chemo. My hair loss presented no great challenge. I spent lots of time in a big chair and special bed—both purchased by caring friends. Mostly, I tried to keep going, day by day, but with extra rest. I took my meds—and still do.

One hymn I’d sung from my youth meant the world to me. I sang it to myself again and again:

Jesus, I am resting, resting
In the joy of what Thou art;
I am finding out the greatness
Of Thy loving heart.¹

The time to build up your “faith bank account” is today. Don’t wait until trials come. While facing a threatening diagnosis, relational breakdown, profound disappointment, disillusioning

failure, or devastating loss, the withdrawals come fast and furious. You will need to have banked faith to draw upon.

Here are truths to help you prepare:

1. God is in control. You can trust Him. That doesn't mean circumstances always turn out well. Life isn't like the smiling, late-night TV preacher who offers health and wealth. Cancer can kill. Life presents an extensive variety of hurts and heartaches. To deny that is to deny sin's profound impact on humanity. Jesus says, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Our God is Lord of heaven and earth. He holds the future. He makes all grace abound to you, whatever the circumstance—in life and death, in joy and sorrow, in pain and pleasure.

2. God sees. In Genesis 22, the gospel comes alive on a mountain at Moriah. Abraham obeys the Lord and takes his beloved son Isaac and prepares to offer him to the Lord. But the Lord intervenes. God provides a ram as a substitute for Isaac, and Abraham names that place "The Lord will provide" (v. 14)—in Hebrew, Jehovah Jireh, which means, literally, "God sees." The passage is a neon sign pointing ahead to Jesus, the divine Substitute who died on the cross in our place. God sees you in your heartache. He sees your suffering. And when God sees, He provides.

His provision comes in expected and unexpected ways. The God who sees you in your distress might send a wave of Holy Spirit comfort, or an old friend to sit with you, or a passage of Scripture to point you to hope, or someone from your church who shows up with your favorite meal. He might send a job offer, a check from an old friend, or a bag of groceries. God might send a counselor, a favorite uncle, a neighbor, or a stranger. Watch how He faithfully provides.

3. God cares. I'm no fisherman, but I know that effectiveness requires learning to cast the line into the water. Similarly,

in our suffering, God tells us, “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). This marvelous verse’s context reminds us that such humbling of ourselves (v. 6) requires vigilant watchfulness (v. 8). We dare not give in to the devil’s scheme, tempting us to despair and turn our backs on our heavenly Father. Instead, we press in to Him. We call upon Him. We pray earnestly. We cast and keep casting!

Why? Because God cares. He showed His merciful care for us by sending His Son to be our Savior, Redeemer, and Friend. He continues showing believers that loving care every day, for His Spirit dwells in us and is our Comforter. The cynic says, “God doesn’t care about you.” The cross screams otherwise.

4. God prepares. Suffering is a kind of preparatory school. God is preparing us for Himself. And He is preparing a place for us to spend eternity with Him. This is our hope in suffering: “If I go [and He has gone] and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:3, brackets added).

For us to be with God requires holiness. Our holiness requires the divine washing by Christ’s precious blood, followed by the divine surgery transforming us from the inside out to be God’s holy people. The whole process is the great grace-work of justification (in a moment) and sanctification (over a lifetime). Suffering is part of God’s sculpting work in our sanctification. But the destination—the very presence of God Himself—is worth every bit of the suffering.

Prayer Strategy

So why and how can we pray with confidence in the midst of painful suffering

- Because God is in control, let your prayer be filled with praise and adoration to the One who alone is God:

“Hallowed be your name.” Let your prayer reflect your sweet submission to your Father in heaven. “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (see Matt. 6:9–13)

- Because God sees, and when He sees He provides, ask God for the daily bread of His sustaining grace, whatever that might be. Jesus asked Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” (see Mark 10:46–52). We have a wonderful privilege to answer Jesus’ question, praying, “Father, here’s what I long for You to do for me.” Keep in mind, the answer will not always come quickly. Often God wants to work in us through the waiting! But if we trust Him for His timing—and if we stay patient—we will see His hand and His heart in due time.
- Because God cares, keep casting! From the midst of pain, don’t be afraid to honestly tell the Lord what is on your heart. Any burden can be transferred from our broken hearts to His broad, strong shoulders. As you cast your cares upon Him, remember that the committed believer’s greatest desire is always this: that Jesus Christ be magnified. Paul reminds us, “Do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). What seems like silence to us may in fact be God’s strategic timing, using our suffering for His glory in some remarkable way we don’t see now. In my case, I believe my cancer and complications were tools in God’s hand, working powerfully in me and in our church. We are taking steps of faith today that I believe are answers to heart cries during my illness. We too easily focus only on ourselves. God’s agenda is far larger and more complex. Nevertheless, from your suffering, don’t stop casting! One more cast may yield the big fish of God’s awesome answer to your prayer.
- Because God is preparing you and preparing a place for you, pray with hope. Hope is faith applied to the future. When you trust God today to do mighty things that will last forever, that is hope! When you pray big, expansive prayers that will be finally answered in the

new heavens and new earth, that is hope-filled praying. When you pray, knowing that the final outcome will arrive with the return of Christ, that is hope on its knees.

