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## INTRODUCTION

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### The "Whys" of Unanswered Prayer

Prayer is a human instinct. We all cry out for help beyond ourself. In desperate situations, in deep distress, in times of ache and longing, we call out to God: *God, if you're really there, now is when I need you. God, if you really love me, now is the time to come through.* The stakes are often very high:

A dear family friend calls to tell you that she's losing her job, her ex-husband is six months behind in child support payments, and her car just broke down.

Your child doesn't want to have anything to do with the values you've tried to instill in him since birth, and you're scared.

You can't seem to cope like you used to, and the pressures are getting overwhelming.

You have worked and worked and worked to establish yourself in your profession, but someone is unfairly questioning your integrity and spreading rumors

about you. You're starting to see everything you've worked for crumble.

You're alone, so very, very alone.

So you pray. To the best of your abilities, you really pray. So much is riding on that prayer. That's why it hurts so much when no answer comes.

### A PAINFUL QUESTION

Why do some prayers seem to go unanswered? This question has too much pain behind it to answer with glib, pious platitudes. I think, for example, of a man I know whose marriage ended, despite his desperate efforts to save it. Pouring out his anguish to me one day, he answered my unspoken question: "I prayed and prayed and prayed." Looking him in the eye, I knew that quoting a Bible passage like "All things work together for good" and then saying a quick prayer would only wound his soul even more. It would discount his suffering and the genuine mystery of life in this fallen world.

I began reflecting on unanswered prayer in the tenth grade when a friend was seriously injured in a car accident. My friends and I prayed and prayed for him, but he died. I didn't get it. Even at that age I wanted to believe God would help us but felt myself giving in to a kind of fatalism, a resignation that "whatever will be will be." A few months later a friend gave me a book called *Essays on Prayer* (InterVarsity Press, 1968). As I read through the table of contents, I saw the chapter titled

"Some Pray and Die" and immediately turned to it and began reading. The essay was written by an anonymous army chaplain serving in Africa during World War II. He began with these words: "I wish that people would stop writing about people who pray on rafts and get rescued. Because they don't all get rescued. What about the fellows who pray regularly and get killed regularly? What was wrong with their prayers?"

The chaplain went on to tell the story of a devout young Christian who arrived in Africa on assignment as a pilot. Within the first day, the pilot had sought out the chaplain and attended chapel services. The next day he prayed with the chaplain and boarded his plane to fly his mission. But he never returned. The chaplain wrote, "What was wrong with my prayers?" I asked myself as I stood by the fearful wreckage of the plane he tried so bravely to bring in safely. Other people's prayers are answered. What's wrong with ours? Who gets the breaks in prayer?"

### THE COST OF LETTING UNANSWERED PRAYER STOP OUR PRAYING

This author's raw, blunt emotion pierced my heart. Here was someone, a spiritual leader no less, who was honest enough to admit his disappointment, confusion, and heartache about tragically unanswered prayer. His candor gave me hope. It was not the hope that comes from getting all the answers. It was the hope that comes from seeing courage and conviction despite great pain, deep disappointment, and threatening obstacles.

If we are going to grow spiritually, we must learn what

to do about unanswered prayer. In fact, for some, resolving this issue is critical to developing a positive relationship with God.

Perhaps there is no more common spiritual struggle than the one that results when we don't get what we prayed for. In *Letters to Malcolm*, C. S. Lewis said, "Every war, every famine or plague, and almost every deathbed is a monument to a petition that was not granted." Then how do we respond? ~~Failure to understand is one of the greatest obstacles to becoming all we long to be.~~ Unanswered prayer can block deepening fellowship with God, even as a refusal of help from a friend can hurt the friendship. It can smother joy, defeat hope, and erode faith.

I have been trying to make prayer a way of life. I want prayer to be my first response, not my last resort. But in order for that to happen, I need to face the fact of unanswered prayer. Why doesn't God come through sometimes—especially in some very important times? If that's not *your* question, it's one that your friends and neighbors are asking. I have listened when people asked:

Why didn't God answer my prayers when my child was sick? Instead, he died.

