

# **“Does God Hear African Prayers?”**

I live in Nairobi, Kenya, and I have several questions about prayer. 1) Why does it takes such a long time to answer our prayers? I have been asking God to give me sponsors to go to Bible College and I have been fasting all the time. 2) Why do many, many people in Africa suffer so much more than white people? Does God hear African prayers?

You ask some very important (and very profound) questions. As I think about your questions, they seem to fall into two categories: 1. Questions concerning petitionary prayer (i.e. making requests of God, or asking Him for something) and 2. Questions concerning the problem of evil and suffering.

Concerning prayer, I can safely begin by saying, Yes, God does hear the prayers of Africans. But if this is true, you want to know why it takes God so long to answer your requests. Now as I'm sure you already realize, I really cannot answer this question—for God has not told me why He is waiting to answer your request. However, there are a number of things that can be said about why (in general) God may take a long time to answer a person's request. First, of course, the answer may simply be “No.” Just as we wouldn't give our children everything they asked for, so also God doesn't give His children everything they ask for. Of course, if His answer to a particular request is “No,” then we can (and must) trust that He has very good, loving, and wise reasons for answering in this way.

Second, God's answer might be “Yes; but you need to wait.” This can be hard to hear, of course. But again, my children sometimes ask me for something (like a snack) to which my answer is, “Yes; you can have a snack. But not right now. You need to wait until after dinner.” In the same way, God

sometimes has us wait a while before giving us what we have asked for. In my own case, I prayed that God would provide a particular kind of woman to be my wife. I prayed nearly every day for ten years before He finally granted my request. So sometimes, God does intend to grant our request, but he first requires that we wait a while. We can learn a lot of important spiritual lessons about trusting God, being patient, persevering in prayer, and so forth, as we wait upon the Lord. I'm not saying this is easy. But God wants to develop us into certain sorts of people. And one of the ways He does this is by having us wait a while before He grants our request. After all, for many of us, if God granted our requests immediately, we wouldn't appreciate what He has given us nearly so much. By having us patiently and prayerfully wait upon Him for a time, before granting our requests, we often come to appreciate much more the blessings God has given us.

Third, God might be willing to grant a particular request immediately, but does not do so because we are harboring unconfessed sin in our hearts. We all struggle with sin in many ways. If we don't confess our sins, but continue to pursue that which the Lord hates, He may think it better not to grant us our request.

There are other reasons why God might not immediately grant a request as well. Some of these you can find in my article ["Problems and Promises of Petitionary Prayer."](#) I think you would find this article helpful, especially the last two sections on "Qualifying Christ's Promises."

Having said all of this, however, I want to reiterate that I do NOT personally know why God has not yet granted your request. Whatever the reason, we all need to learn to trust in the wisdom, love, and goodness of God toward us in Christ, whether He grants our requests quickly, slowly, or not at all. He has very good reasons for doing things as He does and we need to learn to trust Him.

Now concerning your second question, why so many people in Africa suffer so much more than white people, I must (once again) honestly confess that I do not know. This would be yet another instance of the problem of evil and suffering in the world. How can we reconcile the existence of an all-good, all-loving, all-powerful God (like Christians believe in) with all the evil and suffering in the world?

Now I want to be clear, Christian philosophers and theologians have proposed very good answers to questions such as these. But these answers essentially aim to show that God can have very good, morally sufficient reasons, for allowing the evil and suffering that He does—even if we have no idea what those reasons are. As you can see, therefore, these answers (even if they're successful) will not be able to explicitly tell you why so many people in Africa suffer so much. Unless God tells us the answer to such a question, we simply do not know. And it would be dishonest for me to tell you otherwise.

Having said this, however, I do like what the Christian philosopher William Lane Craig has to say about such matters. He, along with many others, points out that there is a very strong statistical correlation between the amount of suffering in a particular area of the world and the number of people coming to Christ for salvation. That is, he observes that in those places where there is a lot of suffering, there are often a lot of people coming to Christ for salvation. But in that case, one of the very good reasons that God might have for allowing suffering and evil, is that it ends up being a very effective means of moving men and women to give their lives to Christ that they might be saved. And this, it is crucially important to note, ends up insuring THEIR ETERNAL WELL-BEING.

