

The Challenge of Unanswered Prayer

By Cheryl A. Taylor

Cheryl Taylor is the director of the doctor of ministry program at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary in Springfield, Missouri. She also serves as the vice president for academics at Asia Theological Centre for Evangelism and Missions, an Assemblies of God Bible college in Singapore. She previously served in local church ministry, on the district level, and on the foreign mission field.

I believe in prayer and its power to change both people and events. I have seen amazing answers to prayer in my own life, as well as in the lives of countless others. Nevertheless, I still struggle with those times when God seemingly doesn't answer prayer. Every time I rejoice over God's miraculous answer to my fervent prayer for a child, I cannot help thinking about my close friend who has prayed just as fervently for nearly 20 years to have a baby, yet her arms remain empty. So while I rejoice over the reports of miraculous answers to prayer, I also remember with a pang the stories of those who have not received their answers.

The many accounts of answered prayer do not solve the problem of unanswered prayer. For example, we rejoice in the testimony of the man who cried out to God and was miraculously spared from death in the Twin Towers on September 11. But what about the 3,000 who died, many of whom were also praying even as the building imploded on them? Why did God answer one man's prayer, but not the prayers of many others who perished that day?

Mary and Martha must have struggled with similar emotions. They fully believed in God's ability to heal. That's why they had sent for Jesus, informing Him of Lazarus' illness. But while they waited for the answer, their brother died. They struggled with Jesus' lack of response: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21). What had happened? Why didn't Jesus answer their prayers? Why, at times, does it seem He doesn't answer ours?

Possible Reasons Prayer May Not Be Answered

Why would an all-loving, all-powerful God deny valid requests from faithful believers? The question deserves consideration. It should be pointed out that in reality, no prayer goes unanswered. The Lord answers yes, no, or wait—and often when we say God has not answered our prayer, we're really saying that He has not answered in the manner we desired. So, more accurately, we are discussing those situations in which God seems to be answering "No" or "Wait."

The Bible clearly warns that a lack of social concern—for the poor, orphans, and widows—has a direct bearing on how our prayers are received.

We must acknowledge up front that we will likely never know all the reasons for unanswered prayer. Sometimes the reasons for God's apparent silence are a mystery. While we can't always know the reason for unanswered prayer in every instance, the Bible does give many clues as to why God may appear to be silent in response to our petitions. A biblical examination reveals several possible factors contributing to unanswered prayer. The following paragraphs will consider just some of the possible reasons offered in Scripture.

1. Unconfessed sin, or Disobedience (Exodus 23:25; Numbers 12:10; Psalm 66:18; Proverbs 28:13; Isaiah 1:15,16; 59:2; John 15:7; James 5:16; 1 John 3:21,22)

When our prayers go unanswered, the first thing many Christians ask is, "What's wrong with God? Why hasn't He responded to my prayer?" It's a normal human response, because it's a lot easier to blame

God than to look into a mirror and say, "Maybe I'm the problem." At some point we should ask if the problem resides within ourselves—that sin may have cut off our communication with the Father? Scripture states: "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Psalm 66:18) and, "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2). We cannot live however we want, and then enjoy open communication with God.

If you are tolerating sin in your life, don't waste your breath praying, unless it's a prayer of confession. "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). Receive the Lord's forgiveness, and then He will listen when you call out to Him.

2. Lack of faith (Matthew 17:20; 13:58; 15:21-28; Mark 6:5,6; 9:23; 11:22-24; James 1:5-7; 5:15)

Sometimes prayer may not be answered due to a lack of faith on the part of the person praying, or on the part of the person for whom prayer is being offered. Christ's disciples, although divinely commissioned to cast out devils and to heal the sick, on one occasion failed to deliver an epileptic boy. When Jesus came down from the mountain, He delivered the boy and rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith (Matthew 17:20). On another occasion, when Jesus traveled to His hometown of Nazareth, "He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith" (Matthew 13:58).

