

Prayer to God is something that is grounded in faith and love. As we hear in the Small Catechism, we can pray and bring our requests before God because by Baptism He is our loving Father and we are His beloved children. Because He loves us perfectly, we can be sure that He will always give us what He knows is best for us.

But this doesn't mean that prayer is always easy. Often, it's hard, because it comes out of times in our lives that are hard. And then, sometimes, it can get even harder, even more trying. We get examples of these two scenarios – hard and harder – in our Gospel reading this morning. Yet however hard it gets, we are shown that the answer to our prayers is always given to us in Jesus.

So consider first the situation of the woman whom we meet about halfway through the reading. She's been afflicted with bleeding for twelve years. Hard.

Like many problems, when it started, she had no idea what was coming. Maybe it began after the birth of a child, a joyful event, though marked by the shedding of blood. Or maybe it was a tragic event, such as a miscarriage. Or perhaps it was something else entirely.

Whatever the start of the bleeding, it was probably accompanied with prayers, perhaps prayers of thanksgiving, perhaps prayers of lament, and then prayers that God would restore her health, stop this bleeding, and let her continue with her life. Nothing too out of the ordinary; it'll stop soon. Just pray and it will be over before you know it.

But the bleeding doesn't stop. It goes on, and on, and on. Concern grows as this problem is shown to be more serious than originally thought. But don't worry, we'll go see a doctor, they'll get this figured out. Just keep praying, it'll pass.

But it doesn't. It keeps going and going. The doctors come and go, but all they can finally do is give her medical bills. Friends, very concerned and supportive at first, gradually have their concern decreased, not out of malice, but simply by the passage of time.

Years go by, and prayers go up... but nothing changes. Will it ever end? Is God even listening? Does He even care? For this woman, prayer is hard.

Hard times to pray come in the lives of all Christians as they struggle with sin and the brokenness it brings. You've probably had these times in your life as well. A problem comes along, maybe not so concerning at first, and so as a Christian, a child of God, you call out to Him in prayer.

In addition, you seek out means that God might choose to work through, reaching out to people and institutions in this world to get some help. And all the while, friends and family offer support and encouragement and prayers. Surely the problem will go away any time now.

But it doesn't. Despite your best efforts, and your prayers, it remains, like a thorn in the flesh, to echo St. Paul. Everywhere you've turned you've come up empty. Your family and friends, while still caring, have lives that keep going, and so they're engaged less and less.

The weeks turn into months turn into years, and nothing seems to get better. The prayers continue, but it gets hard to pray. Is it doing any good? Is God listening?

It's hard, and then sometimes, it gets harder. We see this in the ruler who comes to Jesus. St. Matthew condenses the events in his Gospel, but from St. Mark and St. Luke, who have fuller accounts of this event, we know that the daughter wasn't yet dead when her father set off to find Jesus.

We don't know how sudden the onset of the girl's condition was, but eventually it gets to the point where it's clear that the girl is going to die. And no doubt throughout this time, her father, who was a ruler of a synagogue, was praying. By his position, he's a man of faith, and from his actions we can see that he loves his daughter very much.

Despite all the prayers, and no doubt the efforts of doctors as well, the girl gets worse and worse. What is the father to do? He's heard of this Jesus, who is said to heal even those thought to be incurable. But the Pharisees, who control the synagogues, don't have much good to say about Him.

The father is a very influential man in his town, perhaps the leader of the only synagogue there, and so what he does will affect a lot of people. If he goes after Jesus, but then Jesus doesn't save his daughter, it will look like the synagogue is being led by someone who fell for a false prophet. Not only will the Pharisees take away his livelihood, great spiritual harm will be done to all those people who have looked up to him and trusted him.

But if he doesn't go, his daughter, whom he loves so much, will almost certainly die. Would he be able to look himself in the mirror, knowing that he could have saved his daughter but chose not to act? Pressure like this makes prayer hard.

By faith, the Holy Spirit working in his heart, the father takes off to find Jesus. He wagers it all on Jesus, so to speak. When he finds Jesus, he – the ruler of a synagogue, comes and kneels, worships, at Jesus' feet. The Pharisees aren't going to be happy!

But the father pleads... and Jesus agrees to come! Surely his prayers are being answered! Off they go, hope alive for his daughter after so much worry. It's going to be okay. But then, bumping and pushing through the crowds, Jesus decides to stop and ask who touched Him.

No doubt the father felt a little frustration at this. It's a crowd – as the disciples point out. We really don't have time for this! And then Jesus hears the story of a trembling woman, and declares her healed, and that's good and all, but time is of the essence! Delays might cause everything to fall apart.