In this respect, it's important to bear in mind that this life is not all there is. People will continue to exist after they die physically either in fellowship and communion with God in heaven, or eternally deprived of such fellowship and communion

in hell. If God knows that more people will freely repent of their sins and turn to Christ for salvation if He allows suffering to enter their lives, then (somewhat ironically) the most loving thing He can do is allow suffering to enter these peoples lives. For by doing so, God knows they will repent, trust in Christ for salvation, and be saved. And this means they will have all eternity to enjoy God, without any pain or suffering. If you would like to read more on the problem of evil, here are some links to articles you might find helpful: 1. [The Problem of Evil](#), 2. [Christ and the Human Condition](#), and 3. [The Value of Suffering](#). My colleague Sue Bohlin has also provided her speaking notes for a message [When God Says No: Reasons For Unanswered Prayer](#) at Bible.org.

At any rate, a great deal more could be said about the questions you have raised, \_\_\_\_\_. For the questions you have raised are very profound questions. But hopefully, this brief answer will give you some help and comfort as you continue to wrestle with these issues. As I have said, I really cannot specifically answer your questions. These are questions which no one knows the answer to but God—and it's very important to honestly say so. However, the Christian tradition does offer genuine wisdom in thinking through questions of this sort. And I've tried to share a bit of that with you in this letter.

Michael Gleghorn

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# The Power of a Mother's

# Prayers

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Jesus' most famous parable in Luke 15 tells the story of a rebellious young man usually dubbed "the Prodigal Son" who demanded his share of his father's inheritance while his dad was still alive, shameful enough, but then went off into "the far country" to squander it on riotous living. A modern-day prodigal and his mother have written their story, telling parallel stories from each one's perspective. The son's "far country" included drug dealing, living it up as a party animal, and gay promiscuity leading to a diagnosis of AIDS. But God brought both mother and son out of the far country to Himself.



Because I am privileged to walk with a number of people out of their own personal "far countries" of homosexuality, *Out of a Far Country* was a compelling read for me. But because I am also a mother, Angela Yuan's testimony of trusting Christ and then entrusting her beloved son into His hands again and again as a faithful prayer warrior, was deeply encouraging as well.

I was reminded of several lessons on prayer through this book.

First, *it's better to pray big than to try to micro-manage the outcome*. Angela continued to relinquish her own desires for her son to the Lord's better plan, which was for Christopher to walk in his true identity as a beloved child of a loving heavenly Father. When her son was angry and rebellious, she kept her eyes focused on the Lord instead of Christopher. She writes, "I started fasting and praying, asking God for wisdom and discernment. I had no idea what it would look like, but I had a clear sense that Leon and I needed to step aside and get

out of the way so that God could work in Christopher's life."

When Christopher was three months away from graduating from dental school, he learned he was expelled because of his foolish, illegal and sinful choices. His parents went to meet with the dean. Both the dean and the son expected the senior Yuans to put pressure on the school, but instead, Angela said, "Actually, it's not important that Christopher becomes a dentist. What's important is that Christopher becomes a Christ follower. Leon and I have flown down to Louisville to tell you"—I looked over at Leon—"that we will support whatever decision you make. I only pray that my son will turn to God."

And he did. It didn't happen until he was incarcerated for his drug dealing, but God answered the far more important prayer.

Second, *let go of your time line*. We are such impatient people! We start praying and we want God to answer in the next day. Or week. Or month. But while He is at work behind the scenes, unscrambling the mess we tend to make of our lives, we don't think He is listening or answering. Angela prayed for years for God to bring Christopher out of the far country, and when He did, it was glorious. Christopher went from prison, where he met the Lord Jesus, to Moody Bible Institute, and then graduate school at Wheaton College, and now has a worldwide ministry telling his/their story and bringing great glory to God in the process.



