Most people struggle with unanswered prayers. In fact, unanswered prayers are so common that many get discouraged, thinking, “What is the use of it?” and get tempted to quit it.

How can they not quit if what they have been taught about prayer is that if you say the right words and use the correct formula, you will get what you want?

This is an issue that has serious implications for our lives. And it becomes even more troublesome when we hear stories of how God answered prayer for others, but not for us. Then, we may begin to question why God does not answer “my” prayers and wonder if there is something wrong with us, thinking, “What am I doing wrong? God must not like me. If I were just a better person, my prayers would get answered.”

Jesus talked about prayer often and encourage the disciples to pray many times. Here is one instance when that happened from Luke 1:1-13,

“He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” So he said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, may your name be revered as holy. May your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

“So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”

In this text, Jesus is responding to the request of a disciple, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Jesus answered by giving a pattern for prayer, teaching that through prayer, we praise God, ask for God’s will to be done, and provide for our needs. Through prayer, he said, we also confess our sins and ask for strength to overcome sinful behaviors. And then, he continues his instruction by illustrating how we should approach God, giving an example of persistence, “I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.”

Even with a quick reading, it is clear that the strong emphasis in this text is on receiving answers to our prayers. It sounds so simple, right? “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”

It sounds easy enough, but it does not answer the question, what about all those unanswered prayers? Those moments when our prayers don’t seem to go anywhere or have no power after asking many times, searching everywhere, and banging on the door more times than we can remember.

I relate to this more than you can imagine. As a pastor, I pray for many people with all kinds of needs. Often, the prayers are about health and broken relationships. However, many times, people don’t get better or heal, and relationships don’t improve or get restored. The “Did I pray enough? Am I a good pastor? Could I have done more?” thoughts run through my mind.

I know I am not alone. How many of you relate to this? This is nothing new and we are not the only ones who struggle with unanswered prayers. If we read the Bible, paying attention to the stories with prayers, we would see that even the great heroes of faith struggle with unanswered prayers more often than not.

For example, Moses’ prayer to enter the promised land with the people he led for 40 years was denied. King David fasted and prayed for seven days that his son would live but he died. Jeremiah prayed that Jerusalem would not be destroyed, and when it got destroyed, he complained to God, “you have wrapped yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through.” (Lamentations 3:44). In the New Testament, even the Apostle Paul’s prayers went unanswered when he prayed for the removal of an affliction he called a “thorn in his side” (2 Corinthians 12). It never went away. And these are just a few examples of many.

In all of this, the one thing unanswered prayers have in common is that most of them point to a sensitive and painful period in our lives when we thought there was no way we could have hope again or that we knew what was best for us but we did not get it. Yet, somehow, as life goes on, we find that our stories have not ended and experience greatest blessings than we had asked for before.

Since love is in the air, let me talk about a great song by Garth Brooks that speaks to love and prayer, and in an uncanny way, provides us with a profound answer to the dilemma of unanswered prayers. The song is titled, “Unanswered Prayers.”

The song is based on Brooks and his wife Sandy’s true story. When Brooks and Sandy went back to Oklahoma, Brooks’ hometown, he ran into his high school girlfriend at a football game. As he introduced his wife to her, he recalled their past relationship. He remembered the days when he prayed for that girl and told God how much he wanted her to be his wife, but she got away. As he turns back to his wife, he thanked God for unanswered prayers.

The lyrics that make this point clear are,

“Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers  
Remember when you’re talkin’ to the man upstairs  
That just because he doesn’t answer doesn’t mean he don’t care  
Some of God’s greatest gifts are unanswered prayers”

So, in Brooks’ theology, he believes that even though God doesn’t answer all our prayers, he is preparing us for his best answer. God may take someone out of our lives but we shouldn’t feel sad or upset. Instead, we prepare ourselves for God’s perfect timing and greatest blessing.

I must say he is not too far off. In fact, I would agree with him on this one because I, too, thank God for unanswered prayers. If I had gotten my prayers answered when I was younger (way younger), I would never have met Evelyn. And let’s be honest, she is the best part of me and way out of my league.

Of course, the challenge with this approach is that it may be a little simplistic and does not apply to every situation. How could I ever tell someone, “God did not heal her because he has a better plan,” or “God did not answer your prayers to save your son because there is a greater blessing ahead.” That would absolutely misrepresent God’s love and be wrong in every way.

Still, many of our prayers often go unanswered because there is indeed something better for us. So, I believe there is value in Brook’s theology to the extent that many of our prayers fall within this range. We ask for what we want and get upset or disappointed because we don’t get it, but later we realize God knew best.

How can we trust unanswered prayers, then? When we don’t understand why we don’t get the answers we want or think we need, God does. When we pray and can’t explain why people suffer, God can. Not because he is responsible for the suffering, but because he suffers with us. When we don’t know what is next and get worried about the unknown, God knows the way. This means there is freedom in saying, “I don’t know why my prayers are not answered or why things are happening the way they are, but I trust God in my need or pain.”

All this to say, the benefit of prayer is not only getting what we ask but what happens to us and through us when we pray. Prayer brings us closer to God, helps us experience God’s presence, and affirms our faith by nurturing our minds, hearts, and spirits. Prayer aligns our lives with God, giving us peace and strength to get through something difficult. But beyond what prayer does to and for us, there is a lot that prayer does through us because prayer has a way of motivating us to get involved in what God does. Sometimes the answer to a prayer is God moving you to do something about it, like bringing food to a family in need or calling someone who struggles with loneliness. You may think God is not answering your prayers, but he might be answering them through you.

The good news is that even when we don’t know the answers, we know the God who loves us and is with us always. In this sense, it is better to know God than to know the answer.

Perhaps we can say like Garth Brooks, “Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers. Remember when you’re talkin’ to the man upstairs. That just because he doesn’t answer doesn’t mean he doesn’t care. Some of God’s greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.”