Why didn't God hear my prayers for my marriage? Instead, my spouse had an affair.

Why didn't God answer my prayer for my career? Instead, I lost my job.

Why didn't God hear our prayers for our unborn child? Instead, she has birth defects.

Why? Why? Why?

When we ask tough questions, we've got to get ready for tough answers. When we ask heart questions, we've got to dig a little deeper to understand the purposes of God.

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#### EVEN IF WE KNEW . . .

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It's important to acknowledge up front that we cannot know all the reasons for unanswered prayer. Sometimes, the reasons for God's apparent silence are a mystery. (We will look at the issue of mystery in one of the upcoming chapters.) In many cases, however, ~~even if we did know the reason for a particular unanswered prayer, the knowledge would not comfort us.~~ Ultimately, ~~comfort comes only from the Lord.~~

Understanding unanswered prayer is not so much about gaining information as it is about understanding who we are spiritually and what we believe about God. 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.

While we can't always know the reasons for unanswered prayer in specific instances, the Bible does give some clues as to why God may appear to be silent in response to the petitions of his people. In this book, I'm

going to survey six reasons the Bible gives for unanswered prayer. This survey is suggestive, not exhaustive. Please note that I'm presenting these principles in the order in which they appear in the Bible, not in any order of priority. After considering each reason, we will look at how to live with unanswered prayers.

One note about the term *unanswered prayer*: The reality is that no prayer goes unanswered. The Lord either says *yes* or *no* or *wait*. This book addresses those situations when God seems to be saying *no* or *wait*. My hope is that you and I may come to the point where we can see *wait*—or even *no*—as the Lord's *yes* to our heart's deepest desires and needs.

I believe there are some reading this book who haven't prayed in years because of a prayer God never seemed to answer. If this is your situation, I'm hopeful that as you read, your heart, mind, and spirit will be touched. In fact, I hope that by the end of the book, you will be ready to get on your knees again—not because you've been given easy answers—but because you've found encouraging truth and practical principles that can soothe the ache, stimulate renewed vision, and guide you as you continue to pray.



## CHAPTER ONE

### The Principle of Progressive Victory

Sometimes unanswered prayer is simply the first step on the way to a wonderful answer that needs to come in stages. We see this principle when God's people began to conquer the Promised Land. The people of Israel had been in Egypt for over four hundred years. They had done well in Egypt in the time of Joseph but later experienced oppression and persecution. They were subjected to slavery for the great building projects of the pharaohs. They left Egypt as a rather ragtag group, moving through the wilderness into Canaan, the land God had promised as their new homeland. But they faced tremendous opposition. Though God gave them victories like the one at Jericho, he didn't answer all their prayers right away. They didn't conquer the Promised Land instantly. The Lord's strategy is described in Deuteronomy 7:21-24:

"No, do not be afraid of those nations, for the Lord your God is among you, and he is a great and

awesome God. The Lord your God will drive those nations out ahead of you little by little. You will not clear them away all at once, for if you did, the wild animals would multiply too quickly for you. But the Lord your God will hand them over to you. He will throw them into complete confusion until they are destroyed. He will put their kings in your power, and you will erase their names from the face of the earth. No one will be able to stand against you, and you will destroy them all.

This is a fascinating passage. The Lord promises to drive out the nations before Israel little by little, instead of all at once. And we ask, *Why little by little? Why not all at once, God? Wouldn't it be easier just to get it all over with, once and for all? Wouldn't it be more efficient? Wouldn't it be a dramatic display of God's power of the ungodly? Wouldn't it be a great way to encourage the Israelites? What could possibly be wrong with driving the nations out quickly, giving Israel a complete victory immediately?*

Listen to the reason: "for . . . the wild animals will multiply too quickly for you." In other words, answering their prayer for complete victory immediately could bring them ultimate defeat! The simple fact is that the ecological balance of the food chain would be so disrupted by a radical depopulation that it would threaten the fledgling nation. God was giving the Israelites protection by answering their prayers little by little.