The lack of fervent prayer and fasting can be a hindrance that prevents us from seeing our prayers answered.

Scripture is clear that when we ask something of God, we must ask in faith. Jesus said: "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him" (Mark 11:23). Praying in faith means that a person is more than simply "open" to the possibility that God is able to answer their prayer. If a non-Christian died while he or she was open to the possibility that Jesus had died on the cross for their sins, that person would still go to hell. It is not being open that gets answers from God, but believing to the point of pursuing what He has promised. "Everything is possible for him who believes" (Mark 9:23).

Thankfully, it is possible for each of us to have true faith. I have heard some Christians say, "I guess I don't have the gift of faith." They incorrectly assume that faith is merely a gift that a person either has or lacks, rather than something that can be developed by exercise, like a muscle. As long as we have the faith of a tiny mustard seed, we can indeed exercise that faith by engaging with God in prayer.

In order to boost your faith, read of what God has done for His people in the Bible. Then review His track record in the lives of others throughout history. Finally, remind yourself of the ways He has worked in your own life. This is one reason why it is good to build "altars" or ways of remembering what God has done in your life. I know one family who writes their answered prayers on a large stone and places it in a rock garden in their back yard. For many, the "altar" could involve keeping a journal of your prayer requests, so that you can log the answers as they come and review them periodically. Focus your mind accordingly, so that when you pray it will be to the God who is able. Anticipate seeing mighty demonstrations of God's power.

3. Violating the natural laws of nature (Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 3:16,17; 6:19,20; Galatians 6:7)

When God created the world, He set in motion certain laws of nature, laws that He designed to govern the universe. Christians are mortal beings subject to these laws the same as unbelievers. If Christians abuse their bodies or fail to take proper care of them, they cannot assume that God will honor their prayer for exceptions to the rule. For example, a person cannot continually overeat, and fail to get enough rest, and yet expect God to make an exception and keep him strong and healthy. It is useless to seek healing for ulcers if one is not willing to give up the worries or resentments that are causing them. Likewise, a chain smoker has no right to expect God to protect him from lung cancer.

There is yet another possible hindrance to our prayers: not praying in the will of God.

Let me share a personal example about the unchanging character of the laws of nature. I am extremely fair-skinned. Often, when I am ministering overseas, women tell me how they wish their skin could be as white as mine. Believe me, I'd gladly trade with them if I could. As a teenager, I longed for a golden-bronze tan that so many of the popular girls sported. I could have prayed every day for deep dark skin, solicited all my friends to pray for it, and it would have no more effect than if I prayed for God to change my family of origin or the country of my birth. The laws of genetics largely determine my appearance, and prayers to reverse those laws, no matter how sincere, are not going to be answered.

4. Old age/Appointed time to die (Ecclesiastes 3:2; Romans 5:12; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Hebrews 9:27)

While God's ability to answer prayer will never be limited by a person's age, healing was never intended as a mere prolongation of life, apart from spiritual considerations. The Bible clearly teaches that for every person there is "a time to die" (Ecclesiastes 3:2; Hebrews 9:27). God has spoken it, and barring the Rapture of the believers first, every person will keep that appointment.

Unfortunately, contemporary society finds it difficult to accept its mortality—yet the mortality rate of every generation is 100 percent. Even the people that Jesus healed during His ministry died. Many Christians act like they believe there should be no limitations to their lives. However, Christians are subject to the effects of the Fall just like everyone else. If this was not God's intent, then every believer who ever lived should still be living today. If it is a person's time to die, we should be willing to release him or her to God. For God's people, physical death leads to ultimate healing. "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8).

