

**I've Never "Heard" God Answer Prayer
Or
Prayer Has a Backstory**

By Kathleen Beagles

I must admit that I have a bit of a problem with "prayer." There are so many slivers of truth about it that have become clichés and left my interest in the topic rather jaded. (God answers prayer with yes, no, or wait; Prayer doesn't bring God down to us, it brings us up to Him; Prayer is the answer; Prayer doesn't change God, it changes us; Pray without ceasing; Seven days without prayer makes one weak.) I do not get spiritually uplifted about the idea of prayer breakfasts or prayer walks.

What really is prayer? Lots of people pray for all kinds of reasons to all kinds of things. So, why do we still maintain that there is "power" in prayer? The realistic among us know that prayer as we often do it is somewhat of a monologue. We claim God hears and answers, but for the most part we don't "hear" His answer, or even know for sure what the answer is (what does the difference between "no" and "wait" sound like when God "says" them)?

What I want is to communicate with my God—dialogically. Christ calls the Church His bride. Do you think the best form of communication for a husband and wife is one of petitioning each other and hoping you'll understand the response of Yes, No, or Wait? We are always hearing that communication is the main ingredient in the strength or weakness of marriage relationships. I think that applies to any relationship, and especially in our relationship with God.

So, in order for me to "get into" prayer, I need to substitute the word with a definition I can resonate with. I like the one in *Steps to Christ* (usually page 100). It

essentially says “Prayer is opening the heart to God as to a friend.” When was the last time you left a prayer breakfast feeling as if you had opened your heart to God as to a friend? Some people may be able to capture that experience there, but not me so much.

I find this passage from a little book *My Life Today* to help explain my reticence at some prayer events. “There are two kinds of prayer—the prayer of form and the prayer of faith. The repetition of set, customary phrases when the heart feels no need of God, is formal prayer . . . We should be extremely careful in all our prayers to speak the wants of the heart and to say only what we mean.” (*My Life Today*, p. 19)

That makes a lot of sense to me. In this dialogical prayer life I want with my God-Friend, my part is to be real and open—whatever is going on inside of me, even if, like Job, I am really wishing for the good old days (see Job 29:2-6), or like David, I’m wanting God to bash the children of my enemies against a rock (see Ps. 137:9).

But what does God’s side of the dialogic exchange with me look or sound like? Over many years of observing my own life, I have come to think of God’s side of the communication as “unfolding His will for His children.” When I think of Him “answering” rather than “unfolding,” it makes Him seem somewhat capricious. I feel as if I have to get the formula just right, to have the right amount of faith, or say the right words the right way. Some of these feelings may be connected with bits of truth, but I need a bigger, more whole picture of this communication.

“Unfolding” makes me think of stories. Stories unfold. Perhaps we’ve been spoiled in this day and age when our stories—packaged as sitcoms and movies and novels—unfold rather quickly and in a rather expected pattern. When it comes to the God story, He unfolds it with His own sense of timing, not ours! Take the creation story for instance. In Genesis

1:27 it tells us that God created male and female together in His image. But then in chapter 2 it goes on to describe a much more elaborate explanation of “opening the heart” and “unfolding His will.”

Sometimes it isn't easy to figure out who “speaks” first in our story dialogues with God. For some reason God had decided already that it wouldn't be good for the man-half to be alone (v. 18). So He sets up an active, discovery learning strategy for Adam to come to this conclusion himself (vs. 19, 20). It's like God had planted the “prayer” for a spouse in Adam's heart, and then He went about unfolding the answer—put to sleep, remove, mold, wake, introduce (vs. 21-23).

I have had many unfolding prayer answers to my open heart cries that I only “heard” in retrospect, with a good bit of reflection.

When I was in my early thirties and knew that my little son was the only child I was going to have naturally, I opened my heart to God about Nikki, a potential daughter for our family. She was the foster child of a family at church. I met her at Sabbath School. She was eagerly drinking up the wonderful stories and activities and learning to open her heart to Jesus. When she was placed for adoption, and we realized that she could easily be taken from her new church family and placed anywhere, we decided to try to adopt her.

