

When God says 'no': What to do when it seems our prayers go unanswered

"More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of."
– Alfred Lord Tennyson

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Mt 7:7). These words keep us fingering our rosary beads, making novenas and reading from our prayer books. Yet diseases still rage. Loved ones stay away from the Church. Jobs are lost. Marriages fail. So why do we keep falling on our knees and lifting up our prayers over and over?

Perhaps it is the second part of Our Lord's beautiful promise about prayer. "Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asks for a fish? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him" (Mt 7:9-11).

So, what happens when we do not get what we wanted, or when it feels like we have been handed a stone instead of bread or a snake instead of a fish? Do we think our prayers have been wasted? Like pouting children, do we want to walk away and declare we will no longer believe in this supreme being? Or do we feel that some other good thing has been given to us? Here are seven truths to keep in mind when our prayers seem to go unanswered.



Adobe Stock

1. We are not God

We need to think of prayer as humble asking and not spoiled demanding. It is our job to serve God. It is not his job to work for us. Fortunately, we are blessed with a God who loves us and loves to give us good things. But we must remember he is still the one in charge. He is the one who knows all. He knows what is best for us, even if a situation seems painful and unreasonable to us.

The image of Jesus as our Good Shepherd is a helpful one for when we pray. We are the sheep, and sheep are rather stupid animals. They do not know what is best for them. They do not know the way to go. That is why they always need a shepherd. We must humbly admit we are the sheep, not the shepherd. Our ideas of what we need or of what we think someone else needs might be misdirected or unwise.

God is the wise Father. He knows what is best for us. Like

children, we often go to our Father with unreasonable requests. Yet, it is not God's job to spoil us. He smiles at us like a benevolent parent who listens kindly to a young child's outrageous pleas. And sometimes, out of great and everlasting love, he goes along with our simple and short-sighted ideas. But sometimes he says, "No way! That will not work." And we, foolish children that we are, do not understand why we can't have ice cream sundaes for breakfast every day. We cannot have all that we want, even though God is the most loving and generous father in all the world.

Prayer helps us to surrender to God's will. It is easier to accept his will when we know that we have humbly asked, he has lovingly listened and now the final outcome is not in our feeble hands but in his great and wise ones.

2. God may have a better plan

Sometimes, when we look back on our lives, we realize we should thank God for unanswered prayers. Maybe we now know the car, job or house for which we once prayed would not have worked out so well. But the most significant unanswered prayer was Jesus's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42).

By not honoring this anguished prayer from his own Son, God saved us all. If God did not fulfill his Son's prayer of agony, we certainly cannot expect him to answer our every prayer. But he will do good things for us. We just need to remember every prayer should include the caveat which Jesus taught us to pray: "your kingdom come, your will be done" (Mt 6:10).

God tells us through the prophet Jeremiah that his will is always good. "I know well the plans I have in mind for you ... plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope" (Jer 29:11). The Catechism of the Catholic

Church affirms this, saying: “Do not be troubled if you do not receive immediately from God what you ask him; for he desires to do something even greater for you, while you cling to him in prayer” (No. 2737).

To see the ways God answers our prayers, we must open our hearts to the unexpected reply. It could be a new turn of events. It could be a passing word that inspires us. It could be the appearance of someone who solves our problem in a way we never considered.

We should remember God’s plan is to make each of us saints. His way to do that might be different from our own plans. Mother Teresa once wrote, “For 20 years in Loretto I prayed fervently to be forgotten, nothing to the world, to be ignored and held for nothing – and this is how the Lord has answered my prayer.”

3. Suffering is necessary

We often pray to end suffering. It might be our own suffering, the suffering of a loved one or the suffering of the world. It might be the physical suffering of sickness or the mental suffering of a bad situation. These are good and honorable requests. So, when these prayers seem to go unanswered, it can cause some people to turn their backs on God.



Pope Francis prays in front of

the “Miraculous Crucifix” from the Church of St. Marcellus in Rome during a prayer service in an empty St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican March 27, 2020. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

There are no easy answers as to why we suffer. Suffering is one of the greatest challenges of our faith. Yet, if God’s own Son suffered, what makes us think we should be spared? In his book “On Hope,” Pope Francis reminds us that Jesus did not suffer so we could “go to heaven in a carriage.” Our Lord suffered to show us the way.