5. Lack of social concern (Proverbs 21:13; Isaiah 58:3-9; Malachi 3:5,16)

The Bible clearly warns that a lack of social concern—for the poor, orphans, and widows—has a direct bearing on how our prayers are received. Proverbs 21:13 bluntly declares, "If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered." On one occasion, the Israelites were wondering why God was not answering their prayers. They had even fasted and humbled themselves, and He still did not listen. Here is what He told them through His prophet Isaiah: "On the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers.... Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I" (Isaiah 58:3,6,7,9). God is committed to developing a people who will reflect His character in this world, and His character always expresses concern and compassion for the afflicted.

Wrestling with unanswered prayer may cause our faith to grow in ways it never would grow otherwise

These warnings are a strong indictment to the Western church today. It may seem strange that issues such as social concern have a direct impact on our prayer life, but author Philip Yancey explains how every aspect of life, including how we treat those around us, affects an intimate relationship.¹ I cannot say to my neighbor, "I love you and enjoy spending time with you, but I hate your stupid dog, and keep those bratty kids out of my yard, will you?" How I treat what belongs to my neighbor affects how he receives my love. The same applies to God. How I treat God's creation, God's children, will determine in part how God receives my prayers and my worship. Prayer involves more than bowing my head a few times a day; it pervades all of life, and vice versa. John summed it up: "We receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him." Possibly if you're asking, "Why does God not answer my prayers the way He answers that person's prayers?" you should really be asking, "Why is it that I have not lived the kind of life that person has lived?"

6. Poor domestic and social relationships (2 Kings 20:3-5; Job 42:10; Malachi 2:13-16; Galatians 4:19; 1 Corinthians 11:29,30; 1 Peter 3:7; 1 John 2:9; Revelation 3:16)

Poor domestic relationships can be another hindrance to effective prayer. Peter stresses the importance of husbands and wives keeping their relationships in good order "so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (1 Peter 3:7). Likewise, Malachi states that those who break marriage vows through adultery and divorce risk God closing His ears to their prayers (Malachi 2:13,14).

God's concern extends beyond the marriage union, to relationships in general. Most believers underestimate how committed God is to building and maintaining authentic Christian community. He wants us to carry our relationship with Him over into our relationships with others. If we do good to our brothers and sisters, it is like doing good to Jesus himself (Matthew 25:31-46). There is no point in trying to pray if we are engaged in ongoing conflict with a family member, friend, coworker, or a neighbor. "Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness" (1 John 2:9). A key indication of this is the unwillingness to forgive (Matthew 6:14; 5:23,24). Since Christians are meant to live in a community of love, some prayers will not be answered until poor relationships are restored.

Of course, it isn't always possible to make amends. The other party may have passed away, or may not desire to be reconciled. Romans 12:18 says: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Bill Hybels challenges: "If you find yourself in this situation, examine your heart. Have you sincerely tried to restore the relationship, or are you holding something back? Do you really want restoration, or are you only doing it because you have to? If your attempts have been wholehearted and honest, God will not let the broken relationship stand in the way of your prayers." ²

7. Lack of prayer and fasting (Matthew 15:28; Mark 9:29; 11:23,24; Luke 11:1-13; Hebrews 11:6)

The lack of fervent prayer and fasting can be a hindrance that prevents us from seeing our prayers answered. The disciples prayed for a boy with a mute spirit, but he was not healed. When Jesus came, He cast out the evil spirit and the boy was healed. Later, when they were alone with the Lord, the disciples asked why they had not been successful. They had been given power to cast out demons and had successfully done so before this. Jesus said, "This kind can come out only by prayer" (Mark 9:29).

In the final analysis, we may come up with no other possible explanation than the fact that God is sovereign, and that He knows best.

This is referring to bold, persistent prayer. "The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" (James 5:16). God rewards those who earnestly seek Him (Hebrews 11:6). In Luke 11:1-13, Jesus told a parable to teach the disciples the importance of boldness and persistence in prayer, and to assure them that God answers prayer. Mark 11:23-24 shows a pattern of prayer: one is to ask in bold confidence that God will give them whatever they ask. One should pray until an answer is received. Those who pray six times fervently and stop there, when they ought to have prayed seven times (2 Kings 13:18,19), deprive themselves of the answer to their prayer. Again, in Matthew 15:21-28, one reads about the Syrophenician woman who begged Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter. Repeatedly, she sought healing from Him, and finally His response was, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted" (Matthew 15:28). We can boldly enter the throne of grace, fervently seeking God to work on our behalf.