Third, *prayer is essential for the spiritual battles against the forces of darkness*. Christopher's choices to engage in ongoing sexual sin, drug use and wild living went hand-in-hand with a spirit of rebellion and a strong delusion. Both of these involve demons, because his sinful choices opened up

doorways to demonic influence. The Yuans' book provides plenty of examples of the spiritual blindness that resulted. But Angela's faithful time in the Word of God and intercessory prayer tore down the strongholds that held her son captive to his fleshly desires and his spiritual bondage. She turned a shower stall into her prayer closet, where she spent literally hours every day immersing herself in the Bible and prayer.



Fourth, *remain thankful*. When Christopher called his parents to tell them that he had been arrested and was in jail, Angela recognized this as the answer to her frequent prayer: *Lord, do whatever it takes to bring this prodigal son out of that far country to you*. For the first time in years, she knew that where her son was, and that he was safe. She grabbed a length of adding machine tape and wrote down that blessing. And then, as God unfolded His glorious plan for drawing Christopher to Himself and then redeeming the pain of his rebellion, she kept adding to the blessing list over the years. When I heard her tell her story at an [Exodus International](#) conference several years ago, she held up her rolled-up blessings list and let it drop: it's about six feet long! Christopher tells me it's almost full on the second side as well. Choosing to focus on the ways in which God continues to bless us in the midst of suffering, developing an attitude of gratitude, keeps us from losing heart in a hard situation.

Fifth, *persistent prayer changes the one praying*. Desperation for her son drove Angela Yuan to an incredible intimacy with her Savior. Her daily time in His word and her gift of intercessory prayer drew her heart ever closer to Him. *Out of the Far Country* isn't just a story of a mother's and son's spiritual journey, it is an inspiration to "always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1).





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## Just Say the Magic Words

*June 11, 2012*

One of my friends is doing the hard work of facing the devastating effects of childhood abuse and various unspeakable horrors. She knows that she needs to accept the full impact what happened to her in order to grieve it and forgive the people who wounded her so she can walk in freedom. But one of her friends recently gave her some disheartening counsel: “Oh, there’s a spirit of grief harassing you. You don’t need to go around digging up the past like you’re doing. Just speak your inner healing into existence! Declare that you are healed and whole in Jesus’ name!”

This lady has bought into the dangerous (and unbiblical) “word of faith” theology (WOF) that puts faith in one’s words instead of in God Himself. It’s a religious version of “wishing will make it so,” having morphed into “speaking will make it so.” This wrong thinking can range from an unfortunate



misunderstanding of the Scriptures to a blasphemous presumption that creatures can create reality by the power of their words—just like God did when He spoke creation into existence by the power of His word.

It's certainly an appealing idea, bypassing the hard soul work of [grieving and forgiving](#) to get to the prize of a healed heart at peace. Just say the magic words, like waving a magic wand, and POOF! you're healed! Who wouldn't want to go that far, far easier route?

Shortcuts don't work. They do, however, result in major disappointment when people are taught [unrealistic expectations](#) of God about promises He never made. One of the most basic principles of Bible reading and study is that "context is king." We must never wrench verses out of their surrounding paragraphs, chapters, and books. And if we come up with an understanding or application of a verse that is contradicted by other passages in scripture, we need to jettison our wrong thinking.

So, for example, if someone points out Isaiah 53:5 to my friend, which says "by His stripes we are healed," and promises she can claim healing of any and every pain or ailment, what happens when nothing happens? This wrong-headed promise tempts people to conclude that God is not good, and He is not faithful, because He didn't keep His word. But that cannot be the meaning of Isaiah 53:5 since the supposed promise of immediate healing is contradicted in other scriptures such as 2 Cor. 12:7-9, where Paul tells us that God said no to his pleas for healing from his thorn in the flesh, promising instead that His grace was enough. Claiming inner healing without submitting to the process of facing the full impact of what happened to her so that she can release it to the Lord not only isn't truthful, it doesn't work like that.

