

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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Native American Tribes

Experience Revival

In some respects, the plight of Native Americans hasn't changed. They face troubling issues ranging from substance abuse to a massive COVID-19 impact, to an alarming number of missing and murdered women.

"There's a lot of broken areas, broken communities, and our communities are rampant with drugs," Donna Stands-Over-Bull (from the Crow Reservation in Montana) told CBN News.

Yet, in the midst of the suffering, Stands-Over-Bull and her husband Russell say God is on the move. "We can feel and sense the rumblings of revival, and when I say revival I mean people's hearts turning back to God," she shares.

"We've been having healing revivals over the online church. God's been healing people through social media. People are giving their hearts to the Lord," explains Russell Stands-Over-Bull.

The senior pastors of Arrow Creek TV e-church say God called them to start the online fellowship in 2018.

"We couldn't comprehend what that would look like, but God put it on our hearts, and we began to establish Arrow Creek TV," Russell says. "And millennials started coming to the church, and I'm so proud of my congregation. We've got the best. We've got five continents represented."

"We probably represent the biggest church in the Indian community throughout the U.S.," he continues.

Leaders of the Crow Tribe have even put up a sign which boldly proclaims that "Jesus Christ Is Lord on the Crow Nation." It also has a Scripture that reads, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord; and the people whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance" (Ps. 33:12).

In addition, the southeast Montana tribe passed a 2013 legislative resolution “to honor God for his great blessings upon the Crow Tribe and to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord of the Crow Indian Reservation.” They also fly the flag of Israel next to the sign.

“The Scripture says that as we stand with Israel, we are a blessed nation, so we held that,” Sharon Stands-Over-Bull says. “And so today, there are ministries throughout the reservation, and people have been saved and healed and shouting the victory.”

Mark Martin, taken from CBN News.

Appearing in *Prayer Connect* magazine.

Thirsty for a Soft Heart

“Your heart has layers and layers of callouses.”

This was God’s response after pouring out my painful heart to Him.

I had just experienced a year of traumatic events, one more hurtful than the other. There were challenges I’d never faced, a series of turbulent situations, and a succession of surprise attacks from the enemy. It felt like I had been swept over Niagara Falls in a barrel, unable to tell which end was up.

Physically, a callous appears on our bodies when there is pressure on an area of our skin, causing a hard surface to form. I have a callous on my finger from gripping my pen too tight when I write. Callouses protect our skin. We’re fearfully and wonderfully made by our Creator.

Spiritually, however, hardness of heart can transpire from abrasive circumstances or suffering one hurt too many. Our hearts can also become calloused when we turn to someone or something besides God, searching for what only God can give. When we look to an idol, we turn away from Him. This hardens our hearts.

Symptoms of hardness of heart are many and varied. A calloused spiritual heart can manifest as passion loss, indifference, a feeling of numbness, or doubt. It is also noticeable when we isolate from people and God (isolation equals desolation), when our devotional time becomes dry and rote, or when we become jaded critics. Dire spiritual consequences can result from a hardened heart.

The disciples had just witnessed the miracle of feeding the 5,000. Immediately after, while they were in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus came walking on water toward them. The disciples were terrified of Him and cried out in fright. Mark 6:52 tells us why: “. . . for they still didn't understand the significance of the miracle of the loaves. Their hearts were too hard to take it in.”

A hardened heart thwarts our spiritual understanding to the point that even miracles no longer impress. It's difficult to experience personal revival when our hearts are hard. No, it's downright impossible.

When God exposed my hardened heart that day, after recovering from the shock of my true heart condition, there were specific things I did to cooperate with God in softening my heart. These prayer directions served to give Him full access to my hardened heart. They saved my spiritual life.

Here are the eight steps I took to position myself for God's heart-softening. I implore you to go through them, one by one. Your spiritual life may depend upon them:

1. **Get honest with God.** Lay your heart on God's altar and

pour it out to Him—all of it. Bring your bottled-up distress, questions, loss, habitual sin, lurking anxiety, anger, and unmet needs to the Lord. God can take it; His shoulders are broad. Get brutally honest with Him. Bring the contents of your heart into the light of Christ Jesus. Light chases darkness.

2. **Surrender your pain to Jesus.** If you don't, you'll build a memorial to those traumatic events, pitch a tent at its base, and camp out. No, instead give your hurts and disappointments to God and leave them there. God longs to turn your battle scars into beauty marks so that you reflect the image of our Savior.
3. **Extend forgiveness.** If you walked into a convenience store to buy a loaf of bread and the price tag read \$100, would you buy it? Of course not. You would say, "That costs way too much!" Unforgiveness comes with an enormous price tag. It will weigh you down with a heavy emotional burden you were never intended to carry. But here is the highest price of all: if you don't forgive, you won't be forgiven. Therefore, forgive whomever, whenever, of whatever. Forgive, let go of resentment, and repent of bitterness. And while you're at it, extend God's amazing grace to yourself as well.
4. **Intentionally cast your care upon the Lord.** Sometimes you barely catch your breath from one trial before you are afflicted with another. Therefore, it's vital to ensure you aren't shouldering the care of anything that has occurred. What problems or people are you still carrying? Picture yourself walking up to the throne of Jesus and placing your burdens in His hands: "Jesus, they're Yours."
5. **Ask God to perform spiritual heart surgery.** Our loving Heavenly Father wants to reach His healing hand into your spiritual heart to heal wounds, soften scar tissue, and tear down walls. Give Him permission to speak to your heart, convict your heart, strengthen your heart, and deposit the desires of His heart. Let God do a

transforming work in your life by giving Him full access to your heart.

