

February 4, Epiphany 5B (Mark 1:29-39)

Debbie's prayers have not been answered.

by [Thomas Jay Oord](#) in the [January 17, 2018](#) issue

Picture a woman named Debbie, who has been praying. She's been praying for health and healing, for other people and for herself. She knows other Christians who testify to God's healing in their own lives. And the Bible describes Jesus as an amazing miracle worker. "They brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons," says Mark's Gospel, "and he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons."

Debbie's prayers have not been answered.

As a child, she prayed with childlike faith. She believed that God could do anything. Her church said so, and the Bible seemed to as well. It only made sense; this was God, after all.

Debbie prayed for her grandparents and prayed against all that ailed them. She asked God to put back together the divorced parents of her friends. She prayed for hungry and hurting children around the world. She prayed for her country.

As a teenager, Debbie started documenting her success rate. She kept a ledger of her prayers and noted whether the people for whom she prayed improved. She found that her praying-for-miracles success rate was in the single digits.

Debbie married Dana, and she continued praying. But she prays less now than as a child, at least when it comes to prayers of petition. She still believes in God and goes to church, and she incorporates many Christian practices. She tries to live a life of love.

In six years, Debbie has suffered four miscarriages. After the first, she diligently consulted doctors, ate the right food, and discarded anything in her home that might undermine future pregnancies. But her fastidiousness has gone unrewarded. Each miscarriage brings intense emotional and spiritual pain. Debbie prayed nightly

during her last two pregnancies. “God, keep my baby and me safe,” she pled. “Please give us a healthy child.”

Friends at church have tried to explain the miscarriages. “This is part of God’s plan,” some say. “It will make you appreciate your children even more once you have them,” say others. Or, “God is building your character by allowing this.” Some even blamed demons.

But the explanation that angered Debbie and Dana most was this: “You just don’t have enough faith!” People pointed to biblical statements about the faith of those Jesus heals. The implication: those not healed did not believe. Weak faith gets weak results. But Debbie and Dana do believe! At least they try. And they can’t imagine that a loving God would keep a faith-o-meter and offer healing only when the levels are high enough.

Recently Debbie’s way of seeing God has started to change. She and Dana began therapy together to work through their emotions. They also wanted to work through their view of God, so they sought a counselor who is a theologian as well.

Debbie came with a list of questions. Does God exist? Does God heal? If so, why doesn’t it happen more often? Is God fickle, preferential, or just mad at some people? And if God doesn’t heal, why would so many people claim to have been healed?

Then their therapist asked a question that startled Debbie. “What if God wants to heal everyone but can’t do it singlehandedly?”

God can’t? The possibility had never occurred to Debbie. It’s not that she thought God was controlling in the sense of completely determining everything that happens in life. But she did see God as a micromanager, acting alongside our free will, the laws of nature, and other factors.

“What if in addition to free will,” said the therapist, “various factors in our lives—whether biological, environmental, social, or even at the quantum level—are sometimes conducive to healing but sometimes not?”

“But wouldn’t a loving God override or control those things?” asked Debbie. “If God really is loving, why wouldn’t God intervene occasionally? I guess I want to believe that God can heal singlehandedly whenever God wants to.”

“How’s that belief working for you?” the therapist replied.

“Not very well,” Debbie admitted.

“If you think a loving God wouldn’t control our freedom, it’s not so big a step to say God can’t control free creatures. It’s only another step to believe there are other factors in life that God can’t control, either.”

“So God isn’t doing anything?” asked Dana. “Is God just watching from a distance?”

“Well, that’s one possibility,” the therapist admitted. “But that wouldn’t account for the healing that does happen—or for the sense we have of God’s presence in our lives, our sense of right and wrong, beauty, truth, and so on. Perhaps we should think about it like this instead: God is involved all the time, everywhere, and to the utmost, but this involvement is expressed as influential but uncontrolling love.”

Debbie has been thinking about this idea ever since. It makes a lot of sense. If God can’t control all the factors necessary for healing, God’s not to blame for failing to heal. But her prayers may make a difference anyway, because God may use them when acting for the utmost possible good in every situation.

Mark’s Gospel says that Jesus “cured many who were sick with various diseases” and “cast out many demons.” Reading a passage like this, Debbie used to assume that “many” means “all.” Now she wonders if it means “some but not all.” After all, later Jesus goes to Nazareth and is able to perform some miracles but not others (Mark 6:1–6). Debbie is realizing that she would rather believe that God is lovingly doing all that’s possible to heal than that God could be doing more and chooses not to.