WOF taps into legitimate longings for a life free from want, from sickness and death, from pain, which are promised to

believers in Christ in the new heavens and new earth. But it illegitimately promises that life NOW. It's simply a matter of praying in faith, believing *not* in God's goodness, but the power of one's own prayers. Our own words. That's a form of idolatry.

But this theology is not consistent with reality, which means it cannot be of God. One night I was at an event where there would be a drawing for some jewelry. I watched several people lay hands on the blingy stuff and say, "I claim this in Jesus' name." Guess what—none of them won the drawing. What happened? It's the same dynamic as when believers on both sides of a football game claim victory for their team in Jesus' name. God cannot grant two opposite requests—or, in this case, demands. (He's not much into demands of any kind, actually.)

God deals with truth, not fantasy and illusion. WOF violates the scriptural principle of embracing truth, such as the psalmist's powerful statement in Ps. 51:6, "You desire truth in the innermost being." Another friend, Cathy, was dying of cancer, but she refused to believe what the doctors said. She insisted right up to her last breath that she was believing health for herself, and would not talk to anyone about funeral arrangements or even what to do with her house and her possessions because that would be faithless. But she wasn't putting her faith in God, who was actually calling her home, but in her wishful prayers.

Beware of spiritual shortcuts, especially those that are created by your own words. If there were such a thing, don't you think Jesus would have bypassed the Cross?

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# It's Not Rubbing the Genie's Magic Lamp

*Oct. 25, 2011*

Recently I heard a young man share his story of battling his unwanted same-sex attractions. Though Ben's dad loved him very much, he felt like he was everyone else's dad and *then* his dad. He also didn't connect with the masculine that his dad represented. He ended up with longings for deep connection with males. What helped him turn the corner was when he found people with whom he could be completely honest about his shameful desires and feelings, who also helped him develop his relationship with God.

He shared that he slowly realized his heart was looking for three things in other men. First, he longed for someone who was unquestionably a "Capital M-A-N" who made that intangible connection with him that his father didn't make, leaving him with a father-shaped hole in his soul. And he realized that he was also looking for a rescuer, to pull him out of his own wretchedness. And finally, he wanted to be comforted by someone, he said, "who's there when I come back down, when I'm lost, when I'm troubled; I would fantasize about a guy who could just say the right things, do the right things, and comfort me any time I needed it."

Optimally, he told us, it would really great if he could find someone who would be all three of those things at one time, wrapped up in one person. That would be the "Mr. Right" he longed to find and be loved by.

The major "lightbulb moment" of his journey came when he realized that what he longed for was a Father, a Savior, and a

Comforter. . . and that perfectly describes who God is—three in one, Father, Son and Spirit. And because he had trusted in Christ at an early age, that very God was already indwelling him! He realized that the triune God was everything his heart was longing for but he had been too blind to see. God, in giving Himself to His beloved son, was ready to meet Ben's heart's needs and longings, but would not force Himself on him. When Ben opened his heart to receive the Fathering, the Saving, and the Comforting of the God who loved him, everything shifted inside.

God connected some dots for *me* when hours later, our pastor observed that Psalm 37:4 is one of the first Bible verses that people memorize. . . and one of the most misunderstood.

*Delight yourself in the LORD, and He will give you the desires of your heart.*

Sounds like a magic formula, right? Delight yourself in the Lord, and you get what you want? Just a religious-sounding way of rubbing the genie's magic lamp to get your wishes granted? But that's not what it means.

When we delight ourselves in the Lord, He gives us Himself, and *He* is what our hearts desire. Uncover all the surface, temporary things we think we want, and underneath are the true desires of our heart: to be loved, to be known, to be valued, to be safe, to *matter*.

And as Ben showed us, to be fathered, to be rescued, to be comforted.

