

The Answer God Gives
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Having suggested twelve reasons why prayers are unanswered, I must now add what you may have already surmised: No true prayer is ever unanswered. The preceding messages in this series have pointed out obstacles to effective prayer, which keep God from doing what he really wants to do. He wants to “give you the desires of your heart.”

True prayer is communion with God. It is being in his holy presence. It is sharing heart-to-heart fellowship with the heavenly Father. And this experience is self-rewarding, even as being in the presence of evil is self-defeating.

One day I was invited to address a convention of businessmen in Los Angeles. For several weeks a crowded calendar had denied me the joy of being with my son (who was ten at the time). Anxious to “play catch up,” I invited him to go along.

We had a good visit while driving down. During the dinner hour he met some interesting people who added to his enjoyment. I told a few jokes as part of my speech which made that easier to take. All in all we had a great time.

As we started home over the famous Grapevine Pass I suggested, “Jeff, why don't you curl up here on the seat and go to sleep?” “No, sir!” he replied. “For nearly five hours I've had you all to myself and I want this to last as long as it can.”

I knew there was something special about those hours which made them precious to me. It took my boy to phrase it. They had been rich because we shared a rare experience of togetherness. We had really given ourselves to each other.

In true prayer a similar sense of oneness can develop between you and God. You can have him

all to yourself. You can be alone with him. You can share an experience of fellowship with the heavenly Father, and this will provide its own reward.

Exclusively Yours

Does such intimacy with God seem impossible? Do you stumble, as I did at one time, over the thought of having God all to yourself? Does it worry you that in having his undivided attention you might be keeping him from someone else who needs him more?

I used to feel that way. In fact, my sense of sub-Christian guilt often kept me from praying at all. I didn't want to trouble him. I felt he was too busy to bother with the likes of me. My problem was twofold: First, a feeling of false humility which led me to feel unworthy of his attention (but no son of God should ever grovel, for he is a child of the King!), and, second, an infantile image of God which kept him bound up in the stream of time.

I pictured God as an overtaxed switchboard operator trying valiantly to answer the millions of prayers which were coming to him all at one time from various parts of the earth. I could see him sitting somewhere trying frantically to plug in the right answer to the right petition, but never quite making it. From time to time the connections got crossed, and then it rained when the sun should have shone. Or someone died when he should have gotten better.

I had God locked up in time; I had him living in my stream of consciousness. But I was wrong. He isn't limited in that way at all. His life isn't measured, as ours is, by a clock or a calendar. For God there is no past or future; there is only an eternal now.

In his gem of a book *Beyond Personality*, C.S. Lewis makes this fact wonderfully clear. "If a million people were praying to him at ten-thirty tonight, he hasn't got to listen to them all in that little snippet which we call ten-thirty. Ten-thirty and every other moment from the beginning of the world is always the present for him. If you like to put it that way, God has all eternity to listen to the split-second prayer put up by a pilot as his plane crashes in flames."³

Or, to understand it another way, also suggested by Lewis, here is a man writing a book. One of his characters is called Mary. In the course of the novel he writes: “Just then the telephone rang. Mary laid down the book she was reading and picked up the receiver.”

Now for Mary, who lives in the imaginary time of the author's novel, there is no delay between the moment the telephone rang and the moment she laid down the book and picked up the receiver. But for the author, the man who is Mary's creator, this is not so. He does not live in that imaginary time at all. And, between the writings of the first half of that sentence - “Just then the telephone rang” - and the second half - “Mary laid down the book she was reading and picked up the receiver” - he might sit for three or four hours and think steadily about Mary.

In fact, he could think about her as if she were the only character in his book. He could do so as long as he pleased. And this is the important part: *The hours he spent in thinking about her and being exclusively concerned about her would not appear in her time, the imaginary time of the novel, at all.*

This is just an illustration, and any illustration can be pushed too far. But perhaps it gives you a small glimpse of the truth about God. Lewis continues: “God is not hurried along in the Time-stream of this universe any more than an author is hurried along in the imaginary time of his own novel. He has infinite attention to spare for each one of us. He doesn't have to deal with us in the mass. You are as much alone with him as if you were the only being he had ever created...”⁴

True prayer is always answered by the very fact of gaining an audience with God. Your visit with the heavenly Father is in itself an answer. And furthermore, this bears its own reward, for God gives you himself.

