

Hope for the uprooted woman

Unanswered Prayer

by Ann Kelley



I have much to be thankful for.

And yet . . .

And yet, some situations go on and on and on. In our third year following treatment for leukemia, my husband's recovery continues to be a journey of ups and downs.

His medications prevent his body from producing any antibodies for Covid or any other disease. As a result, the pandemic necessitates constant evaluations of what we can and cannot participate in.

Isolation and loneliness have often robbed me of joy. Each time I learned of a friend's travel adventure or had to decline an invitation to an indoor gathering I felt a pang of jealousy of the freedoms others seemed to have.

Many times I asked God for the ability to receive my circumstances as His invitation to deepen my sense of His presence and care. Many times I did feel His presence and care—especially in nature. But just as often, I felt empty, aimless, and mildly depressed.

To be honest, I was disappointed with myself for not rising above my circumstances and for lacking the ability to accept my circumstances and trust God. It was a rude awakening to discover that my circumstances had such a powerful impact on my mood and outlook. I thought I was better than that.

That's hard to admit.

God was not miraculously removing my malaise and He wasn't changing my circumstances.

So what was He doing?

I don't know, but each morning I awoke with resignation and reluctance, I was reminded how much I needed God to make it through the day. Each photo I saw of happy friends vacationing on the beach or traveling through Europe reminded me that God shed tears *with* me—He understood and felt my pain. God received my anger and frustration and never shook His finger at me or was disappointed in me. With God, I was safe to feel every emotion and to ask every impatient question. All was received in love.

Perhaps my prayers were answered after all. Just not the way I expected.

I have no doubt that you have experienced unanswered prayer. I hope that this issue of *Bloom* will bring you some encouragement and a measure of faith when your prayers seem to go “unanswered.”

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“The deeper our faith, the more doubt we must endure; the deeper our hope, the more prone we are to despair; the deeper our love, the more pain its loss will bring; these are a few of the paradoxes we must hold as human beings. If we refuse to hold them in the hope of living without doubt, despair, and pain, we also find ourselves living without hope, faith, and love.”

Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*

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God's Ministry of Disappointment by Amena Brown

In pain and confusion, I'm finding that God is, indeed, close to the brokenhearted.

I thought I'd be pregnant by now.

Full stop. Hard return. I will sit a few minutes after writing that sentence. I want to highlight and delete. I want to press backspace, as if a button on my laptop can keep that sentence from being true. I imagined my mid-30s differently. I thought my guest room would be a baby room. I thought I would have smiled at my baby shower by now, gentle hand on a round belly. I thought by this time, I'd have a calendar full of playdates and plenty of funny kid stories to tell.

I'm living every day trying to hold the tension of fully trusting in a God my humanity will never completely understand.

Instead, it's just my husband and me. This isn't a bad thing. This is in fact enough. My husband and I are a family. Having a child doesn't start our family. These are the things I tell myself when people whose manners exist somewhere between well-meaning and none of your business search the torso of my shirts with their eyes, trying to discern if I am hiding a pregnant belly from them. These are the things I remind myself of when enduring conversations that start off as small talk and turn to the dangerous territory of statements that stab you right between your heart and your unanswered prayers.

Our journey to one day having children has not been blissful, innocent, joyous, or as easy as I expected it to be. It has been a journey of loss, heartbreak, delay, doctor appointments, test results, delays, stress, frustration, more appointments, more delays. Hope seems to be a liability too expensive to carry in the face of so much disappointment. My relationship to God and my feelings about prayer became tumultuous. I found myself wincing in my faith, praying cautiously because I don't want to deal with asking God for something when I think he will disappoint me. How do I keep going to God and asking when it seems like his consistent answer is no or wait? How do I keep believing the God who says no or wait when he knows how much that no or wait hurts me? How do I believe that God actually has my best interests at heart?

I am learning the painful truth that even when you pray and ask God, even when you quote back to God the applicable Scriptures, God doesn't always answer the way you want him to.

What do you assume about a God who does this? He must be mean, cold, distant, unloving, inconsiderate. He must be more human and less holy, right? He must care about

other people more than he cares about you. He must not see how hard you've tried to be good/honest/righteous.

God is near

I didn't want to write my story this way. I wanted to have a happy sitcom ending. I wanted to be able to tell you this story from the lofty place of prayers answered. I wanted to spend a short time telling you this hard time we had and spend most of the time telling you the amazing story of how that all changed. But I'm not there yet. I don't know when I will be. I don't know if I will be.

Some people said this would be a season, and maybe it is, but it hasn't ended yet. It's gone on longer than I thought I had the strength to walk. Sometimes I get so weary all I can muster in prayer is "God, help me." And sometimes no words come, and I trust he hears the things my soul wants to say when it hurts too much to gather the words to express.

I'm learning to accept this mystery of God. There are many things about God I will come to know or understand, and there is plenty I will never know, never understand, never be able to put words to. I'm learning the truth of Psalm 34:18: "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted." This means that when my pain hurts me deeply, God understands, God listens, God is near.

I wish I had answers. I wish I could predict the future. One of the limits of humanity is knowing only exactly what we know right now, right where we are. One thing I want my soul to remember is that life isn't always good, humans aren't always good, but God is good. Always.

I don't say that because it's convenient. I don't say it to silence the frustrations, doubts, and questions. I say it because our tears and frustrations and doubts and hurt feelings and anger matter to God. I say it because I know how scary hope can be when you've lived with disappointment so long. I say it because I'm living every day trying to hold the tension of fully trusting in a God my humanity will never completely understand. As I sit in that tension, my heart still wants to believe in the God whose love is found in prosperity and poverty, in answers and in questions, in disappointment and in miracles.