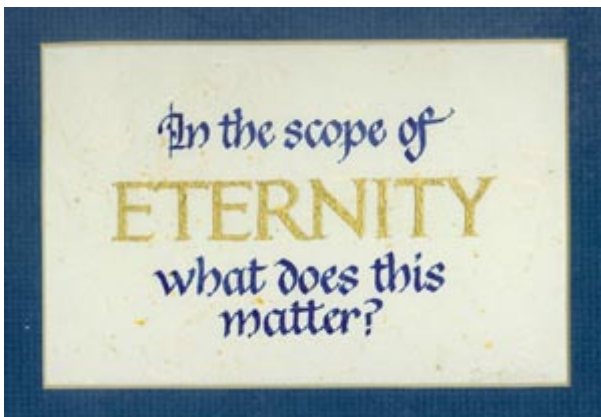
Yes, we want all those things—and our marvelous God delights to give them to us as He gives us Himself.

He is so good!

This blog post originally appeared at  
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## In the Scope of Eternity. . .

There's a piece of my calligraphy in our bathroom, where it's been for many years in a place where my sons would see it (over the commode!), of one of life's most important questions: "In the scope of eternity, what does this matter?"



This simple question can create a lens or filter through which we can assign value and importance to our experiences. It helps us know if something is worth getting upset about or not. If it's not going to matter two weeks from now, much less in eternity, *let it go*. Many of our stressors would be less stressful if we would just put them in perspective.

Both of my sons were athletes when they were growing up. They had a full supply of testosterone and were quite competitive. When you play sports, there are going to be wins and losses; when you're a boy or a young man, you can think those wins and losses are a lot more important than they actually are. But when filtered through the question, "In the scope of eternity, what does this matter," you can see both wins and losses as valuable for teaching and revealing character. (I put another calligraphy plaque in the bathroom as well: "Win without

boasting, lose without excuses.”)

I find myself invoking this question when trying to encourage people caught in the throes of temptation. One of my friends is in the excruciating process of withdrawing from an addictive and sinful relationship. I ask her, “One hundred years from today, where will you be? When you are facing Jesus, what do you want to be glad you did now, and what do you want to avoid regretting? Think back on this difficult time from the position of one hundred years from today, when you are in eternity.”

One of my dear ones has been doing hard work in counseling for over a year. When the challenge of facing one’s internal pain is filtered through this question about eternity, it is encouraging to realize that cooperating with the Holy Spirit to uncover and relinquish his unhealed and broken parts is changing him forever, making him more fit for future Kingdom responsibilities and glory. The answer to the question, “In the scope of eternity, what does this matter,” is “The hard work and pain will be totally worth it.”

It’s helpful to ask myself this question when I’m experiencing nighttime sleeplessness, or physical pain, or financial stress. And it’s also helpful to ask myself this question when I’m concerned about my loved ones; when the answer is, “In the scope of eternity, this is REALLY important,” it motivates me to pray. Hard. And long.

What are you wrestling with? In the scope of eternity, what does it matter, really? Does this question help?

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on Aug. 30, 2011

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# Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life. Like It or Not.

Recently I have been engaging in an email conversation with a lady who is deeply burdened by the sinful choices and ungodly thinking of a young man dear to her. As we have talked about what she can do, our conversation turned to prayer. Yesterday she asked, "How does intercessory prayer make/change/mediate the young man's own will? How does the person we pray for 'get the message'? How can we pray for God's will to be done when it is against the will of the person we're praying for? How does our prayer help the person to *want* God's will for themselves? How does my intercessory prayer help the person I'm praying for yield their own will and turn it over to God's will?"

I answered, "You're asking about the mechanics of how something spiritual works, and I don't know that the Word gives us that kind of information. But think about how *you* have changed *your* thinking about anything. How did you go from being dead in your trespasses and sins, to being alive in Christ? How did you go from caring more about yourself than anyone else (because sinful humanity is inherently selfish) to having a desire to pray selflessly for others?"

"I would suggest that God gave you enlightenment, showing you more and more truth, at the same time drawing you into His own heart. You started gravitating toward what was true, and Jesus said, 'I am the truth.'

