

**“The Answer We Need”
2 Corinthians 12:2-10**

About three months ago, I received this e-mail: “You asked for suggestions regarding sermon ideas, and I know I told you before, but your sermon on ‘unanswered prayer’ was one of my favorites. As we discussed one time, Garth Brooks has a song called ‘unanswered prayers’ and that chorus often goes through my mind.”

I’m not sure which sermon she was referring to, it could be one of three possibilities, so I can’t do a simple “re-run”! I’m also not sure I believe at this point in my journey that there is such a thing as unanswered prayer. It seems to be an expression for when we don’t receive what we asked for.

When I choose hymns to be sung during worship, I feel like a kid in a candy store. I usually want to include more than we have time to sing. We almost opened the service with Hymn #489

Open now thy gates of beauty,
Zion, let me enter there,
Where my soul in joyful duty
Waits for God who answers prayer;
O how blessed is this place,
Filled with solace, light, and grace.

Wow! That’s the point I really want to make – God *does* answer prayer. Then I remembered the words of another hymn that is contradictory: Hymn #326. Look at the third stanza:

Teach me to feel that Thou art always nigh;
Teach me the struggles of the soul to bear,
To check the rising doubt, the rebel sigh;
Teach me the patience of unanswered prayer.

I’m confused. Which is it? Does God answer prayer? Always? Sometimes? Do we need patience for unanswered prayer? Maybe we should give thanks for unanswered prayer. That is the tenor of the Garth Brooks song:

*Just the other night at a hometown football game
My wife and I ran into my old high school flame
And as I introduced them the past came back to me
And I couldn’t help but think of the way things used to be*

*She was the one that I’d wanted for all times
And each night I’d spend prayin’ that God would make her mine
And if he’d only grant me this wish I wished back then
I’d never ask for anything again.*

She wasn’t quite the angel that I remembered in my dreams

*And I could tell that time had changed me
In her eyes too it seemed
We tried to talk about the old days
There wasn't much we could recall
I guess the Lord knows what he's doin' after all*

*And as she walked away and I looked at my wife
And then and there I thanked the Good Lord
For the gifts in my life.*

*Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers
Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs
That just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean he don't care
Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.ⁱ*

Gerald Sittser is a professor of theology at Whitworth University in Spokane. He puts a more sophisticated spin on that idea:

Strange as it may sound, we need unanswered prayer. It is God's gift to us because it protects us from ourselves. If all our prayers were answered, we would only abuse the power. We would use prayer to change the world to our liking, and it would become hell on earth. Like spoiled children with too many toys and too much money, we would only grab for more. We would pray for victory at the expense of others; we would be intoxicated by power. We would hurt other people and exalt ourselves.

Unanswered prayer protects us. It breaks us, deepens us, and transforms us. Ironically, the unanswered prayers of the past, which so often leave us feeling hurt and disillusioned, serve as a refiner's fire that prepares us for the answered prayers of the future.ⁱⁱ

As much truth as there is in Garth Brooks' song and Gerald Sittser's words, I'm increasingly uncomfortable with the idea that prayers might go unanswered. Do we really believe that God would ever turn a deaf ear to us and ignore us? **"Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near..."** cries the prophet.ⁱⁱⁱ Although you faithful ones pray without ceasing, it's more likely that the world as a whole would turn a deaf ear to God and ignore him. At one point in his relationship with his people, **"The Lord said, 'I was ready to answer my people's prayers, but they did not pray. I was ready for them to find me, but they did not even try.'"**^{iv}

Perhaps it would simply be better to say that sometimes God says "no" to our prayers. A negative response feels better than no response. Responsible parents learn how to say "no" to their children when it is necessary. I almost titled this sermon, "When God Says, 'No'". But the Bible says, **"For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you ... is always 'Yes.' For in him every one of God's promises is a 'Yes.'"**^v

Ah, sweet mysteries of our faith! I'm digging us deeper and deeper into a quagmire! I want to say without equivocation that God *always* answers our prayers. God never ignores us. And God *always* answers prayer in a positive way. God would never do anything that would deny that he is for us or that Jesus Christ was anything but God's "yes" to us. **"If God is for us, who**

could be against us? ... Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ *prays* for us.”^{vi}

To say that God *always* answers prayer requires us to modify our concepts of prayer, if not even some of our concepts of God. Yes, Jesus said some bold things about prayer – he promised that if we ask, we will receive; if we seek, we will find; if we knock, the door will be opened.^{vii} He taught that if we ask for anything in his name, he will grant it.^{viii} We all know, however, that it doesn't always work that way. Prayer is not like going to the one-arm bandits in Atlantic City hoping that if we put our money in and pull the lever enough times we'll get a payoff.