While we cannot expect God to take away all of our suffering, we do know he will walk with us every step of the way, just as he walked every step to Calvary. So as long as God is walking alongside us, we might as well talk to him. The extra prayers we offer in times of suffering can draw us closer to God for the rest of our lives. Pope Francis tells us, “Suffering cannot be eliminated, yet it can have meaning.” (*Lumen Fidei*, No. 56).

Our suffering can be a prayer we offer for others in greater need than us. Just as the cross of Jesus saves us, our own suffering can help another person. Even the pain of something as simple as a needle drawing blood can be offered as a prayer for someone who has a much greater burden.

Yet we would have no suffering to offer if our every prayer was answered. This life would be heaven. But it is not. This life is full of clouds. Clouds can be good. The setting or rising of the sun is always more beautiful if some clouds are on the horizon to reflect the rays of the sun. And so, it is with suffering. It reflects the glory of God.

4. There are lessons for us to learn



Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem by Rembrandt van Rijn, 1630.

God told the prophet Jeremiah, “Call to me, and I will answer you; I will tell you great things beyond the reach of your knowledge” (Jer 33:3). This is a truth about prayer for us to remember even today. God did not say he would give us what we wanted. But he did say he would answer us and give us new knowledge! So often our prayers do lead us to vital new insights.

Consider what we have learned during the COVID pandemic. Ideally, the virus would have been wiped away right after Pope Francis gave his extraordinary *urbi et orbi* blessing. But that did not happen. However, we have all learned new lessons. Maybe we are paying more attention to our neighbors or those in need. Maybe we are realizing how wasteful we once were. Maybe we are getting along better with our house mates. Maybe we are becoming more appreciative of the blessings we have. In his *urbi et orbi* homily, Pope Francis suggested God might be calling us to pay attention to problems we have ignored for

too long. He said we did not “listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick.”

We don't need a major world crisis to learn lessons from our prayers. Even little trials can open our eyes to God working in our lives. Instead of asking God to take away every pebble in our shoe we might want to occasionally ask, “Lord, what are you trying to teach me here?”

One lesson we can learn from unanswered prayers is gratitude. Joy is often richer and more deeply appreciated after some hardship. Think how much we will appreciate every Easter tradition next year after being denied them this year.

5. God will not take away our free will

Another reason God may not give us that for which we pray is a little thing called “free will.” God did not want to force us to love him. He wanted us to choose to love him. So, he gave us a free will. That free will impacts the answers to our prayers in two ways.



How we use our free will is our decision. Adobe Stock image

First of all, God does not take away the free will of one person just to answer the prayer of someone else. For example, God will not take away the free will of a boss to promote whom

he wants even if one employee prayed more for the job than the other. God does not take away the will of a person to drink too much even if it is harmful to someone else. This is the sad reason why, despite our prayers, bad things may happen to good people. God does not override our poor decisions.

The second way our free will impacts prayer is that God will never answer a prayer in such an “unbelievable” way that it absolutely forces us to believe in him. Faith means believing that which cannot be proven. If God were to use dynamic displays of power to fulfill our prayers, we would be compelled to believe in him – not because we loved and trusted him but because of his “magic.” God does not want us to come to him because of his amazing “tricks.” He wants us to come to him because of his tender and gentle mercy. He wants us to choose him as much as he has chosen us. Thus, the miracles we will see most often in our lives are little miracles. Miracles of inspiration or coincidence. The cure discovered. The rain putting out a forest fire. The helping hand from a stranger. As Albert Einstein once said, “Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous.” Instead, let us see it as God’s humble way of letting us come to him freely without being forced in anyway.

6. Our ultimate goal is heaven

When Jesus answered prayers with miracles during his life here on earth, he showed us the importance of eternal salvation over bodily cures. He said to the blind man, Bartimaeus, “your faith has saved you” (Mk 10:52). He told the cripple who was lowered through the roof, “Your sins are forgiven” (Lk 5:23).

It seemed everywhere he went Jesus was answering prayers. He was curing people. But where are all of those people now? They are not still walking this earth. Even Our Lord’s own miraculous touch did not allow them to live forever. The reality is that each of us must die. Death is our door to heaven. And heaven is where we all want to be.