Our cry for God to make us whole inherently applies to our holiness.

Prayer Strength

Engineers work with the concept of tensile strength: the maximum stress that can be applied to an object under tension before it breaks. Cancer is only one of many possible tension producers in life. You can fill in the blanks for yourself. What has brought significant tension to your life? What has threatened to break you, in the past or present? What fiery darts have come your direction from the world, the flesh, or the devil? Whatever is putting stress on you, keep on praying.

Your prayer life can greatly strengthen your spiritual tensile strength. Trials will test you—and they are inevitable. But by prayer you can be prepared, can pray through, and pray beyond the trial. Build up your tensile strength now. Prepare yourself to pray through the difficulty. Here are practical ways to endure the tension of suffering:

1. Keep on praying. Don't stop. When you can't even put your prayers into words, sigh. Groan. The Holy Spirit Himself will intercede for you. Take Romans 8:26 to heart. Rest in the presence of God and in the joy of Jesus, your Savior and Friend.

2. Stay in the Word of God. Make the Bible your companion in suffering. Let the Psalms give expression to your own journey through pain, and God will meet you there. Both the psalms of lament and the psalms of adoration and praise can build your tensile strength. Where to start? Try Psalm 42:5:

Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

3. Ask others to pray for you! Yes, the Spirit of God will intercede for you, but so will brothers and sisters in Christ. Don't be shy. Ask for their intercession. Phone, email, or text: "I really need you to pray for me right now. It's hard." Let the body of Christ lift you up in your pain to the Father's throne of grace.

4. Sing! If you can't sing, hum. So many Christian songs are prayers that can express our heart's yearnings during suffering. I recommend my favorite, "Jesus, I am Resting, Resting," but you undoubtedly have other songs, hymns, and spiritual songs that lift your heart and mind up to God. If you can't sing or hum, listen to the music of fellow believers who for centuries have made music out of their own journey with pain, songs such as "Day by Day":

Help me then in every tribulation
So to trust Thy promises, O Lord,
That I lose not faith's sweet consolation
Offered me within Thy holy word.
Help me, Lord, when toil and trouble
meeting; E'er to take, as from a father's hand,
One by one, the days, the moments fleeting,
Till I reach the promised land.²

How is your spiritual tensile strength? What is the maximum you can endure by faith? Are you ready for life's next great trial? Holy-spirit enabled prayer, aligned with the promises of God's Word, can prepare you for whatever the Father allows to come your way—from daily stresses to the ER on the 4th of July.

¹ Jean S. Pigott, "Jesus, I Am Resting, Resting," 1876, public domain.
² Karolina Sandell Berg, tr. A.L. Skoog, "Day by Day," 1865, public domain.

DANA OLSON is senior pastor for teaching and preaching at Faith Baptist Fellowship, Sioux Falls, SD, and former director

of Prayer First, the prayer mobilization ministry of Converge Worldwide. He is a member of America's National Prayer Committee.

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Surviving Isolation

By Jackie Harmon

Eight years ago, I traveled to Ethiopia to meet the little boy God called our family to adopt. I received Miles with open arms. Three years later, those arms were covered in scars, scratches, and bite marks. Every interaction with this child, who has the challenge of autism, was physically painful. And I landed in the darkest place my heart and mind had ever been.

I spent a lot of time at home with Miles, isolated from people. God used my isolation as an invitation to stand in the gap, praying for my husband, my pastor, and my friends in ministry. God sealed on my heart the words, Not on my watch. I made it my mission to pray for hundreds of marriages, families, and ministries every month. God used that time to fill my heart with love for "my people," so I felt connected to their lives and ministries—even though I was still isolated.

Besides calling me to pray for marriages and ministries, God also invited me to change the way I was praying for Miles. In Matthew 11, Jesus sends word to John the Baptist, saying, "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me" (v. 6, NIV 1984).

When I first read those words, it was like Jesus was saying, "Jackie, I know what adding Miles to your family has done. I know that caring for him is hard. But I'm not coming for you. I'm not rescuing you. Do not lose faith because of Me."

I no longer pray that Miles progresses emotionally out of the terrible twos or that he will one day be potty-trained. My prayer is that, no matter what, I will not lose faith because of Jesus.

Nothing has challenged me to keep my eyes and heart fixed on Jesus more than the gift of Miles, who has the gift of autism. Caring for Miles is the hardest thing I've ever done—and it is the greatest privilege of my life!

JACKIE HARMON is a member of Cross Church, Springdale, AR. She blogs at keithandjackie.blogspot.com.