

Prayer without answers

The main purpose of prayer is to enjoy God.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [April 12, 2017](#) issue



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Does prayer work? That's the question many people ask when they perceive that God is not answering their prayers. Other questions surface too. Is prayer worthwhile? Does it change anything? Am I talking to myself? Does God care about my prayers?

I propose that we radically alter the way we talk about prayer by eliminating the use of the word *answer* from our references to prayer outcomes. The word doesn't fit well conceptually, and it encourages an interpretation of prayer that leans heavily

toward self-interest. Prayer is not mostly about us.

At its most fundamental level, prayer is conversation with God, and conversations aren't about answers. They engage a relationship. They involve give-and-take and the sharing of company. Deep conversations inspire curiosity and promote discovery. They foster honesty.

Some people suggest that the first purpose of prayer is to know God. I rather think it is to enjoy God. Prayer is really no more complicated than picking up on a relationship already in progress. Robert Farrar Capon put it memorably: "Prayer is just talking to someone who is already talking to you. [It's] listening to someone who is already listening to you."

In this issue, [Jeffrey Weiss](#) and [Jason Micheli](#) raise penetrating questions as they evaluate the role of prayer. Since both of them live with serious cancer, there is a gravity and immediacy to their writing. Neither one appears to obsess over his compromised health, which is a refreshing sign of broad perspective. I often think God's primary role must be larger than just managing our health. That's why personal and communal prayers that implicitly treat illness as an injustice of God or consider robust health as a right are misguided. Mortality is not an offense. It's actually part of the deal that comes with being human.

Once we discover that the greatest benefit of prayer is intimacy with God, the fostered relationship becomes deeper than one that's organized around having our desires met. The more persistently we hang in there with prayer, the more we encounter a God who does not provide an answer to our every want, but who offers strength for our every need. Requests certainly have their place in honest prayer.

"Let your requests be made known to God," writes the apostle Paul. But we shouldn't confuse the value of supplicating prayer with a recitation of personal wants.

In the end prayer is about putting away our quest for answers long enough to enjoy the Lord in an unencumbered way. Here is where Anna comes to mind. She was a parishioner of mine in Kansas City who was terminally ill. Sometimes when I visited her in the hospital, she prayed; at other times I took the lead. Even though Anna's voice and body weakened as the weeks passed, her eyes retained their glow and her mind its spark. "Pastor," she said to me one day, "I don't see myself getting better. How about we skip the prayer for healing today? I just want you to pray for the Lord

not to leave me. That's all I need now—the close company of God.”

Anna Johnson died 25 years ago. Her rich prayer instincts continue to school my love for God.

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