Prayer is no gimmick. Prayer is not magic. Prayer is not power in our hands. I've said this so many times I hope it sounds familiar: “I don't believe in the power of prayer. I believe in the power of God and prayer is the way I stay connected to God.” If I believed in the power of prayer the way some talk about it, I would be boasting of my own strength and power. The point of the Gospel is that when we think we are strong and powerful, then we are very, very weak.

It's similar to what we heard last week when Moses warned the children of Israel as they were entering the Promised Land, **“Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me wealth.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth...”**^{ix} Perhaps we need that same kind of warning about our prayer life. *Do not say to yourself, “the power of my prayers have gotten this or resulted in that. Remember, God, and God alone, holds all the power.*

Prayer gives to us not what we want, but what we need. We deceive ourselves into thinking that we need everything we want. We've learned this past week that when our youngest grandson sees various toys on TV commercials or in the catalogues he doesn't say, “I want this or that.” Instead he says, “I need this or that.” Clever of him, but we know better.

The answer to our prayers that we do need and we are always given when we pray is this: **“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”** The context of today's reading is Paul's self-defense about his credentials as the true apostle of the Lord. He is goaded into boasting – the very thing he despised about the super-apostles. Perhaps they are the first century equivalent to today's TV preachers who boast about all the healings brought about by their ministry. The difference is, Paul does not boast about his strengths, but about his weaknesses.

Paul had plenty to boast about. He had a spiritual experience of the nth degree that would leave all the “super-apostles” standing in the dust, but he talks about it in the third person so as not to put the spotlight on himself. Still, he continues to struggle with the temptation to boast about himself. No matter how high he felt lifted up, he was brought back to earthly reality very quickly. **“To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me...”** What that thorn was is anybody's guess; a physical malady, no doubt. Paul prayed three times that it would be taken from him. It didn't happen. The answer to his prayer was, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weaknesses.”**

Nowhere in our faith story does it say God takes us on a detour around roadblocks in our lives, whatever trials or tribulations we face. Like it or not, God takes us on the bumpy ride right through the construction zone. And we do get through! **“The Lord is my shepherd; I have**

everything I need ... Even if I go through the deepest darkness, I will not be afraid, Lord, for you are with me; your shepherd's rod and staff protect me.”^x

God's grace is sufficient. God's presence is guaranteed. A hospital chaplain writes,

Somehow, in my being with patients, I hope they would get a sense of God's love and compassion. I pray for healing in whatever way they might need, in body, mind and spirit. Prayer is always answered. Maybe not in a way that can be seen as a physical cure, but effects of prayer come through a sense of peace, comfort, insight ... even crying. Crying can help them to know their own vulnerability. Physicians might look for a cure, but chaplains hope for healing of body, mind or spirit. We want patients to have an understanding of themselves, God and others.^{xi}

During the Civil War, a hastily written prayer was found in the pocket of a fatally wounded soldier. “I received nothing that I asked for, but all I had hoped. My prayers were answered.”^{xii} Indeed, God's grace is sufficient, more than sufficient!

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- i. ©1989 Bait and Beer Music / Forerunner Music, Inc.
 - ii. *The Gift of Unanswered Prayer*, Christianity Today, April 22, 2004
 - iii. Isaiah 55:6
 - iv. Isaiah 65:1, *Good News Bible*
 - v. 2 Corinthians 1:19-20
 - vi. See Romans 8:31-38
 - vii. Luke 11:9
 - viii. John 14:14
 - ix. Deuteronomy 8:17-18
 - x. Psalm 23:1, 4 *Good News Bible*
 - xi. Joyce McCullough, A Roman Catholic laywoman and chaplain at Mt Vernon Hospital, Alexandria, VA. (source unknown)
 - xii. Joanna Adams, Christian Century, June 28, 2003, p. 18