The first reason for unanswered prayer is the principle of progressive victory. God may say no to help us move forward in safety. God may say no because an immediate yes would hurt us far more than we might realize.

## WHO KNOWS BEST?

When bringing our requests to God, we often can't resist advising him on how to answer them. In fact, many of us are discouraged if we can't give God a few ideas. But we need to remember that our thoughts are not God's thoughts. God is not limited to the possibilities we see. He sees consequences we cannot anticipate.

K. P. Yohannan, founder of the evangelistic mission society Gospel for Asia, tells of God's delay in answering his prayers for funding his new mission organization:

I never told anyone that I eventually would need such huge sums of money. They already thought I was crazy for wanting to support eight or ten missionaries a month out of my own income. What would they think if I said I needed millions of dollars a year to field an army of God? But I knew it was possible. Several Western missionary societies and charities already were dealing with annual budgets that size. I saw no reason why we couldn't do the same. But as logical as it all was in my mind, I had some bitter lessons to learn.<sup>1</sup>

K. P. was not able to get funding immediately. But as he prayed and shared his vision, he clarified his thinking about the mission and the best way to involve people. Then one day, a friend suggested he develop a "Dollar-a-Day" pledge program to support native missionaries. That program has become the backbone of the mission's financial strategy. He writes, "During

those days our needs continued to be met on a day-to-day basis, and I never had to borrow from the missionary support funds. I am convinced now that God knew the many trials ahead and wanted to teach us to have and trust in Him alone—even when I couldn't see Him."<sup>2</sup>

K. P. thought he knew the right answer to his prayers: God should provide immediate funding for his new mission. But God knew best about what kind of answer K. P. needed and when he needed it.

When I was pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Fresno, California, we once wrestled with what to do with a house that was on property we had purchased to be our new parking lot. The church was located in the downtown area. When I first arrived, we had hundreds driving in to attend worship, but our parking lot held only seventy-five cars. So we used adjacent vacant lots. But the properties didn't belong to us. If they were sold, our future would be radically affected. So we bought the rest of the city block across the street. We demolished an abandoned car dealership and two houses that were beyond repair. But there was a fourplex apartment with six thousand square feet that could either be relocated or used for some purpose. For over a year we prayed earnestly and discussed countless possibilities for what we could do with this building. Nothing was working out. Days before we were going to level it, a member of our congregation had the brainstorm: *Let's make it a leadership house for urban ministry.* In an amazingly short time we had a full-fledged partnership with a parachurch organization to support urban ministry leaders. The "Pink House," as we called it (based on its color, of course!), became a means of

transforming lives and the community, as Christians with a heart for the city moved in—and then often moved out to buy a home in the neighborhood.

Looking back, we saw that the resources for the Pink House were not in place during the months we had begun praying. We had to go through various stages: acquire the property, demolish the other houses, pray, and clarify our vision. Then God brought a person to us who could pull it all together. In God's time, everything came together. Amazing!

God can do more in a moment than we can do in a lifetime. When we fret, we lose sight of both God's purposes and God's power. He is literally orchestrating a work far greater than any of us can imagine. For a while, we only hear our little part. We may find it very difficult to have so few notes and so many rests. But then we hear God's symphony, and we understand.

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#### WHAT SORTS OF BEASTS THREATEN US?

God protected the Israelites by answering their prayers in stages so they wouldn't be devoured by too much success. Are there ways this principle applies to us? I would like to suggest at least four situations in which God may answer our prayers progressively in order to protect us. Let me compare these to the beasts that needed to be kept under control in the Promised Land.

#### THE BEAST OF OVEREXTENSION

In a day of both endless need and boundless opportunities, many of us are tempted to get overextended using

our spiritual gifts and resources. I can tell story after story about myself and others who have taken off like a rocket, only to burn out in exhaustion. But I also know stories of people who were protected from burnout because their prayers were seemingly unanswered.