The Desire of Your Heart

In the Thirty-seventh Psalm there is a verse which brings this thrilling thought into sharper focus: “Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” (Psalm 37:4).

Some people after reading that verse have concluded: "If I tip my hat to the heavenly Father, he in turn will give me the multitude of things I want." But they are mistaken. What it really says is this: If you delight yourself in God - that is, if you make him the central object of your attention and affection so that he becomes the desire of your heart - he in turn will give you that desire. He will give you himself. What a tremendous thought!

In true prayer this experience always happens. You make a pilgrimage into the presence of the heavenly Father and discover he is all you need, and more besides. He is life, health, wisdom, power, truth, love. . . the list goes on and on. When he gives you himself, he gives you these attributes of himself. You are made whole. Why? Because you have *him*.

If this tremendous truth gets hold of you, it will revolutionize your thoughts about prayer. Instead of the dull ordeal it has often been, prayer will become the sheer delight you want it to be. The concerns with which you have often come to God (as if they were matters of life and death) will find their proper level as you experience the joy of being with him.

A young Harvard student secured an appointment with Dr. Phillips Brooks to discuss a perplexing problem. He wanted the great preacher's guidance. After an hour alone with the good doctor he returned to the dormitory where one of his friends asked, "What did the preacher say? Did he help you with your problem?" "Do you know something?" the student responded, a note of wonder in his voice. "I forgot to mention it. It just didn't seem important when I began talking with Phillips Brooks." Then, he added softly, "I can tell you this, though: it didn't seem insurmountable anymore."

The contagion of a radiant and victorious personality lifted the boy above his problem. From that nobler prospective he could see things more clearly. He knew that with God's help all things were possible.

In a far more satisfying way this joy can happen to you when in true prayer you enter the presence of God. So great will be the glory of being with him, so satisfying will be the

knowledge that in having him you have all you need. So energizing will be the infusion of his power, that your previously insurmountable problem just won't matter.

You will return from this divine appointment with a calm assurance that through Christ you are more than conquerer. True prayer is always answered, for true prayer is communion with God. And the such communion is self-rewarding.

There is, as you know, a form of communication above and beyond words. A relationship “so intimate that thoughts and feelings pass from soul to soul” without a word being said. A young lady was expecting a visit from her fiancé who had been away at school. There was so much to talk about she wondered how one evening could possibly suffice.

One of her friends met her the following morning and inquired how things had gone. The girl replied, “Do you know what we did last night? We sat for two hours. *Two hours!* And never said a word!” So sweet had been the communion between them, their hearts understood each other without resorting to words.

When you enter into true prayer, you share a similar experience. You enjoy such a satisfying sense of God's presence that the details of your visit are obscured by the joy of being with him. Though no words pass between you and God, your prayer is answered as He who has become the desire of your heart, gives you himself.

Keep On Keeping On

Obviously, this kind of glory is not easily won. It does not come on the first attempt. You must not become discouraged if your first stumbling efforts in prayer do not take you to the summit. A person who has just begun climbing mountains does not grow discouraged if he fails to top Everest on first try. There are lesser peaks upon which he can practice as he prepares himself for the steeper climb.

In prayer you must be willing to attempt the foothills before you try for the mountaintop. But

you should always keep the mountaintop in sight! Your goal is true prayer. That is, nothing less than a sense of the presence of God. So keep on keeping on.

Diamonds are rarely found on the surface of the ground. They generally are the product of much mining. Similarly, the jewels of the Spirit are rarely stumbled on. The surface soil of attention-getting things must be cleared away. The gravel of your own resistance and the hard rock of your own rebellion must be burrowed through. But finally, by keeping on, you are rewarded with that jewel of great price - God's grandest gift - himself. True prayer is always answered, for true prayer is communion with God.. And this is self-rewarding.

“No” Is an Answer Too

But what about the petitions you bring with you? Does God always grant these? The answer is “no,” for one or more of the twelve reasons I have already discussed. True, he does answer many prayers in the affirmative. Instances of this are far too numerous to be ignored. God says “yes” many times. Not only by giving you himself, but by granting your lesser petitions.