8. It may be divine punishment (Leviticus 26:14-16; Deuteronomy. 28:15,21; Psalm 119:6,7; Proverbs 3:11,12; Hebrews 12:6,10,11)

Throughout Scripture, one can see that corrective measures are sometimes necessary for the child of God. Such discipline is a token of God's love. "The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son" (Hebrews 12:6). Hebrews provides tender teaching about chastisement

in the form of bodily affliction as well as in other kinds of suffering. "Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:10-11).

Unanswered prayer will be worth its while if by it we receive divine instruction that brings about our spiritual improvement. A word of caution should be noted, however. While the concept of God responding to the sins of men and women is portrayed in Scripture, one can never determine whether someone else's suffering is a result of God's punishment. Every person has sinned, and this makes it difficult to know for certain if someone is suffering as a result of divine punishment. A good rule is to assume that all suffering is the result of living in a fallen world, unless one is unusually and clearly impressed that God is personally punishing an individual.

9. Failing to actually pray for your request (James 4:2)

Is it possible that you want something so badly, you simply assume God knows about it, and you never actually pray about it? "You do not have, because you do not ask God" (James 4:2). James assumes that we will receive as long as we ask God. If we look to God in faith, He does answer prayer. We can't expect from God if we aren't spending time with Him, and seeking His work in our lives. We have no right to complain about our situation if we are not making it a matter of prayer.

Be honest with yourself. How often does something like this happen? You decide to pray about something. You add it to your prayer list, even tell a friend that you are praying about it, and you almost do. Even though you think about it from time to time, go to a counselor to talk about it, read self-help books to help you address it, confide in Christian friends about it, you hardly ever pray about it. Why doesn't God answer your prayer? Because you haven't prayed about it purposefully, fervently, expectantly, or regularly over an extended period of time.

10. Refusal to accept medicine as God's means of healing (Matthew 9:12; Colossians 4:14; 1 Timothy 5:23)

Some people may never receive healing from God simply because they refuse to accept the means of healing which He has made available to them. Jesus himself stated that the sick need a physician (Matthew 9:12). Physicians and medicine are the instruments that God often uses to bring about healing. When Timothy had a stomach problem, Paul's counsel to him was to take a little wine for his stomach (1 Timothy 5:23). Paul would have undoubtedly intended this advice for medicinal purposes. It should be noted that the Holy Spirit called Luke the "doctor" (Colossians 4:14), rather than calling him "a former doctor."

11. Not praying in the will of God (Luke 1:20; 2 Samuel 12:14-18; 1 John 5:14)

There is yet another possible hindrance to our prayers: not praying in the will of God. John says, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us" (1 John 5:14). However vigorous one's faith, it is not the guarantee of immediate answer to prayer if it is not in accordance with God's will. All the faith in the world would not heal Zechariah. The angel Gabriel had told him, "You will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens" (Luke 1:20). Nothing could save David's son by the wife of Uriah (2 Samuel 12:14-18). Not until God's time had come for the birth of Isaac could Sarah be healed, even though all the faith of Abraham was added to hers (Hebrews 11:11).

Jesus said, "Everything is possible for him who believes" (Mark 9:23), yet in the Garden He prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me" (Matthew 26:39). Surely Jesus believed it was possible for God to remove His cup, so then why did He say, "If it be possible"? Because the promise "everything is possible for him who believes" is conditioned on the will of God. To make this clear, Jesus ended His prayer, "Yet not as I will, but as you will."

Taking these examples into consideration, it can only be appropriate to include the phrase “if it be thy will” in our prayers. The prayer offered in faith is always subject to the will of God.