I have a friend, for example, who prayed for his new consulting business to succeed. He had a very ambitious plan and enthusiasm to match. Still, he had far fewer clients than he wanted. He added staff much more slowly than he had anticipated. Finally, about seven years into the venture, momentum picked up. "You know, Doug," he said, "I shudder now to think what would have happened if we had met my initial growth projections. I had to go slow in order to go fast."

As another friend who preaches the "build slowly, build solidly" principle points out, lasting works require strong foundations. Firm foundations must come first—and they take time to build.

Is the beast of overextension threatening you? Think about the implications of your prayers: if God answered yes, how would it impact your time, energy, resources, priorities, and relationships? Could it be that God wants you to build a stronger base so you can reach your full potential?

#### THE BEAST OF PRIDE

Answered prayer can be twisted into a means of pride. A blessing may exceed our ability to live humbly. We all know stories of those who achieved too much too soon, whose success destroyed them.

The Corinthians were victims of pride. As God

blessed them, they began to boast in their special relationship with him. They thought of themselves as above God's law. Their fellowship degenerated into cliques. They misused their spiritual gifts—and in general made a mess of things.

We may pray to succeed, but we may not be ready to handle success. God may say no as a sign of protection. The whole principle here is the law of unintended consequences. We may not understand the consequences of what we pray for. So God may give us progressive victory. Are we able to remember that God gives the growth (see I Corinthians 3:6)? We need to guard our heart against the invasion of pride that can sneak in with some answered prayers.

#### THE BEAST OF LIMITED VISION

Shortly after graduating from seminary, I asked one of my favorite professors, Dr. Richard Lovelace, author of *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, to speak at a pastors' conference. He readily agreed. Several months later, I called and asked if he would speak for another event. This time he paused. "Doug," he responded, "I feel strongly that I should say no. I don't want to disappoint you, but I'm learning that I must say no more often in order to make room for others to serve." Dr. Lovelace wasn't God's answer to my prayers. I was initially disappointed. But in reflecting on what he said, I realized that God may say no so that we will look in other directions, involve other people, or think things through again.

When we are praying, we often fasten on one solution for our problem, or one person we want to involve in a

project, or one location for a particular event. Our preoccupation may blind us to the creative solutions God has. He may want us to involve underutilized people or experiment with an idea or a place that others haven't considered. God is very creative—he wants us to break the grip of the beasts of the ordinary, the predictable, and the status quo.

### THE BEAST OF INDIVIDUALISM

Success can cut us off from community. It can insulate us from others when we most need to be connected to them. God has designed us to be interconnected and interdependent. Imagine a commercial gardener who prays for a bumper crop to bring a nice profit. He may even desire to give a portion of that profit to God's work. But thrusting a very large quantity of that particular product into the market all at one time might create a glut and result in a serious loss to other growers. A surplus of that commodity might lessen the demand for another item, creating hardships for someone else. The bountiful crop could affect import and export quotations, the balance of trade operations, and many other aspects of the economy. Our finite minds cannot encompass all the ramifications of a single situation. But we need to learn to trust that God considers the impact of a situation on all parties involved.<sup>3</sup>

### IS THIS WHY MY PRAYER IS STILL UNANSWERED?

Consider your past prayers. Are there times you have seen this principle of progressive victory in operation?

Have you ever seen your prayers answered in stages? I have a friend who desperately wanted to be a college professor. She prepared faithfully, but God closed the doors. So she pursued other areas to exercise her gifts and started her family. Now God is opening the doors for her to teach at the college level. "God's timing is amazing," she said to me recently. "I really wasn't ready when I thought I was. Over these last few years I've had the chance to learn so much more about working with people—things that will add so much to the classroom. And I have a family I might have passed up if I'd gone into full-time academia. I can't imagine missing that!"

What about your present prayers? Is there an area in which you may be getting too far ahead without considering the beasts of unintended consequences? Take inventory of your prayers using this question: "If God answered this prayer in the way I'm hoping for, how would it affect me, my family, my work, my ministry, and my community?" Even if asking this question doesn't give you additional understanding, it may help you think more broadly.

