

Main Point: God's sovereignty determines the outcome of our prayers, not our pleas or fervency. It is we who are to subject ourselves to God's will, and not the other way around.

On Sunday we were confronted with two situations as a church which require prayer and perseverance. One involves Lukah, an 11 month old member of a family in our congregation, who fights for her life in the hospital. The other involves a missionary couple, about to be deported from their country overseas, currently allowed to go "free" while their passports have been held back by the government. They currently wait with their emergency suitcases packed by the front door. This week's study will dive into God's peculiar (from our perspective) timing when it comes to answering urgent prayer, and why we don't always get what we want, even when we ask.

Thinking Things Through

1. Have you ever had a prayer answered? What was it?
2. It is important to remember that God always answers prayer one of three ways. Yes, No, or Later. Does this line up with your life's experience and can you share a story or two about how hearing "no" or "later" from God has shaped your life story and faith?

Digging Deeper

Read 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

3. Paul petitioned God repeatedly and received an answer that did not align itself with Paul's own desires. Having gone through the entire experience, what lessons did Paul learn? How did the lack of an answer to prayer assist him in growing?
4. Why did God give Paul a "no" answer to his prayer? Can you think of a time when you heard a "no" from God yet it turned out to be the best answer?

Leader: answer is in v.7 - to keep him from being proud or arrogant about his visions. That ought to make us think about our gifts and how God abhors pride in us for anything. It was a gift from God to Paul as are our talents and gifts as his servants.

5. Sometimes we hear “no” from God and no matter how hard we try, it doesn’t seem fair, or even right. What does Paul’s life lesson, demonstrated in vs. 9-10, tell us about how to embrace a “no” from God in a positive way, even when it doesn’t make sense?

6. Why, for a Christian, is weakness a source of strength (vs. 10) and how did Jesus demonstrate this?

Leader: See Hebrews 5:7-10. Jesus’ entire life was about demonstrating servanthood, obedience and suffering. In fact, it was entirely counter-cultural to his day. People did everything they could to separate themselves from humble positions. It was a form of shame to kneel down to someone else. Weakness was shunned. But Jesus not only demonstrated humility, he opted for a life of it. The result of his example, was that it fueled his obedience and helped shape him into the perfect high priest. Additionally he became one who could identify with our struggles and temptations in every way.

7. Sometimes when we pray the answer is “not yet”. Share a time when there was a long period of waiting between the start of that season of prayer and the answers to your requests. How were you different as a result of it?

Read Hebrews 12:4-11

8. In Heb. 12:5 we are reminded that suffering and hardship is a form of encouragement. How does he make the case that tough times and tough experiences ought to encourage us?

Leader: The writer compares the discipline of God’s children to the intent and loving correction a parent uses in raising their child.

9. How have you learned to see delayed prayer requests as encouraging?

Leader: Looking back on your own life, are there examples you can think of that make it evident that not all that is prayed for is good for us? What if you had married that high school sweetheart and not the person you did? What if you didn't get that job you fasted and begged God for, then six months after they selected a "more qualified applicant" they went out of business. Just because we see things as being good in our life does not mean they all are.

10. The term "chasten" in vs. 6 (NIV, KJV) is one our culture has lost the meaning of. It means to inflict suffering upon someone for purposes of moral improvement or to teach restraint. How does this apply to long seasons of suffering and seemingly unanswered prayer in your life?

Leader: We don't discipline other people's children (although, I'm sure we have all been tempted to) but we discipline our own children for the following reasons:

- We love them and want what is best for them.
- We discipline to correct their behavior.
- Responsible parents see disciplining their children as their responsibility.
- We legitimize our parental status by taking responsibility for the raising of our offspring. If that's why we do it, then this verse emphasizes that that is how God sees us and why he disciplines us as well.

11. What impact does the idea of parental discipline (growth) in Heb. 12:7- 8 have on our prayers and how God answers? How does this help you understand better the nature of prayer?

Leader: It is an honor to be considered a child of God, yet as children we have to submit to the sovereignty and overall wisdom of our parents (in this case the parental figure of God). Sometimes parents discipline their children for "bad" behavior. But sometimes parents discipline their children to simply make them better. (for example, a parent who insists their child practices guitar instead of playing video games is holding them to a larger view of their life than just the here and now, not necessarily punishing them for wrong behavior).

12. Review Hebrews 12:9 -10 how does God's discipline lead us to a deeper respect for Him? What would happen to our respect for God if we had every prayer answered immediately?

Leader: We would tend to hold God in contempt. We would behave as if he was the one who existed to do our bidding, and the role of worship would be minimized and replaced by relationship defined by immediate gratification. All of the character qualities inherent in the Christian faith would be diminished.

Doing Life Together

13. If God disciplines us to help us share in His holiness (Heb. 12:10) and to produce a harvest of righteousness and peace in our lives, (Heb. 12:11) how are we to handle it when his permanent answer is "no" and we are left with the consequences of the discipline (ie. sickness, divorce, a failed business, etc) and there isn't any relief (Lazarus doesn't come back from the dead)?

14. How do other people, like the ones in this group, assist you in this process?

Leader: Sometimes there aren't concrete answers for life's big questions. We can't always understand why God has things happen the way that they do. It often feels like we are being disciplined for no reason with no end in sight... at least that's how people going through trials feel. In helping people through those situations it's best to just listen. Be careful to avoid pat answers and cliché sayings. Silence is sometimes the best gift we can offer. It's more about how we care in the midst of someone's confusion, and not about confusing an already confusing situation by ill timed advice. People in suffering often aren't looking for your opinion on why they are going through it, as much as they are looking for comfort and a listening ear.