And that's exactly what seems to happen. They get on the road once more, but not long after are met with the terrible news. "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?"

It had been hard. Now it's harder. Imagine the sadness and frustration that had to hit that father. Why did they have to stop for that lady? Why were her prayers answered, but not his? Why didn't he set out to find Jesus sooner; why did he wait? Why did God give him that glimmer of hope, only to have it taken so cruelly away?

Now his situation has gone from hard to harder to impossible. Why pray? His daughter is dead.

It seems like his prayers have been ignored. Perhaps you've been in this father's shoes before. Perhaps you've put so much time and effort into a project or business, and you pray and pray, and it fails, and everything you've put in is lost.

Perhaps you've prayed that a marriage would be healed, that peace would be granted, and you pray and you pray, and then the divorce papers arrive.

Perhaps you've been at the bedside of a loved one, asking that God would give you just one more day with them, just a little longer, and you pray and you pray, and then he or she is dead.

You thought you saw glimpses of hope in whatever situation you were in, chances that it might just turn around, but then it appears they were just illusions. Now it's too late. Did God ignore you, turn a deaf ear to your countless prayers?

No. He didn't. Not to the woman. Not to the father. Not to you. God always listens to the prayers of His people. He is the perfect loving Father who always hears the cries of those He has adopted into His household.

In fact, our Lord knows our prayers even before we say them. David declares this in the Psalms when he writes, "Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether." In His perfect knowledge, our Lord knows exactly what we need. And He gives it all to us as He answers our prayers, ultimately through His Son.

God heard the prayers of the woman the first time she prayed, and He answered them in Jesus. He had already determined that His Son would encounter her on that specific day. Before the bleeding even started, He knew the exact moment when He would stop it.

In His divine wisdom, He arranged those twelve years of suffering to happen, so that when He miraculously healed her, she would have twelve years' worth of people to declare to what Jesus had done for her. Though it took her twelve years to see it, God had answered her prayer the moment she spoke it, and He did so in Jesus.

God heard the prayers of the father the very first time he cried out on behalf of his daughter, and He answered them in Jesus. He had given life to that little girl in the womb of her mother before anyone even knew she was there, and He knew when He would take her by the hand and restore her to life, even when everyone thought she was totally gone.

The Lord arranged for the delays, the interruptions, for the things to get harder, so that when the answer to the father's prayers was revealed, the father's faith would be grown that much more, and God's love and faithfulness glorified all the more.

God hears your prayers, all of them, and He answers them in Jesus. St. Paul writes, "For all the promises of God find their Yes in Him. That is why it is through Him we utter our Amen to God for His glory."

It may not seem that Jesus could be the answer to all your prayers, as He is no longer walking this earth so that we might touch His cloak or have Him raise our loved ones up by the hand. However, Jesus Christ is still very much the answer to our prayers.

First off, when He ascended into heaven, He once again assumed the fullness of His divine almighty power. He is God, and so He can heal, restore, and guide all things according to His will. He is God, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and so there is nowhere He cannot be, nothing He cannot do. He brought the universe into existence from nothing, and He destroyed even death, the enemy no man could overcome. And He Himself declares, “With God all things are possible.”

In addition to this, Jesus is the answer to our prayers, not only because He has the power to answer them, but because He shows the love that desires to answer them. If God didn’t want to be bothered by our prayers, He wouldn’t have sent His Son to teach us to pray to Him. If He didn’t want what was best for us, He wouldn’t have sent His Son to the cross to endure the unimaginable wrath and suffering that we deserve.

But send Him He did! And Jesus came, willingly and gladly! The Bible tells us that “Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of God.” The cross wasn’t joy, but what it would accomplish Jesus saw as joy. It brings Him joy to grant life and forgiveness, to free His people from slavery to sin, to carry them into His Kingdom.

Jesus decided that having you brought to heaven was worth dying for. Christ went to the cross so that, having washed our sins away by His blood, we might call Him our Brother, and His Father, our Father. He desires to give you the highest and greatest gift there is, and He wouldn’t even let the torments of hell keep Him from doing that.

When your prayers get hard, turn to the Word, and hear of God’s faithfulness always shown to His saints.

When it gets harder, look to Him on the cross and know that He has overcome death itself for you.

And when it seems impossible and words refuse to come out of your mouth, then make the sign of the holy cross, and in doing that remember that you have been sealed in Holy Baptism, that the Almighty God has made you His child, and that nothing in all creation can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In His holy name, amen.