### HOW TO PRAY

As you and I pray, we must be aware that God may say no to protect us from the beasts of overextension, pride, limited vision, and individualism. At times, God is bringing progressive victory, for the beasts might slay us.

If you think you may be praying without sufficient regard to the beasts that might slay you, I suggest you ask

God for wisdom to see the present stage and for courage to endure over time—because receiving answers may take longer than you initially hoped. Pray for gratitude to appreciate the victory he is giving, as small as it may seem to be.

Above all, keep praying.

NOTES

1. K.P. Yohannan, *Revolution in World Mission* (Altamonte Springs, Fla.: Creation House, 1986), 77.
2. *Ibid.*, 82.
3. Virginia Whiteman, *Mustard* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1973), 90–91. Cited in Dick Eastman, *Change the World! School of Prayer* (Studio City, Calif.: World Literature Crusade, 1976), 119.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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### Living with Unanswered Prayer

There is a risk in analyzing prayer as we have done in this book, a risk that we will spend more time trying to understand prayer than we will praying. And as we focus on the reasons behind unanswered prayer, it would be easy to forget that God answers prayer! That's why it's so important to draw inspiration from the accounts of God's marvelous answers to the petitions of his people. One such account was given by a medical missionary who told the following story while back on furlough, visiting his home church in Michigan:

While serving at a small field hospital in Africa, every two weeks I traveled by bicycle through the jungle to a nearby city for supplies. This was a journey of two days, which required camping overnight at the halfway point.

On one of these journeys I arrived in the city where I planned to collect money from a bank, purchase medicine and supplies, and then begin

my two-day journey back to the field hospital. Upon arrival in the city, I observed two men fighting, one of whom had been seriously injured. I treated him for his injuries, and at the same time witnessed to him of the Lord Jesus Christ. I then traveled two days, camping overnight, and arrived home without incident.

Two weeks later I repeated my journey. Upon arriving in the city, I was approached by the young man I had treated two weeks earlier. He told me that he had known that I carried money and medicines. He said, "Some friends and I followed you into the jungle, knowing that you would camp overnight. We were waiting just outside your campsite for you to go to sleep. We planned to kill you and take your money and drugs. But just as we were about to move into your campsite, we saw that you were surrounded by twenty-six armed guards."

At this, I laughed and said that I was certainly all alone out in the jungle campsite. The young man pressed the point, however, and said, "No sir, I was not the only person to see the guards. My five friends also saw them, and we all counted them. It was because of those guards that we were afraid and left you alone. . . ."

At this point in the church presentation in Michigan, one of the men in the church jumped to his feet and interrupted the speaker. He asked, "Sir, can you tell me the exact day that this incident happened?" It took the missionary a

moment to recall, but he could. When he informed the congregation of the date, the man who had interrupted him told this story:

"When it is night in Africa, it is day here.

On the night of your incident in Africa, it was morning here and I was preparing to go play a game of golf. As I was putting my golf bag in the car, I felt the Lord leading me to pray for you. In fact, the urging of the Lord was so strong, I called the men in this church together to meet with me here in the sanctuary and pray for you. Would all of those men who met with me on that day please stand up?"

The men who met together to pray that day stood. When all were counted, the number was twenty-six!

"Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?" (Hebrews 1:14, NASB).<sup>1</sup>

God answers prayer! And even when he doesn't answer prayer for a time, he is still engaging us in vital fellowship and spiritual growth. So we have good reason to pray quickly, confidently, and boldly. I am stirred by the words of E. M. Bounds:

Great faith enables Christ to do great things. We need a quickening of faith in God's power. We have hedged God in till we have little faith in His power. We have conditioned the exercise of His power till we have a little God, and a little faith in a little God.

The only condition which restrains God's power, and which disables Him to act, is unfaith.