12. Improper motives (John 5:14; James 4:3; 1 John. 5:14)

Another one of the biblical reasons prayers may go unanswered is because one’s motivations were wrong. One common improper motive is selfishness—wanting something for our own personal pleasure. James says: “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). The term for “wrong” (*kakos*) means diseased or sick. In what way was their motive sick? They were only interested in their own “pleasures” (hedonism), referring to those pleasures that are at war with our souls. It’s not that God does not want people to have pleasure, but that He wants to train them to take pleasure in what He knows is truly good. We cannot view prayer as having a magical genie in a bottle, a self-serving way of getting our latest whim.

Another common improper motive involves the attempt to shift personal responsibility. For example, when someone is praying for a troubled relationship, it is not uncommon to hear them pray that God change the other person. Wives pray this about husbands, husbands about wives, parents about children, employees about bosses, etc. Now it’s often perfectly appropriate to pray that someone will change. After all, that’s what we do when we pray for conversions, for hearts to be softened, for bad habits, or addictions to be broken. But too often the motive behind such a request is not authentic concern for the other person—it often stems from selfish motivations. A more realistic interpretation of the prayer might be: “I don’t want to face my own shortcomings. I don’t want to work on this relationship. I don’t want to have to change at all. Instead, I want the other person to accommodate all my personal needs, so I’m asking you to change him or her.” If you pray that kind of prayer, God may say “No.”³

It should be noted that it is possible to have wrong motives behind prayers for legitimate requests, things for which it is completely proper to ask God. For example, a pastor may be praying for revival. This is certainly in line with God’s will. But what if the pastor’s prayers for revival arose from purely selfish motives? The pastor may desire revival so that the membership may be increased, so that the church may have more power and influence in the community, or so that the church treasury may be filled. What if the pastor harbors ambitions to become a leader within the Movement, and wants to be able to share an impressive report at the upcoming General Council. It should not be surprising if God does not honor such prayers. Author R.A. Torrey wrote that “we should be praying for revival because we cannot endure the dishonor of God caused by worldliness in the church, the sins of unbelievers, and the proud unbelief of the day. We should pray for revival so that God may be glorified by the outpouring of His Spirit on the Church of Christ.”⁴

So, we can make requests of God and expect answers, as long as we have the right motives. Stop and reexamine the motive behind your prayer.

13. The prayer was inappropriate (Matthew 17:1-8; 20:20-23; Mark 9:2-8; 10:35-40; Luke 9:28-36,51-56)

Sometimes prayers go unanswered because they are inappropriate. Jesus’ disciples were not immune from making misguided petitions—not even the three who were closest to Him. The mother of James and John requested that they receive the two best seats in the Kingdom. Jesus knew that the request was inappropriate, and in effect told them that He would not grant it (Matthew 20:20-23). When Jesus and the disciples were denied a travel permit through a Samaritan village, it irritated James and John so much that they asked Jesus to destroy the village with fire from heaven. Once again, Jesus denied their request, and He rebuked them for making it (Luke 9:51-56). Pastor Bill Hybels points out that “if Jesus’ closest disciples were capable of making short-sighted, self-serving, and immature requests, then we are too.”⁵

Some prayer requests, no matter how well-intentioned, are simply inappropriate. They could be self-serving, frivolous, or not in accord with God’s nature. They put the focus on our agenda, rather than on God’s plans. A last-ditch plea for an “A” on the test will likely not succeed if the student has not studied. The example shared above of my praying for tanned skin, not only goes against the laws of nature, but

could likely be considered frivolous as well. Prison chaplains have reported hearing criminals confess that the only time they prayed was when they felt they were in danger of getting caught—which would actually make God an accessory to their crimes.