Even though our prayers are often for physical healing, possessions or accomplishments, Jesus makes it clear these are not the most important things. What we need is faith and forgiveness. What we need is a clearer path to heaven, not an easier street here on earth.

Our prayers may often beg God to postpone death. To cure a disease. To keep a young driver safe. To let the storm pass us by. So, when death comes anyway, we might feel betrayed. But we hear in the Psalms what our ultimate wish should be: "One thing I ask of the LORD; this I seek: To dwell in the Lord's house all the days of my life" (Ps 27:4). God answers all other prayers only as stepping stones to answering this most vital prayer. When one of our loved ones reaches this final reward, it is natural for us to want them back. Yet, we must learn to rejoice that they have achieved the one most important thing for all of us to ask and to seek.

7. God is not bound by our timeline

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest and philosopher in the 20th century, wrote, "Above all, trust in the slow work of God." We may think He is slow to answer us, however, God's timeline is not the same as ours. For God, time is eternal. There is no today, yesterday or tomorrow.

The book of Genesis says God created the world in six days. Yet, scientists tell us the formation of our world as we know it – with plants, animals and people – took billions of years. And so, it will be with our prayers. God's time will be different than our time. God will not answer our prayers on our schedule. We must be patient with God as he is patient with us.

But here is the wonderful thing. God can answer prayers before we even pray them. Or he can reach back in time and grab an old prayer to help an immediate need. For example, a young father may seem to be miraculously saved from a terrible

accident when in fact God was answering prayers his mother had prayed over him years ago when he was just a baby. We don't give God near enough credit for the prayers he answers every minute of every day.

A faith that relies solely on all prayers being answered on our schedule is no faith at all. We cannot treat God like a magic genie in a bottle who will immediately grant our every wish. We must know him as a loving Father who will give us all we need, when we need it. Pope Francis tells us God "has the power to protect us within any time he pleases" ("On Hope").



People attend a candlelight vigil Oct. 3, 2017 in memory of the victims of a mass shooting along the Las Vegas Strip. A gunman, identified as Stephen Craig Paddock, 64, was perched in a room on the 32nd floor of a hotel and unleashed a shower of bullets on concertgoers below late Oct. 1. He killed at least 59 people and wounded more than 500, making it the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history. CNS photo/Reuters

Pray anyway

Ultimately, our prayer should be much more than just asking God for what we want. Instead, let us learn to talk to God as we talk to a friend. Ask questions. Share frustrations. Give praise and compliments. Say, “thank-you.” Express hopes and dreams. Even complain. In the book “On Hope,” Pope Francis tells us that, “to complain to the Lord is another way of praying.”

The more we get to know God through simple conversation the more we will love and trust him. Then when it seems there is nothing else we can do, our praying will be an important kind of action for us. We will find peace knowing God will gently take the problem from our hands and do the right thing, even if we do not understand it or like it.

He may not answer every prayer the way we want, but when we call upon him, he will be there. He will walk with us. He will cry with us. He will give us the strength and courage we need. He will give us the grace and peace to accept his answer.

When Pope Francis gave his extraordinary COVID-19 *urbi et orbi* blessing to all the world he assured us prayer does make a difference. He said, “We need the Lord, like ancient navigators needed the stars. Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them. ... [W]ith him on board there will be no shipwreck. Because this is God’s strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things. He brings serenity into our storms.” And this is the best answer to any prayer.

Susan M. Erschen writes from Missouri.

A prayer for when our prayers seem unanswered

Dear God, please take my hand and walk with me as I tell you
my worries and woes.

Gently show me your plan is always better than mine.
Let me understand the lessons I must learn from every
situation.

Open my heart to see that each trial is leading me always
closer to you.

Help me to accept and appreciate the great wisdom,
compassion and mercy with which you hear all my requests.
Let me understand that prayer is not about getting what I
want

but learning to accept what you want.

Remind me that you love each person more than I can love even
one person.

So, you will always treat me and my loved ones with the
greatest care.

Trusting in that, I offer all my prayers, my wants and my
hopes to you.

I know you will do what is best, even if it seems wrong to me
right now.

Thank you, for answering all my prayers just exactly how they
need to be answered.

Amen.