In God's ability to do, He goes far beyond men's ability to ask. No commonplace tameness should restrain our largest asking. Large, larger, and largest asking magnifies grace and adds to God's glory. Feeble asking impoverishes the asker, and restrains God's purposes for the greatest good, and obscures His glory.<sup>2</sup>

#### EXERCISING GREAT FAITH IN THE FACE OF UNANSWERED PRAYER

I realize that I haven't addressed all the reasons for unanswered prayer in this book. I may not have touched on the reason that affects your situation. But as we look at how to live with unanswered prayer—whatever the reason for it—I hope that you are encouraged both to search your own soul and to spend time with the Lord and the Bible seeking insight.

To get insight into living with unanswered prayer, let's look at Paul's response to an unanswered prayer in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. Paul relates his experience of being caught up into the third heaven. But then he faced a time of trial and unanswered prayer. He writes:

But to keep me from getting puffed up, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from getting proud.

Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, "My gracious

favor is all you need. My power works best in your weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may work through me. Since I know it is all for Christ's good, I am quite content with my weaknesses and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Three principles emerge from Paul's story that may help you live with unanswered prayer.

#### MAKE PRAYER YOUR FIRST RESPONSE

Paul did not accept his "thorn" like a Stoic. He begged God to take it from him. We should never hesitate to bring our requests immediately to the Lord.

As you are living with unanswered prayer, keep praying. Don't hesitate to pray about anything and everything. Some people say, "Well, why should I pray when God already knows what I need?" The answer is, because God likes to be asked. P. T. Forsyth notes, "Love loves to be told what it knows already. . . . It wants to be asked for what it longs to give."<sup>3</sup>

Why would a parent who knows his or her child needs something delay giving it until the child asks? There are many good reasons. The delay can teach the child initiative and how to take responsibility for his own life. It may be a way to engage the child in conversation about the nature of the request and other possible ways to meet his need. Jesus demonstrated this principle when

he asked the blind beggar, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:51). The blind man's need seemed so obvious, yet Jesus wanted more than "a satisfied customer"—he wanted to connect with the man in need. Frank Laubach, an early-twentieth-century missionary who developed methods of literacy education that are still used today, captures this desire in the following meditation:

As I lay on the warm earth on Signal Hill last night I asked God the question:

"Why is it that Thou dost allow us on this earth to do nearly all the talking? Why do we not always hear Thy voice, since Thou art so much wiser than we are?"

Instantly back came the answer. I could see it, from beginning to end, in a second, though it may require more than a minute to write it down. So many of these thoughts from God are hurled at me in an instant like that:

"When you are teaching the Moros to read, your art is to say as little as you can and leave them to say as much as they will. That is why I leave you to do and say as much as you can, while I say little. You learn by doing, even when you make mistakes and correct them. You are to be sons and daughters of God, and now you are taking the first feeble steps of infants. Every step you take alone is infinitely more important than you now imagine, because the thing I am preparing you for exceeds all your imagination.

So the talking you do to me is essential. The talking others do to you, when they are trying to talk up to your expectations, is more important than the talks you give to them. This is the best way to act: Talk a great deal to me. Let others talk a great deal to you, appreciating everything fine they say and neglecting their mistakes."<sup>4</sup>

God wants our talk. He wants prayer. He wants to hear our requests. It's the relationship, not simply the fulfillment of a request, that matters most. Love loves to be told what it already knows. I still ask my wife, Sarah, "Do you really love me?" And she will say, "You know I love you." Love wants to be asked for what it longs to give.

#### DON'T DEVALUE YOUR REQUESTS

One of our natural tendencies is to try to gauge how important our need really is to the Lord. Is it really worthy of his attention? Is it too small to bother him with? Paul's experience sheds light on this. He urges us to bring every concern to the Lord.

We do not know for certain the exact nature of Paul's malady, his "thorn in the flesh," and I think that's good. I believe the Scriptures are deliberately vague. Knowing human nature leads me to believe that if we knew what Paul was struggling with, we would either pass judgment on Paul or on God for not answering Paul's prayer. We aren't told because such things aren't for us to know and judge. Instead, we are presented with the testimony of a person dealing with an unspecified problem that was very difficult for him.