Many Christians are quick to quote, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 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 good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7: 7,8,11). But “it is God’s prerogative to give good things, things that we have need of, and if in our limited earthly perspective we ask for things that do not come under these headings God, like any good parent, reserves the right to say ‘No, not that; it wouldn’t be good for you—but have this instead.’”⁶ My 5-year old-daughter, Natalie, has an incredible sweet tooth. If we let her, she would be content to live on candy alone. Obviously, as her parents, we do not allow her to subsist on sugar alone—despite her frequent pleadings to do so—because we know this is not good for her health. Like any good parent, while God never simply ignores what we are saying, often He gives us what we should have asked for, rather than what we actually requested.

Fortunately, our God loves us too much to say yes to inappropriate requests. I wouldn’t want a God who would do any less than that. We may fool ourselves into thinking selfish requests are appropriate, but we can’t fool God. He knows when our motives are destructive, and He often protects us from them by saying no.

Before bringing a request to the Lord, we would do well to ask ourselves four questions: (1) Would it bring glory to God? (2) Would it advance His kingdom? (3) Would it help people? and, (4) Would it help me to grow spiritually? May our prayer be, “Lord, help me present requests that are in line with your will.”

14. The timing may not be right (Psalm 6:2,3; 41:3; Matthew 25:36; Hebrews 11:32-34)

Sometimes what we are praying for is in God’s will, but the timing is not right, and God responds with the words, “Not yet.” God’s promise to David that He “will sustain him on his sickbed and restore him from his bed of illness” (Psalm 41:3) gently suggests the possibility of delay. The answer to prayer is not always immediate; sometimes it is “not yet.”

Many parents know that children rank the words “not yet” as nearly the worst in the English language, second only to the word “no.” When my children were young, they would begin asking in January, “Is it almost Christmas time again?” “Not yet,” to which they would reply, “When is Christmas going to get here? It’s taking forever!” I, too, can remember exclaiming to my mother, “All of the other fifth-graders wear make-up and nylons, may I?” How I hated to hear her “not yet.” And nearly every family has had the experience of leaving on a 500-mile car trip when, 15 miles from home as you slow down for a tollbooth, voices from the back seat ask, “Are we there yet?” “Not yet,” you say, and the groans and complaints begin. There’s an impatient child in all of us, a child who wants God to meet every need—grant every request—right now. When our all-knowing and all-wise Heavenly Father deems it best to say, “No yet,” we get frustrated with Him, and the groaning and complaining begins.

Why does God sometimes hold off in answering our prayers? Hybels suggests He could have one of several reasons. First, sometimes God delays in order to test our faith. Do we think of Him as a celestial vending machine that we should kick if we don’t get an instant response? Or do we relate to Him as a loving Father that will give us what we need when we need it? Can we trust Him even if we don’t see immediate results? Second, sometimes God delays so that we can modify our requests. Over time we may see that the original request wasn’t quite legitimate. As we understand the situation better, and strive to see the situation from an eternal perspective, we may want to modify it to make it more in line with God’s will. Third, sometimes God delays so that we can develop character qualities such as endurance, trust, patience or submission—qualities that come only when we wait patiently and trust in His timing. A lot of spiritual gains come through pain, hurt, struggle, confusion, and disappointment. If we had our way, though, how long would any of us put up with these character builders without asking God to remove them? We may not be able to see the reasons for the delay, but that isn’t surprising. As God says through Isaiah the prophet, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my

ways,' declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts' " (Isaiah 55:8,9.) ⁷

Wrestling with unanswered prayer may cause our faith to grow in ways it never would grow otherwise. It can drive us to search our heart, examine our faith, and consider deeply our relationship with God.