We began the process of doing everything the government says must be done to assure that this would be good for Nikki and us too. We were closely examined—physically and emotionally—and were deemed to be a perfect family for Nikki, with a built-in little brother a year or so younger. But, the process seemed to run aground and we waited with great trepidation for the decision of one social worker who was reluctant to give the final approval. All through this process we kept our hearts open to God, but we couldn't “hear”

Him answering. Especially when the final decision came that we would not be allowed to adopt Nikki because her grandmother, who lived on welfare, wanted her.

All I could hear was God's silence. All I could sense was a reverberating "No" that didn't make sense in the present context. However, when I could see the unfolding storyline, I could see God's hand, and the tapestry He was weaving with more clarity.

A year or so later, before all the legal waiting periods would have been completed for the adoption, we were missionaries in Africa, which would not have been allowed while in the midst of adoption proceedings. Three years later I was given an opportunity to work on a masters degree, which I was able to do with one child, but probably would not have attempted with two. And five years later a daughter entered our lives, this one from our own extended family.

God's immediate, perceived answer of "No," had turned into a grand, unfolding "Yes."

When I was in my forties I opened my heart to God about being tired of teaching on the secondary level. I begged him to let me teach on the college level and work on a further degree. As usual, I also started working toward my heart's desire and within a couple years of this heart-opening, I was actually flown to a college for an interview, being assured by acquaintances on the staff that I was first choice on the short list of names being considered. All the circumstances in my life at the time indicated to me that God's hand was all over this storyline. But my happy faith was shaken to its roots when I got the call telling me that another person had been chosen for the position. I knew, even as I wiped up the bitter tears, that there was a much bigger picture in the making, but it was cold, intellectual comfort while all I could sense was the resounding echoes of "No" in the dense silence.

And the dense silence grew more painful for awhile before it started lifting. I could see no unfolding pattern of a sensible storyline for quite some time.

Later in my forties, family as I knew it was gone, never to be put back together quite the same. And I ended up for 28 days in an in-house treatment center for various types of dysfunctions and addictions. My heart-opening at this point was a simple “Who are you, God? Do I even know you?” The only answer that came was the conviction that I must let go of my pre-conceived ideas about God long enough to let him show me who he was. My opened heart consent to this conviction led to the sense that I was jumping off a cliff with no idea what was at the bottom. But, the beginning of the unfolding answer felt as if I was being enclosed in arms of love, and very, very safe.

The unfolding answer became distinctly visible when the very next year, instead of teaching secondary school, I began writing and editing children’s Sabbath School lessons founded in an understanding of God’s grace and power. This, in turn, led to the further studies I had prayed about, but this time in the area of theology and religious education, fields I had not really considered for myself before.

When I was in my fifties I was in need of a home for my family. Having previously always lived on school campuses, I knew nothing of purchasing a home. One thing I knew for certain, I did not want a “fixer-upper.” I had no expertise to draw on and neither did anyone else who would be living in the home. With my heart open before my heavenly Father-Friend, I set about exploring. I found the perfect little townhouse with lots of recently refurbished, feminine touches. I made an offer, countered the seller’s counter-offer, then even offered to rent it back to them as long as they needed to find what they

wanted to move to. I was very open-hearted with God. I wanted this home. God would have to take it off the market if it was not his will for me.

I remember clearly the call from my realtor. “I can’t understand it,” he said. “After all you’ve given them, they are now taking it off the market.” I explained to him that I could understand perfectly, and asked if he was willing to still work with me even though the final say seemed to be with a Third Party. He hesitantly said he would, but that he wanted me to consider a “fixer-upper” that had just come onto the market. “I know you said you didn’t want something that needed work,” he said, “but this one has been worked on some already and is technically livable.”