No one but you truly knows how difficult your problems are for you. And you don't know how difficult my problems are for me. We need to show each other grace in terms of our different responses to difficulties. Some of us have high thresholds for pain and frustration, while others of us have low thresholds. It is not for us to judge one another's thresholds. Think of the plant world: some plants are hearty and can live almost anywhere. Others, such as orchids, require extremely delicate handling. They are sensitive to the least change in climate, water, and soil conditions. So it is with individuals and with their requests. Some are more hearty than others in certain areas. We are not to judge one another in these matters. We are to support and encourage one another. Above all, we can be thankful that God cares about the least thing that troubles us. Above all, we can be assured that God respects our requests.

#### PRAY CONTINUALLY

Paul said, "I prayed three times." Some have taken this passage to mean that there is a limit to the number of times we can pray for something. Some have even said we can pray only three times. This is an inappropriate conclusion. Paul prayed until he heard God's answer. Then he stopped. It happened that he prayed three times before getting an answer, but we might pray thirty, three hundred, or even three thousand times until God impresses his response on our heart. My friend Pastor Paul Binnion gave me a phrase to encourage continual prayer: PUSH. *Pray Until Something Happens.* I like that. Effective prayer isn't a matter of

quantity. It's a matter of continuing communication with the living Lord.

#### LISTEN FOR GOD'S RESPONSE

Each time Paul prayed, God's response was: "My gracious favor is all you need. My power works best in your weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul's main need was God's sustaining power, not release from the problem. That same principle applies to us in many circumstances. We may not understand it, we may not like it, but we need to learn to live with it. Sometimes our problems are our lifeline to God.

I was meeting with a group of men when one asked, "What keeps your attention on the Lord?" Without hesitation, another man spoke up, "Being broken! When I'm struggling, God gets my full attention." We all identified with his confession. In our brokenness, we often discover God in ways we never would otherwise.

Do you ever wrestle with a sense of God's silence or withdrawal? What you are experiencing is a spiritual dynamic but not a theological reality. In other words, just because something may be part of your experience doesn't mean it's true. While you may feel that God is absent, the Scripture says in no uncertain terms that God never leaves you. You say, "How can you say that, Doug?" Well, let's look at Hebrews 13:5 (NIV), "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." Then there's Matthew 28:20: "I am with you always." If you sense God's silence, remember to rely on the truth of Scripture, not on your feelings.

### TRUST GOD TO WORK THROUGH THE PROBLEM

Although he didn't remove Paul's problem, God promised to reveal his power through it. Paul discovered God's grace in ways he never could have apart from his unanswered prayer.

As in Paul's situation, unanswered prayer is often an occasion for grace. I was talking with a couple I'll call Scott and Sarah, who had been very successful in real estate until the market began a decline. After years of scrambling, they lost everything and had to file for bankruptcy. "We prayed and prayed and prayed," Scott said to me, "but God never answered our prayers the way we thought he should. Still, we learned more about his love and sustaining grace through that time than we ever had before." Scott and Sarah genuinely celebrated God's sustaining power, carrying them through the darkest days of their lives—even when they lost their house. God led them to a nice home they could afford, and they set up housekeeping on a greatly reduced basis—without a shred of resentment. Scott became bolder and bolder, both in sharing his struggle and in challenging others to seek the support they need in crisis. "Through this process, we realized that the family of God doesn't like to talk about failure, especially financial failure," Scott explained. "We're ready to help people be honest and get the help they need." Like Paul, Scott and Sarah found that our weakness may be God's greatest asset.

Let me make a very bold statement. I believe there is no such thing as unanswered prayer when we want what

God wants. We may have to wait, or we may have to revise our requests, or we may have to humble ourselves in the face of great mysteries, or we may have to repent, or we may have to go through a process of shaping and growth. But no matter what, we are to be in vital relationship with God, seeking his face and trusting his grace in all things.

The challenge is getting to that point.

I want to offer you the opportunity to come once again to God. I invite you to try a "holy experiment" in prayer, using a concept from a story I once heard about the beloved Episcopal teacher-preacher Dr. Sam Shoemaker, who was a primary developer of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. One day Sam was talking with a man at his wits' end, who only kept going through a steady diet of pills and liquor. He saw no way out of his predicament. The man knew Shoemaker was a Christian, so when Sam asked, "Want to try an experiment?" he waved him off, saying, "Oh, I don't believe in God."