15. The Kingdom has not arrived in its ultimate fullness (Romans 8:19-24; 1 Corinthians 15:52)

The believer lives in what has been called the "already/not yet" tension of the salvation-historical framework. To expect physical well-being for every believer is to ignore the "not yet" side of this tension. Only in the final state of the Kingdom has God promised to remove all physical illness. We must remember that despite the victory that Christ has achieved over Satan, everything is not yet submitted to God. The enemy is still active. His years are counted and his end is sure. But in the meantime, he still remains the prince of this world, he causes much suffering, and he often seems to have the upper hand. However, God will have the final say, and He will assert His universal sovereignty in salvation and judgment at Christ's second coming. Because of this ultimate victory, Christians have the assurance that those very prayers that remained unanswered in this life will have spectacular vindication in eternity. Revelation 21:4 promises that God "will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." ⁸ Hebrews 11:32-34 enumerates people who experienced victory through deliverance, but verses 35-38 mention another group of those who were tortured, afflicted, tormented, and slain. To one group, victory was apparent. To the other group, deliverance did not come in this life except through death. On the resurrection side, both were victorious.

Many claim that if healing is provided for in the atonement, then one should be healed as readily as one is saved. The strength of this argument rests on the validity of the assumption that salvation in all its fullness is completed at conversion. But is this true? Is the whole of the sin question settled immediately? It could be; the resources are adequate.

Author Gordon Wright maintains that "In the atonement is provision for deliverance from a gossiping tongue, a bad temper, a malicious spirit, evil speaking, in fact, from every sin, but who can claim to have received such a full deliverance? Despite the provision, our nature has not yet been made perfect. If one finds it difficult to appropriate the entire provision for the soul, is it surprising that one finds it difficult to appropriate the entire provision for the body? Although the provision for victory over death is in the atonement, it cannot become our experience until the resurrection. For this reason, the provision for perfect health cannot be received until the resurrection either The full provision for the body and soul is not granted until the kingdom comes in its final ultimate glory." ⁹

Presently, we can live in anticipation of the fullness of the kingdom of God, yet we also have a down payment of the coming: ultimate redemption and healing. We can look forward to the time when "we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:52,53).

16. Sovereignty of God (John 5:1-15; Isaiah 55:9; Mark 9:23; Matthew 26:39)

In the final analysis, we may come up with no other possible explanation than the fact that God is sovereign, and that He knows best. We must resolve to accept this answer. We can search the Scriptures from beginning to end, and pray from morning to night, but in the end, we cannot afford to let ourselves come to a place of unhealthy obsession. This can lead to a fruitless end; God can grow dim and the heart cold.

There are times when God chooses not to give any reason at all for why He does not answer prayer. When Jesus was at the Pool of Bethesda, He only healed one paralytic (John 5:1-15), even though there were sick people lying all around the pool. We are never told why it was the Father's will only to heal the one person and to allow all the other sick people to continue suffering. God is truly sovereign, and He does not have to explain himself to anyone.

As finite creatures, we are incapable of understanding the mind and ways of God. Mystery is a central characteristic of the spiritual life. The simple fact that we are human means that there is a limit to our understanding. God's thoughts are not our thoughts. We cannot discern the long-term, even eternal ramifications of our requests. Author Douglas Rumford wrote that "we cannot understand the intricate web of relationships and events that may be blocking the answer we desire. We cannot discern how a delay in answering our prayers may actually be preparing us for a much greater manifestation of God's grace and power. In short, we have to trust God and seek to see life from the eternal perspective."¹⁰

Ultimately, we must come to a place of submission, humbly acknowledging that God is sovereign, and that however baffled we are by the circumstances, He is in control. Such a humbling of spirit leads to a greater trust in the love and wisdom of God, as well as to a deeper understanding of His sovereignty.

The Blessing of Unanswered Prayer

The Bible clearly reveals several obstacles that can hinder our prayers. This is not to say that God only answers prayer when the conditions are perfect. He is God, and can do anything He wants, at any time He wants. No one can limit the work of the Holy Spirit, and divine answer to prayer has certainly occurred in some unlikely cases. However, our prayers may go unanswered for a number of reasons. If you have been praying diligently about a matter, and it seems as if God has stopped talking, maybe you need to reexamine your request. Maybe your request stems from self-serving motivations, or is simply inappropriate; maybe there is unwillingness on your part to face the real issue; maybe the answer to your prayer would be destructive in ways you don't understand. Maybe it's short-sighted or too small. Maybe God has something better in mind.