I knew I had to look at all options since my ways were obviously not God’s ways.

Needless to say, God’s unfolding was the perfect one. How was I to know that my son would come home from graduate school, use his student-loan payback money to invest in my townhouse, teaching himself to remodel homes; that, because of the remodel and the market changes, we would sell that home (located near a lake and a popular mall) for more than 2 ½ times what we paid for it; and that those proceeds would finish paying for my education which had led me to a university teaching position much more to my liking than the first one I had attempted to orchestrate before?

I realize that some people have had very different experiences from mine—ones in which they pray for very specific things and God comes through in a tangible, observable way, right away. I believe in those experiences as well. If God wants to plant a prayer in your heart so that you can watch Him answer it and have your faith strengthened, that’s wonderful. But I think we mustn’t discount the times that He wants to be able to trust *our* trust of *His* heart without having to make immediately observable changes in our storyline.

(To reinforce this point, you may enjoy going to YouTube and listening to a rendition of the song *Trust His Heart*.)

When we pray, we aren't trying to manipulate a whimsical God. We are seeking to join His story, surrendering to the trust that He knows the storyline better than we could ever begin to know it. And, we won't know the whole story on this earth. Job trusted God through an unfolding story that he didn't understand. He didn't know anything about its beginning, or why it was happening the way it was.

But God actually chose first to trust how Job loved and trusted Him (even in the midst of Job's opening his heart and saying what he meant.) God trusted Job even with His own character was on the line before the universe. And although Job didn't really ever get the whole story, He finally got more about God (See Job 42:5 to sum up his deepening relationship).

What we have to remember on the "unfolding" side of prayer is that the biggest and most important story is the one about the love of God for His kidnapped children, and His mission to rescue all of us. My smaller story (whatever I'm currently opening my heart to God about) falls inside of that bigger one. And so does yours. He wants to weave all of them together, and for that He needs my trust in His omniscience. There are so many things He needs to teach me as the story unfolds.

I believe that, along with the Word of God, it is God's responses to our prayers that form the curriculum for our Christian maturing. And the relationship between God and us is always a story line that His is "unfolding" just as we are always maturing and learning to "open our hearts" to Him more and more completely. I love what I read in the Sabbath School lesson for January 14, 2014 (emphasis mine).

“Prayer miraculously bonds finite souls with their infinite Creator. *Prayer is spiritual adhesive*. Bonded with the heavenly Father, believers transcend their earthly natures and sinful tendencies. This transformation separates them from the world. Should Satan successfully recast prayer into a self-centered mold, thus robbing prayer of its *potential for our transformation*, we might be powerfully compromised and our witness stymied.”

God has to “unfold” the answers to our “open heart” cries within the context of the bigger Great Controversy story. Which only He knows the beginning, workings, and end of. Yes, we can expect dark nights of the soul when we can’t see or hear Him, but God is working. We are told back in the Creation story we referred to earlier that evening first and then morning are what make day. God works in our darkness . . . then He wakes us to His light.

Through it all He is longing for us to come to love and trust who He really is—to open our hearts fully to Him while He unfolds our characters, the answers to our prayers, and the lives and characters of those with whom we are in daily contact, and for whom we daily pray. It is this relationship of “heart opening prayer” and the “unfolding revelation of God’s heart” that will have an impact on those around us as we spread the last great message of God’s character of love to the whole world, beginning in our own homes, schools and churches. I believe that all of this is implied in my favorite passage from the book *Education*. This is a picture of the impact we will have on discipling others when we, His already-disciples, have found our true dialogic prayer closet:

“Happy will it be for the children of our homes and the students of our schools when parents and teachers shall learn in their own lives the precious experience pictured in these words from the Song of Songs:

As the apple tree among the trees of the wood,

So is my Beloved among the sons.

I sat down under His shadow with great delight,

And His fruit was sweet to my taste.

He brought me to the banqueting house,

And His banner over me was love. Canticles 2:3, 4”