Sam said, "Well, there is something that seems to help people, and that something will help you if you will let him."

"How can I let him if I don't believe in him?" asked the man.

"Well," said Sam, "suppose we try saying out loud the whole truth about your situation, the way you feel about it, to whatever the ultimate reality is in this universe. Call it 'he,' 'she,' or 'it' for the moment and honestly ask for help and guidance."

"Now how would you do that?" asked the skeptic as he grew a little warmer to the idea. Shoemaker suggested

they kneel as an expression of reverence toward the unknown and then asked the man to say exactly what he was thinking and feeling, not putting on anything or pretending to believe something he did not believe. He was just to address himself to whatever creative force runs through the universe.

"Well, I certainly am in a jam," said the man. "I'll try anything once." Half laughing to himself, the man then knelt down, thinking nothing would happen but hoping with all his heart that it might. And there he prayed this prayer:

"Oh God, if there is a God, send me help now because I need it." In commenting upon that prayer, Shoemaker said, "It was a good, honest, selfish prayer. But from where I sit it is worth a dozen pious word formulations that never get above the ceiling."

Climbing back into his chair, the man looked at Shoemaker in a mischievous sort of a way and said, "I don't feel any different." Sam answered that he didn't especially care how he felt, but he was interested in what he was going to do. The man asked, "Got a Bible I can read?"

Later that former skeptic moved on to become a knowledgeable, contagious Christian. But it all began when he dared to be honest with God about his doubt, brought his deepest need to God, and opened his heart just a crack so as to allow God to plant his seeds of faith in his needy life. It was this man's way of saying, "Lord, I believe. Help me with my unbelief."

If you have given up praying about something, I want to encourage you to give it another try. Even if you are

very disappointed in God, I urge you to come back to him, to let him touch you, as he did Paul, to let his power be shown in your weakness.

What situation troubles you? Bring it again to the Lord. Only this time, lay it gently on the altar of his grace. Let him search your heart. Listen for any prompts from the Holy Spirit about how you might change your prayer. Consider journaling your thoughts as a way to focus your prayer.

I leave you with a testimony from Diane. While she and her son Brian were driving home from a holiday visit with family members, something happened—she still isn't sure what—as they rounded a curve in the country road. The car went up an embankment and flipped over, breaking Diane's neck and killing Brian. Words cannot express Diane's anguish or the pain of other family members. But God sustained her, and she recovered. After preaching on unanswered prayer I received a note from Diane that greatly encouraged me. She wrote:

Through months of grief and confinement, God repeatedly said, "Be still and know that I am God," and "God will give us His peace that surpasses all understanding." I was not to question God. I was to trust Him.

God sent me special reassurance three months later in pictures Brian had taken himself. One was of Brian's hand with a "thumbs up" and another of a ceramic angel blowing a kiss. Brian

was OK and he's definitely with God. What more could a mother ask for?

Satan still tries to defeat me with whys and guilt, but God is stronger. . . . The truth is that we won't know the answers until we are in heaven. We must just trust God in all the good and bad and continue to seek him and study his Word.

What a powerful testimony of acceptance and courage. Diane learned that unanswered prayer isn't the last word. The Lord himself is our answer, our yes in all circumstances. Trust in the Lord, and you will break the bonds of discouragement, of unbelief, of withdrawal from God. And, wonder of wonder, God will use unanswered prayer to answer your deepest prayer to become more like Christ, growing ever stronger on the way.

#### NOTES

1. Reported by the Calvary Missionary Service in the "Global Prayer Digest," September 1991, U.S. Center of World Mission.
2. E. M. Bounds, *The Possibilities of Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979 reprint), 61, 63, 66.
3. P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1916), 63.
4. Frank C. Laubach, Ph. D., *Letters by a Modern Mystic* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement, 1937), 40.