"At the same time, God never violated your will, allowing you to freely choose to turn to Him in faith and in choices that matured you. How those work together, I don't think anyone understands."



Ah. Mystery. We keep running into it, don't we? And that makes sense, since God is so other, so immense, so brilliant—do we really expect that we would be able to figure out how the spiritual realm works, much less figuring out God Himself? But with our modernist, Western, scientific mindset, we are set up to disdain mystery (and all things supernatural). The progression of scientific knowledge and understanding has stripped the apparently mystical and miraculous from things like how babies are conceived and how illness spreads. Our culture's misplaced confidence in science to solve all problems extends to mystery; we tend to think, "Oh, we just haven't figured it out yet. . .but we will."

We want to know *how things work*, and there's nothing wrong with that. I think that wrestling with that question is one way we can love God with our minds (Matt. 22:37). But there are also going to be times to choose to be content with mystery, and let it serve its role of pointing us to the One who delights to weave mystery into life like a divine tapestry.

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on Aug. 2, 2011.

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## Praying for Japan

I don't know about you, but the continuing news stream (March 15, 2011) of devastation in Japan just breaks my heart. The compassion of even the most tender-hearted person in the world, I believe, is just a drop in the bucket compared to the infinitely huge compassion of our God. He weeps over the death

and destruction unleashed by the effects of sin in a fallen world. I cannot imagine the sound or the size of the tears of God.

But I think Jesus invites us to take His yoke upon us (Matthew 11:29) and co-labor with Him in intercessory prayer. How can we pray for such an unspeakable tragedy?

I think we can pray on a scale big and small. “Oh God, help Japan and the Japanese people” seems like such a pitifully inadequate prayer—and in our own puny human strength, it is. But the Word tells us that “the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). We can trust the Holy Spirit to translate our inadequate, too-small prayers into the language of God. We can rely on Him to be faithful to His promise.

But then, we can also pray with the newspaper (or website) in hand, guided to pray for specific people highlighted in the news. I keep thinking about the man rescued on the rooftop of his house two days after the tsunami and almost ten miles out to sea. I think about how Jesus was with him on his roof as the house floated away from land, and when his wife slipped into the water. I pray for him, that he would be granted grace to sense Jesus’ presence and comfort, and turn to Him in faith.



I pray for the people named in the *Dallas Morning News*

stories, that they would not rest with the fact that their lives were spared, until they come to Jesus in faith. I pray for the spiritual cataracts that would keep them blind to His reality to fall from their eyes so they can see the truth: God loves them personally and passionately, and saved them from death for a reason.

I pray for the people not named, but mentioned: those searching for bodies. The survivors of lost loved ones. The officials responsible for cremating an unrealistic number of bodies. Those trying to restore water and electricity. The workers in the nuclear power plants who knowingly expose themselves to the risk of deadly levels of radiation. Those securing and those passing out food. Those plagued by nightmares that don't go away, and those who will help the traumatized process their terror. All of them need God's help and grace. Their ancestors will not help them. False gods will not help them. Only the true God is there for them.

And so I pray for the Christ-followers and the churches in Japan, few though they be, to shine in this time of breathtaking need, to be "Jesus with skin on" in this crisis.

Lord, have mercy. Lord, show up in Japan in a way never before seen.

And Lord, what would You have ME do?

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# Prayer Notch-Bumpers

This weekend my understanding of the power of prayer was bumped up a notch.

I was at a retreat that was being bathed in prayer; 50 young people, all battling unwanted same-sex attractions, gathered to find fellowship with each other and pursue greater intimacy with Jesus. The fact that they were there at all is an evidence of the power of God and the fact that He answers the prayers of their loved ones. The fact that so many of them are experienced some degree of change in the way they think and act, with a resulting change in the intensity of their feelings, is also evidence of the power of God. Nothing builds my faith like seeing His love and grace and power released into the lives of precious people like these dear friends of mine.

But the “notch-bumper” came in the form of two incidents.