6. **Recalibrate your expectancy.** When you're sucker punched by the enemy, it's like you've experienced your own spiritual Pearl Harbor. This can deal a blow to your faith. If you aren't careful, your expectations of the future can reflect the hardships you've faced. Ask God to recalibrate your faith to echo Jeremiah 29:11: "'For I know the plans that I have for you,' says the Lord. 'They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.'"
7. **Refocus your vision.** Somewhere along the way of being turned upside down, your purpose probably got a little (or a lot) blurry. Prayerfully revisit your personal mission statement and let the Lord give you laser-focused vision. Ask Him to reignite your passion to continue running the race of your calling with reckless abandon.
8. **Learn every lesson.** Our lives are lived in seasons. And there are reasons for every season. Mine every lesson, revelation, and wisdom nugget you can from what you've just experienced. God is a multitasker and uses it all—the good, bad, and the ugly—to prepare us for His overall plan for our lives. Take everything you've learned in the wilderness into the next season of promise.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Are you presently experiencing symptoms of hardness of heart?
2. Are you struggling with a particular hurt?
3. Why do you think a hardened heart impedes personal revival?

Personal Prayer for Revival

I ask You to reach Your healing hands into my spiritual heart

to smooth any callouses and soften scar tissue. Tear down any walls I have built to protect myself from future hurt. You are Lord of my life and Protector of my heart. Open the eyes and ears of my heart so I can see and hear You.

Help me to guard my heart. I turn back to You in any area I may have turned to an idol. Break up the fallow ground of my heart so that I'll be thirsty for You once again.

I love You, Lord! In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

—Jamie Morgan from *Thirsty: A 31-Day Journey to Personal Revival*.

God's Security System

By Barbara Gordon

Video game, science kit, a drum or violin. I scanned nine-year-old Bryce's birthday list. A bark of laughter escaped as I continued, *a home security system.*

Bryce's misunderstanding of a home security system was evident in his exact words, "I need one to capture special moments in the house and outside."

This morning I examined a different list—my prayer list. I wonder if I, too, could use a lesson or two or three concerning my entreaties. Is my purpose in praying to create special moments or to change the world?

The writer of Hebrews 10:36, lists three actions associated with suffering affliction I find applicable to prayer. "You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God,

you will receive what he has promised.” (NIV) This verse tells me in order to endure hardship and to effectively pray, I need to persevere, do the will of God and then receive his promises.

Dictionary.com tells me perseverance is a *steady persistence in a course of action, a purpose, a state, etc., especially in spite of difficulties, obstacles, or discouragement*. The Bible is our best source of persevering prayers. The prophet Jeremiah continued his pleadings to God despite beatings, mockery and imprisonment. The apostle Paul stayed faithful through all sorts of abuse. Jesus’ teachings are clear, we “should always pray and not give up.” (Luke 18:1b NIV)

Steadfast praying often results in the answers we seek. After many years of praying for the salvation of a friend, I rejoiced when she confessed her sins and was baptized. Those years of crying out to God on her behalf gained me not only my request, but also a greater faith and a stronger relationship with God. Persevering prayer has the power to change situations and to change me.

The second action in Hebrews 10:36 directs us to do the will of God. Disobedience hinders our relationship with God, and therefore negatively impacts prayer. John 9:31 is clear, “We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will.” (NIV) The Old Testament Israelites, found this to be true. Even though they were God’s chosen people, during times of idol worship, grumbling and corrupt sacrifices, their connection to God was broken. When they confessed and repented, restoration came.

Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived warns us, “If anyone turns a deaf ear to my instruction, even their prayers are detestable.” (Proverbs 28:9 NIV) Recently I experienced a time of dryness in my prayer life. I lacked enthusiasm and my conversation with God felt one-way. I brought my requests to him, but nothing happened. Then the Holy Spirit reminded me of

a disagreement with a church leader regarding a ministry area. Though the conflict had been resolved on the surface, I harbored ill-feelings toward my Christian brother. When I confessed and repented of my sin, power in prayer returned. Sin and prayer cannot co-exist.

The Hebrews' author assures us perseverance and doing God's will results in receiving his promises. Abraham persevered, obeyed and received. His wife, Sarah, was ninety-years-old when God announced she would have a baby. Paul describes Abraham's unwavering faith in "being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised." (Romans 4:21 NIV) Genesis chapter twenty-two highlights Abraham's obedient willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Perseverance and obedience equaled promise received.

Bryce made his list with full assurance I, his Nana, would provide. God is more faithful than even the most devoted grandma. Intercession is the best security system in the world, and I am asking God to teach me to apply Hebrews 10:36 as I put together my prayer list.

By the way, I bought Bryce a drum.

—Barbara Gordon is a prayer leader from Moundville, Missouri.

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