But what about those times when instead of “yes,” his answer is “no”? Then you must remember that “no” is an answer too. In fact, there are times when “no” is the only answer which love and wisdom can give. For God to answer “yes” would be to harm or hamper you. So when you pray, seek for maturity enough to know there may be victory in defeat and profit in prayers denied.

Personally, I have lived long enough to thank God some of my prayers were not answered in the affirmative. Through the 20-20 vision with which hindsight is equipped, I have come to see that “no” was a far better answer in some instances than “yes.” You may be able to say the same. So, while you continue to come to God with your supplications, never hesitating to ask him for those things which you deem desirable, remember he will not give you everything you ask for. Not because he is stingy but because he is wise, not because he is indifferent but because he really cares about you.

When still a youngster, my son would often start a conversation by saying, “Dad, I know you’re going to say ‘no,’ but...” and then he would reel off some natural or spontaneous request. Occasionally, to his surprise, his request was granted. More often, his prejudgment of the situation was correct, and my answer was “no.” Then, believe it or not, he was relieved. My denial had served to confirm and strengthen his own evaluation of the situation.

He usually knew before he asked, which request was unwise, but he found himself in tension. There was a conflict between what he wanted and what he knew was best. My denial helped him to resolve the conflict and reassured him his best judgment was correct. Through a repetition of this process he, in time and by the grace of God, learned to weigh all the alternatives with which life confronts him and, for the most part, comes to right conclusions on his own.

If I had been so weak and unwise as to grant my son every whim and fancy that came to mind, I would have done him a grave disservice. I would have spoiled him and in a way far more devastating than the word normally implies. I would have failed to provide the necessary confirmation of his own correct opinions which he needed in order to develop the essential self-reliance necessary in adulthood.

“No” is an answer as well as “yes,” and sometimes it is the only answer which God, in his love and wisdom, can give to his children.

“I will not doubt, though all my ships at sea
Come drifting home with broken masts and sails;
I shall believe the hand which never fails,
From seeming evil worketh good to me;
And, though I weep because those sails are battered,
Still will I cry, while my best hopes lie shattered,
‘I trust in thee.’

“I will not doubt, though all my prayers return
Unanswered from the still, white realm above;
I shall believe it is an all-wise Love
Which has refused those things for which I yearn;
And though, at times, I cannot keep from grieving,
Yet the pure ardor of my fixed believing
Undimmed shall burn.”

Ella Wheeler Wilcox

The Grace of Waiting

One more thought completes the picture. Sometimes neither “yes” nor “no” is the right answer. In these cases, the answer God gives is, “Wait a while.”

Waiting is not one of the arts for which our generation is famous, but it is a virtue we all must learn if we wish to make effective use of prayer. In prayer you are dealing with one to whom “a thousand years... are but as yesterday when it is passed, or as a watch in the night” (Psalm 90:4).

God's grandest gifts are often gained only by waiting. The old tales of the sea illustrate this truth. There were the little ships which sailed the coastal waters and carried the ordinary things of life from port to port. They were important, because without them the routine needs of daily life could not be met. But it was the great Spanish galleons which put out to sea for extended journeys into unknown waters that came home with richer freight.

Similarly, the little barks of prayer which you put out day by day bring you the small necessities of life, though they never venture far from shore. But it is the great prayers, like the mighty sailing ships of old, which mount the winds of faith and are borne to some farther shore, which reap the rich rewards. They are not so quick to return as the smaller craft. Often there is much anguish in waiting, but it is worth your while, for when they come their holds are filled with golden treasures. “Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you” (Isaiah 30:18).

So when your prayers are not answered in the precise time or fashion which you fancy best, wait on the Lord. God does not measure things as you do. He has eternity's values in view. And in his good time the ship of prayer you may have thought lost at sea will come sailing into port bearing blessings which only a long journey into faith and the grace of waiting can win.

“God answers prayer; sometimes when hearts are weak
He gives the very gifts believers seek.
But often faith must learn a deeper rest,
And trust God's silence when he does not speak;...
For he whose name is Love will send the best.
Stars may burn out, nor mountain walls endure,
But God is true, His promises are sure
For those who seek.”

Myra Goodwin Plantz