Why Doesn't God Answer My Non-Stupid Prayers? by Karl Vaters

When you're in pain, even good, thoughtful ideas about why God sometimes doesn't answer our prayers can feel trite and fall short

The answer to the question posed in the title takes just three words:

I Don't Know.

A Partial Answer at Best

I don't know why God doesn't answer so many of the heartfelt, desperate prayers of godly, faithful, sincere people.

I don't know why prayers for healing from cancer, the salvation of a loved one, or relief from some other deeply tragic need seem to go unanswered.

Oh sure, I've heard all the answers we try to give. And I've used most of them on many occasions.

- We live in a fallen world
- God's ways are higher than ours
- God's timing is different than ours
- God has a purpose for everything
- The rain falls on the just and the unjust
- God is with us in our suffering
- Sometimes the answer is "no" or "not now"

All of those statements have some validity. They each speak to some portion of the truth. But when you're in pain and seeking an answer, they often fall short.

At best, all those truths feel less like an answer than like the ingredients of an answer that hasn't quite gelled yet.

What the Bible Promises

There are so many scriptures that seem to tell us that sincere prayers for real needs, offered by faithful people, will receive positive answers. Many from the mouth of Jesus himself.

- "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." (John 15:7)

- “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” (Mark 11:24)
 - “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” (Matt. 7:7)
 - “And whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.” (1 John 3:22)
- ...and so many more

How can the Bible give us so many promises about answered prayer, but we still see so many of our sincere, valid prayers go unanswered?

Once again, I don't know.

I don't know why there seems to be such a huge gap between the promises in God's Word and the answer we need when we're in pain.

But I do know this.

Even when the answers are hard to come by, staying faithful is always better than giving up.

What to Do While We Wait

So, what does staying faithful look like when things get tough?

For those in pain, keep praying. Keep hoping. And keep believing. Find whatever solace you can in the partial answers listed above. But mostly, hold on to Jesus and know that he's holding on to you.

For those who are ministering to people in pain, concentrate on giving them your comfort, prayers and presence more than giving them solutions.

Avoid the temptation to give pat answers when you get uncomfortable with the awkward silence.

If a hurting person gets angry at God, don't worry about defending the Almighty. Just let them vent.

Pray with those who pray, cry with those who cry, and mourn with those who mourn.

We won't always be able to answer their questions. But when someone is in sorrow, just being with them is always the right answer.



The Excruciating Loss of a Loved One by Susan Miller

This was not the answer I had fervently prayed for



It was Easter Sunday, 2009. As I sat in the hospital waiting room pleading with God in heart-wrenching prayer, I heard footsteps coming down the long empty corridor and looked up.

It was an image that will be forever imprinted in my mind. She was an attractive, petite woman in her mid-forties, with shoulder-length black hair, white blouse, and a dark pencil-thin skirt. My eyes were drawn to her large red purse as she walked down the long corridor. It seemed almost too big in proportion to her small size. As she walked closer, I could tell she was coming toward us, especially since my daughter and I were the only two people sitting in the waiting area.

There wasn't a smile on her face as she introduced herself. It was obvious the news she was going to tell us was not good. "I'm so sorry," she said. "There's nothing we can do. The cancer has spread."

I wouldn't let the reality of her words penetrate my mind – not now. I went into a mama's protection mode as I pushed back my own feelings to be strong for my daughter. "We'll get through this, we'll get through this," I kept saying. Even though I didn't believe my own words, I said them anyway. After all, this was her daddy the surgeon was talking about. My husband of 45 years, but her daddy who she adored. What I really wanted to do was run down the long corridor screaming, "No, No, No!"

This was not the answer I had fervently prayed for with every beat of my heart.

The seemingly empty section of the hospital and surgical waiting room suddenly seemed very cold and I began to shake as I often do when I am chilled to the bone. I began to feel the chill of the surgeon's words pierce my heart. "A rare, aggressive form of colon cancer that has spread to the liver and beyond...."

I knew this was something I couldn't fix with words, a hug, or a kiss. I knew I needed to lean into Jesus – no . . . *fall* into Jesus – like I'd never done before, even though I felt the anguish and emptiness of unanswered prayer and unfulfilled scripture.

I felt numb as I pushed away the reality of losing Bill. Despite feeling abandoned by God, I knew the only way I could physically take another step or emotionally face the time we had left, was to continue breathing in Jesus and His word with every breath I took.

As much as I wanted to run *from* God, I ran *to* Him.

Following Bill's death, I withdrew from my ministry and church responsibilities for four months. I needed time and space to go through the grieving process. Daily, I cried out to Jesus to guide me and strengthen me. When I was overwhelmed, I asked Christ to *be* my peace. When I thought I would drown in my tears, I knew Christ had wept in his anguish and felt my pain. Over time, I began to feel strength returning to my mind and spirit.

Watching Bill live out his strong faith and cling to Jesus during pain and suffering changed me.

I began to understand that God works in *all* things—even terminal cancer and death—for His Glory. We don't always have all the answers, or even get the answers we pray for, but God never leaves us or forgets us.

I recently saw the surgeon who carried the red purse and stopped to introduce myself, knowing she couldn't possibly remember all her patients. "Oh yes," she said, "I remember you and your husband. Your husband had such peace, even as he faced death. There was an inner strength in him as his body weakened." Her words soothed my soul and was a gentle reminder that Bill's unshakable faith became a testimony to those who knew him during those last four months of his life.

As I sit in church every Easter since Bill passed, I vividly remember that Sunday as the beginning of a life change and loss that rocked my world to the core. But I also remember that, because of our risen Savior, I will see my Bill again, face to face, in Heaven. There will be no disease, no suffering, and no pain – only the joy of being reunited.

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