Several of the board members of this ministry, of which I am one, came to teach seminars. After we finished, I visited with two of them, both pastors. We were talking about how spiritual warfare rages in the weeks before, during and after our retreats. One pastor said, “I confessed to the Lord the other day, ‘I know You say to pray without ceasing, but I just don’t.’ He said, ‘If I let you see for just one second the battle that rages around you, you would never stop.’” Whoa. It was a good reminder to not remain content with simply looking at the physical, material world as if that were all that exists. There are angels and demons at work and at war all around us—all the time!

That night, while we were all singing worship songs, a young lady asked to speak to me outside in private. She asked permission to leave the building because she needed to be alone with God. I had a sense there might be something else

going on even if I didn't know what it was, but the Lord didn't give me a "red light" in my spirit about letting her go. So we agreed that she would be back by 9:00.

By 9:10, she still hadn't returned. I started praying that the Holy Spirit would draw her back to the rest of us. I envisioned a rope tied around her heart, and in my spirit I kept pulling on the rope. A few minutes later she walked in the door with a funny look on her face. I walked over and gave her a long, warm hug, whispering, "I'm so glad you came back."

The next day a group of us were talking with her about her time alone with God. Apparently, she was unhappy with Him and was arguing with Him about something. I told her about my prayer and my pulling on the rope, and her eyes grew big. "That was *you??*" she asked. "I didn't want to go back, I had no intention of going back, but all of a sudden I found myself on my feet, and then I was walking back to the building where everyone was, and I was saying, 'What's going on? I don't want to do this!'" But then I found myself in the room with everyone."

It gave me spiritual goosebumps. When we abide in Jesus—the theme of the retreat—our prayers are His prayers, and He answers them. In ways that bring Him glory. . . and bring us goosebumps.

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# Glee-wind: Grilled Cheesus

Oct. 16, 2010

*Episode background: Major character Finn Hudson accidentally burns his grilled cheese sandwich, imprinting one side of it with the face of Jesus Christ. Finn takes this as a sign to take his nominal Christianity more seriously, irony intended by the writers it seems as Finn begins to pray to his sandwich which he now refers to as Grilled Cheesus. Every trivial and selfish thing Finn asks of Grilled Cheesus comes to pass; meanwhile, Finn's Glee Club friend Kurt might be losing his father to heart disease – it doesn't dawn on Finn to pray for Kurt or his father; instead he prays that he might be quarterback again.*

*Most of the Glee kids turn to their faith in trying to deal with the news of Kurt's father and more poignantly, the immense pain of their friend. Kurt refuses to be comforted with his friends' prayers or anything which derives from religious faith, which he considers ridiculous, irrelevant, and ignorant.*

So... Grilled Cheesus the sacred sandwich very well may be the most sacrilegious (and hilarious) thing since [Monty Python](#). But the episode as a whole really brought some very important spiritual issues to the table. Issues like: It's okay to publicly deny faith but not proclaim it. Conundrums like: You can't prove God doesn't exist and you can't prove he does. Problems like Hell; questions like: Why does it sometimes seem God answers prayers about winning football games but not about real human pain and suffering. It also highlights the fact that, for many, intellectual objections toward, and knee-jerk reactions against, religion are often on some level a shield protecting deeply painful, deeply real experiences: Sue's inability to pray hard enough to help her "handicapable" sister, Kurt's being rejected and marginalized and bullied by

those who should love him most. Sure, both Sue and Kurt misunderstand certain aspects of God's nature and the way he works in the world. But so what? That can't really be addressed until we walk with them in their pain, like Mercedes does. Mercedes didn't give up on loving Kurt even after he rejected her and ridiculed her religion out of the abyss of his pain. She wasn't pushy. She just loved him. She "had [him] at 'fabulous hat'."

