

Why Doesn't God Answer My Prayers?
2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Revelation 5:6-8
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Everybody wrestles with unanswered prayer. The sick want to be well; the poor want an opportunity; the bullied want justice; the ignored want dignity; the tormented want peace. And so we all cry out, "How long?"

Sometimes, in our panic, we begin bargaining with God. I read about a man, desperately looking for a place to park. "Lord," he prayed, "I can't take this much longer. If you open up a parking spot for me, I'll give up gambling and start going to church." Just then, the sun shone on a parking spot. Without missing a beat, the man said, "Never mind, I found one." This story reminds us to avoid the temptation to think of God as our servant. Consumer faith sees answered prayer as a commodity to be bargained for. No!

The Bible does not explain unanswered prayer; it puts it in context and surrounds it with stories we can identify with. That's why I love the 2 Corinthian text. I've preached from it many times. We don't know what Paul's thorn or ailment was. But some superstar pastors had made their way to Corinth and were trash-talking the Apostle Paul. "If Paul is really from God, why aren't his prayers getting answered about his illness?" So Paul turns the tables on them and says, "OK, if you're going to brag, so will I. I'll brag about my unanswered prayers—how God shows up with grace to accept that." (vv. 9-10).

So let's follow Paul's model and ask if there are any positive things which come out of unanswered prayer. This summer on vacation, Janet and I were driving in the mountains, about 6,500 feet above sea level. When we stopped at a turnout to look around, I saw a couple holding a year-old little boy. I asked if the high altitude bothered his ears. "No," they said, "he seems to do fine." I replied, "Well, it bothers me." The dad replied with a weary voice, "Try crying. It works for him." Sometimes, in a season of unanswered prayer, our crying unclogs our ears. And if we can hear God better, maybe we will be better listeners to others, too.

Have you ever thought about how Paul's honesty about unanswered prayer actually helped him bond with others in the Corinthian congregation who were struggling with the same thing? Together, they learned to trust and wait.

Sometimes, what we are praying for needs time to ripen and grow. Sometimes, the delay in answering is because we're the ones who need to ripen and grow. In an interview at his home in Montana, Eugene Peterson told an experience he observed early one morning. A kingfisher had landed on a tree limb, waiting for a fish. Peterson counted. The bird made 37 dives before he caught the fish, commenting that the fowl was truly a king fisher.

But we give up so easily. We quit when it gets tough. Martin Lloyd-Jones once said everything else we do in our Christian life is easier than prayer. That's why Jesus said, "Keep asking; keep seeking; keep knocking" (Matt. 7:7).

A man once prayed for his sister, that she would not enter the hospital for a dangerous procedure. A short time later, she did go in the hospital and had the procedure. She was healed and lived a healthy life. He told his pastor, "God answered my prayer." "No," said the pastor, "you prayed that she wouldn't have the procedure." The man smiled and replied, "That's what I said, but what I meant was, 'God, heal her.'" Remember in Romans 8:26-27, Paul says the Holy Spirit intercedes for us and in 8:34, Christ prays for us. Certainly, that means they pray for us when we cannot pray for ourselves. But it might also mean they correct our prayers ("Father, what Doyle said was this, but what he meant was that!")—sort of like those guard rails the bowling alley puts up for five-year-olds when they bowl.

I love the image offered in Revelation 5. At the end of history, the four living creatures and the 24 elders fall down in worship before the Lamb. They hold in their hands bowls, containing the prayers of the saints throughout history. Nothing is lost! Abraham Heschel reminds us that just because God is not absent doesn't mean God is silent [*The Prophets*, Vol. 1, p. 178]. Because of the resurrection, no prayer is lost. No pain resurrection hope. No loss is beyond resurrection hope.