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When God Doesn't Answer Your Prayer

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ARE YOU LISTENING, GOD?

*If many remedies are prescribed for an illness,
you can be certain that the illness has no cure.*

A. P. Chekhov, from *The Cherry Orchard*

An epic story always covers a huge canvas. Usually referring to a large-scale novel, poem, or film, an epic tells a tale of harrowing adventures that includes a big cast of characters, unfolds over a long period of time, and often traverses a large landscape. Central to the plot of an epic is a journey, undertaken by an individual, family, or community, that involves some mission or quest. The main characters must locate a buried treasure, restore a king to his throne, solve a puzzling mystery, or make their way home after years of wandering.

However happy the ending, an epic often has a great deal of darkness in it—tragedy, suffering, betrayal, and terrible sacrifice. There are strange twists and turns that leave us breathless as we wonder whether the characters will complete their quest. If anything, struggle is necessary to the nature of the story itself. The success of the quest becomes all the more meaningful because of the disappointments the characters experience along the way. The resolution comes as a joyful relief in the face of what once appeared to be unconquerable.

Light shines all the brighter considering the darkness that threatened to prevail.

I believe that prayer is an epic story. In the end we receive answers, for Jesus himself promised it would be so. He commanded us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Would he make such a promise, only to refuse to deliver on it? But along the way there are significant setbacks. The ending is triumphant, though it might not always seem certain. The kingdom comes, God’s will is done, though not right away. God does and will answer our prayers, though it may take a while, sometimes a long while.

But the problem is, all of us pass through stretches of time—sometimes long stretches of time—when God does not seem willing or capable of answering our prayers.

Why doesn’t he answer our prayers? Not the silly and trivial prayers we sometimes say when we’re in a pinch, but the sincere prayers we say when we’re in desperate need. For me and for most people, this is no abstract question, the kind that students in a philosophy class might explore. It’s a real question, as gritty and gutsy as the painful experiences that force us to ask it. My guess is that you’re reading this book because unanswered prayer isn’t an abstract question to you either. Perhaps you have been rocked by the disappointment of unanswered prayer yourself, or you know someone who has. Struggle and suffering are bad enough in themselves, as we all know. They are worse when we cry out to God for help, believing with every bit of faith we can muster that God will hear our prayers—yet still feel unheard. Such experiences can test our faith to the breaking point.

It wouldn't be such a serious question if we didn't take prayer so seriously. That we pray almost goes without saying, no matter what the circumstances. A grandparent says a prayer of thanksgiving at a holiday celebration. A military chaplain prays for the safety of a special military unit before it launches a secret mission. A parent cries out to God in anguish at the bedside of a sick child.

Prayer is partly a habit. As a habit, prayer is something we learn to do and have to work at, especially when we don't feel like it. Some of us succeed, becoming proficient and consistent, which are the fruits of effort and discipline; others of us fail, lacking the motivation to pray day in and day out. But prayer is also a reflex, like the jerk of a leg when the doctor's mallet strikes it or the blink of the eyes when a loud noise goes off. As a reflex, prayer seems to run deep in human nature, as if we have no choice in the matter. Facing danger or difficulty, opportunity or challenge, we feel compelled to pray, even if we're not sure there is a God out there to whom we are praying.

Prayer seems to work, too, which only makes the problem of unanswered prayer more bewildering. At least *some* of our prayers are clearly answered, often in astonishing ways. I have witnessed many answers to prayer over the course of the last twenty-five years. I have seen a young man healed of cancer (though his prognosis was like a death sentence hanging over his head); I have watched churches come alive, marriages restored, and mental health problems overcome. We may pray out of habit or as a reflex; but we also

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