This episode seems to reject Sue's wrong, but widely held, understanding of separation of Church and State. The episode seems to reject Kurt's aggressive atheism (so at least it's equal opportunity religious tolerance), growing him from this position to one that's more open – to others' spirituality and how that affects the way they inevitably relate to him if nothing else. "Grilled Cheesus" rejects the [moralistic therapeutic deism](#) rampant among Christian teens (and adults); and through Emma's talk with Finn it also rejects over-spiritualizing everything that happens. The episode affirms the reality of religious doubt and uncertainty and the often person-relative struggles of everyone's own spiritual journeying, which we should affirm. It affirms religious pluralism, which we reject. (See Bethany Keeley-Jonker's post at ThinkingChristian.com which makes [this](#) important point about Mercedes's pluralism.)

There's much, much more to dig out and explore in this episode, which isn't uncommon for *Glee*. And there are multiple possible interpretations among all that lies beneath, and that isn't uncommon for *Glee* either; things are often complicated and ambiguous. [You can't judge Glee by a single episode](#), or by what's on the surface. It's a project where characters and ideas are allowed to grow and develop in [real-life messiness](#).

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# Unrealistic Expectations

Lots of things can keep us stuck in places that are hard to get out of.

Like harboring unrealistic expectations.

When my first son was four years old, I found myself angry and frustrated with him a lot. One day I “happened” to see a book on the inspirational display at the grocery store, *Overcoming Hurts and Anger*. I don’t remember anything else from that book except the wise counsel to adjust your unrealistic expectations. I realized that although my son was four, and a smart, prodigious four at that, it was still not fair to expect him to be and do things appropriate for a twelve-year old. It was amazing how much happier I was when I decided to expect four-year-old things of him!

Many people have unrealistic expectations of what growth and change should look like. The downside of our microwave culture is that we expect things to be fixed instantly. Last week a friend who is just starting out a long journey of overcoming a lot of hurts from her past asked what she could do to speed up the process. I suggested she work to build daily the always-popular habit of saying no to her flesh and yes to self-control, loving others, and doing the opposite of what comes naturally. Fifteen minutes later she texted me with a question: “I hate people today. Can I stay home from church?”

So much for the fast track!

One of the most dangerous places for our unrealistic expectations, though, is what we think God should do. Some of the most bitter and angry people I know, or who have loud voices in the culture (think of the [“new atheists”](#) like

Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris) are those who feel betrayed by God, so they decide He isn't there.

That sense of betrayal and disappointment comes from having expectations of God according to how we *think* He should act:

- Protect the innocent from pain and suffering
- Protect the people who maybe-aren't-so-innocent-but-not-as-bad-as-axe-murderers from pain and suffering
- Show the same grace to all of us by treating us all the same
- Give us an easy life
- If I do all the right things to be "a good person," God should do His part to make life work the way I want it to

When we pray fervently for what we want and He doesn't answer the way we want, many of us get angry with Him. That's a part of [my story](#). It's easy to decide God doesn't care, or He is evil, or He isn't there at all.

Many times, we pray in faith, believing God will give us what we ask for, but we ask for things He never promised in the first place. Or even worse, we "claim" them on the basis of a scriptural promise wrenched out of context, such as "all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (Matthew 21:22). Jesus never promised that if we believe *in our prayers*, we would receive what we ask for. *Believing* in the Bible is all about trusting in and surrendering to the goodness and character of GOD, not our prayer list. We will always receive an answer to our prayers because God is good. Sometimes the answer is "No, beloved," because we ask amiss. Psalm 84:11 promised, "No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly." If God says "no," it's because it's not a good thing *for us*. [His "no" is a "yes" to something else.](#) But because we have such a limited perspective, it is essential that we trust in the unlimited perspective of the God who sees everything.

When we feel disappointed in God, when we think, "God didn't

come through for me,” that’s the time to take a step back and ask, “What kind of unrealistic expectations did I have in the first place?” That may be a great question to talk through with a mature trusted friend who can see things more clearly. Then we can place the unrealistic part of our expectations into God’s hands as an act of worship and trust . . . and watch our anger and frustration subside.

I’ll share some thoughts about why those expectations of God are unrealistic in [my next blog post](#).

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