Even when we don't see an immediate response to our prayers, we should be diligent and keep pressing on, believing with Paul that "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). We must offer our prayers with a humility that conveys confidence in His ability, yet resignation to His sovereignty. We must continue to believe without attempting to manipulate God, always respecting the mystery surrounding prayer.

We should not jump to the conclusion that unanswered prayer is always a bad thing. The movie *Bruce Almighty* portrays Hollywood's version of what might happen if God were to answer "yes" to every human prayer. The lead character rages against God after a series of mishaps. "He could fix my life in 5 minutes if He wanted to," he complains. So God decides to let him try being God for a week to see if he can improve matters. The man uses his divine power selfishly to get whatever he pleases, no matter how trivial. He hears thousands of prayers in his head at once, and tries to deal with the blizzard of pleas by answering "yes" to everyone who prays. However, when he answers yes to everyone praying to win the lottery, 400,000 winners were created, diluting the grand prize to almost nothing. He lassos the moon to bring it closer while trying to create a romantic mood for his girlfriend, resulting in a tidal wave in Japan. He quickly gains an appreciation for the complexity of prayer as well as a new humility and sense of inadequacy. It is not as simple as merely deciding to say "yes" to every request. By answering every possible prayer in the manner we request, God would in effect be turning the world over to us to run. Author Philip Yancey wrote: "History shows how we have handled the limited power granted us: we have fought wars, committed genocide, fouled the air and water, destroyed forests, established unjust political systems, concentrated pockets of superfluous wealth and grinding poverty. What if God gave us automatic access to supernatural power? What further havoc might we wreak?"¹¹

Often, we can see in retrospect that some prayers prove better off unanswered. As a child, Amy Carmichael used to pray for God to change her eyes from brown to blue. Later, as a missionary in India, she was grateful for her brown eyes, which made her look less foreign and less intimidating to Indian children. This truth is brought home in the hit song, "Unanswered Prayers," by country singer, Garth Brooks. In the song, he recalls pleading with God for his high school sweetheart. Looking back years later, it became apparent to him that she would have been a terrible choice for him, and he realizes that "some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers." If we will simply give it some time, we will often see in retrospect that some of God's biggest blessings to us have been those prayers that He chose not to answer in the way we were praying.

Conclusion

Even though we can trust that God hears and answers our prayers, prayer does not work according to a fixed formula: get your life in order, say the right words, and the answer will come. If that were true, Job would have avoided much suffering, Paul would have been relieved of his thorn in the flesh, and Christ would have been spared the Cross. Between the two questions "Does God answer prayer?" and "Will God answer my prayer?" lies a great pool of mystery. While wallowing in this mystery, it is important for us not to lose sight of the purpose of prayer. God is more important than any answer to our prayer. Oswald Chambers said, whenever our insistence is on the point that God answers prayer, we are off track. The meaning of prayer is that we get hold of God, not of His answer. It is God we must have. He is more than enough for all that we need.

ENDNOTES

1. Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does it Make Any Difference?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 224,225.
2. Bill Hybels, *Too Busy Not to Pray*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 105.
3. *Ibid*, 77.
4. R.A. Torrey, *How to Pray*. (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1985), 64
5. Hybels, 75.
6. J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 192.
7. Hybels, 81,82.
8. Hybels, 79,80.
9. Gordon Wright, *In Quest of Healing*. (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1984), 58.
10. Douglas Rumford, *What About Unanswered Prayer?* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2000), 32.
11. Yancey, 228.

This article is located at http://ag.org/wim/0803/0803_Unanswered_Prayer.cfm

Copyright 2014 The General Council of the Assemblies of God
The Network for Women in Ministry, c/o Enrichment Journal Office
1445 Boonville Ave., Springfield, MO 65802