

THE ANSWER IS YES; WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

There is a quiz show on television where the answer is given and the contestants must guess what the question to that answer is. In fact the “answer” must be formed as a question or it is considered incorrect. I have used this formula (modified, of course) in my thinking about responding to God. In this case I am the contestant and my answer, I know, will be yes. It is not an automatic response; I am given time to think it over. After I answer yes, God tells me what the question is. I may wrestle with it briefly, but my answer has been given and I will not change it. Finally I am comfortable with the whole scenario and, by God’s grace, go on living in the light of it.

A recent example would be my diagnosis of PLS. When I first began noticing symptoms a few years ago, I had the feeling that it would soon be my turn to be a contestant again. What would my answer be this time? Would I give my tried and true “yes” or perhaps – just for a change – try a “no”? The latter was quickly discarded as unthinkable; after all, my questioner is GOD, and I am a person, a sheep under his care. And so, with the answer in place, I heard the question: “Verna, would you be willing to glorify my name by undergoing with patience (even thanksgiving!) a debilitating neurological disease that will gradually remove the use of your legs, hands and voice before it eventually takes your earthly life?”

I like knowing my answer before I know the questions. A lifetime of experience has abundantly shown that I can trust my Lord to ask of me only those things that will advance his kingdom, and kingdom work is the most exciting work on earth! I also know I am not expected to carry out my assignments alone; God is always with me, ready to supply grace, strength, mercy, compassion, whatever I need. God is so good to me!

Recently I heard a pastor conclude his sermon with a story I liked and adopted as my own. He told of a very talented man who sincerely wanted to serve the Lord. He wrote out a long list of things that he was willing to do, signed his name and presented the paper to the Lord. “Oh, no,” said the Lord. “You have this backwards. Here’s a blank piece of paper. You sign your name to it and then I will write down what I want you to do.”

I liked that. It is another clear illustration of the principle I mentioned above: God leading, and we doing what he asks of us. The story is new to me, but not the idea behind it. That has been in my head as long as I have understood the Lord’s prayer: *Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* How powerful that prayer is, especially when coupled with the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

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On the night before Jesus died, he went to Gethsemane to pray. The story is so poignant and so instructive that I am copying here the version given in Matthew 26:37-46:

He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.”

He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Then he returned to his disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

Can you tell that even though Jesus was making such a passionate plea to his Father, he had already said "yes," he had signed his name to a blank piece of paper on which God had written "Crucifixion"? And do you notice that after the third request Jesus was at peace with the decision? His whole demeanor changed with his acceptance of God's will, hard though it was.

I'm so glad this story was included in the gospels. It allows me to respectfully express my true feelings about hard assignments and puts things into perspective. Nothing I could ever be asked to do would come close to matching the assignment given to Jesus in Gethsemane. The prayer of Jesus is mine as well: "Father, not my will, but yours be done."

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It was January, 1971. I was a patient in the hospital, having just had an operation for a bladder suspension. My previous surgery had been four years earlier; four others had been performed during my growing up years. I enjoyed the company of my roommate Ruth and especially liked to engage her in conversation about God and faith. One day I casually mentioned that I certainly hoped I would never again have to have surgery. An understandable remark, you might think, but something didn't seem right about it.

Ruth had company later on. Through the curtain, which had been pulled between us, I heard her talking about me. "She seems to have a lot of faith," Ruth said, "but she did say she hopes she will never have to have another operation." I felt convicted! Ruth was right: true faith would have said yes to the Lord's will, whatever it included. The Lord knows my heart. This incident was a stepping stone in my life of faith.

P.S.: I had no more surgery for about eighteen years. Since then there have been so many that I have lost count!

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"Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete" (John 16:24).

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6).

I must admit that there is much about prayer I do not understand. The above verses seem to some to be promises: ask correctly and God will give you your request. But the request that Jesus made – certainly correctly! – was denied. So was the request that the apostle Paul made three times to have his physical ailment removed. God said no, but added (in effect), "Don't worry. My grace will be sufficient for you." And it was.

The first two prayers that I remember making took place in my teen years. I woke up one Saturday when I was fifteen with such abdominal pain that I could not stand upright. As the day went on with no change, Mother became alarmed and called the doctor. He said he would meet us in the hospital in an hour; I needed a blood test to see if I had appendicitis.

I knew what that meant! I had already had three operations and, if possible, I did not want another one! In a few private moments I had while getting dressed, I knelt by my bedroom window and,

looking up into the sky, made my request known to God. I remember so well, in this visit to the past, that when I rose from my knees I could stand upright for the first time that day and all pain was gone! I walked confidently out to Dad's car and into the hospital, sure that I had been healed.

The blood test showed otherwise. I had my appendix removed that night – just in time. The interesting thing to me was that I actually enjoyed that hospital stay! I had no pain, the nurses and doctors were wonderful and I liked the attention I was given. Looking back, I think God heard my earnest prayer and answered it his way.

A year or two later for a short time our family had a pet guinea pig. The animal was not doing well; would she die? Dad made a pen for her in our side yard so she could be in the fresh air and eat grass. I sat alone beside her pen and prayed: "Dear Lord, when you were on earth, you made many sick people well. Please heal my guinea pig. I don't want her to die." Just then the animal gave a shudder and I thought life was coming back to her. But then she was still forever; dead. I was sorry she died, but I don't remember being upset with God. In fact, I can't ever remember being upset with God! Why would I?

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Luke 18:1-8 records a parable Jesus told about a widow who was being treated unfairly. The judge, an uncaring person, paid no attention to her until he got tired of her persistence. Only then did she get justice. Jesus told this story to the disciples to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He concludes by saying, *"Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"*

I admit that I do not understand this parable. It brings so many questions to my mind. Even Jesus, as you can see, ended with a question. Is faith linked with persistent asking or does it trust enough to let God do his work without a barrage of words from us? Or is it something in-between? One certainty I have: God is not unjust, nor is he reluctant to hear us. I cannot imagine begging God to do what I wish. Request, yes; beg, no. God is God – and I am not.

Long ago I figured that Paul's instructions to pray without ceasing meant that prayer was more than words. How could we accomplish anything else on earth if we were constantly sending paragraphs of words to God? Surely being in such a close relationship with God that God is always in your thoughts, informing your attitudes and actions, is a form of prayer. I have heard it said that a person's growing faith can be measured by the increasing amount of time spent in formal prayer. That would not work for me. I find that the older I get and the more I trust, the fewer words I need to communicate with God. In him I live and move and have my being. God inside: my salvation; God outside: my environment. I am blessed!

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A similar concept to knowing your answer before knowing the question is one that I call "looking to the end." When something difficult happens I imagine what the worst outcome could be for that situation. Then I process whether or not that would be all right with me. If so (and again, the answer has to be yes), I can now return to where I am and work toward the resolution of the incident as free of worry as possible. The converse plan is to plow forward day by day wondering what lies ahead, hoping for the desired result, refusing to think of the "worst."

A week ago I found out that my chest x-ray showed a nodule in my chest. Tomorrow I am scheduled for a CAT scan to try to determine what it is. Last week I "looked to the end":

- Could this be cancer?
- *I suppose it could be.*

- If so, would that be OK?
 - *It would have to be; I am in God's hands.*
- What if this nodule leads to your death?
 - *Then I would be in the presence of my Lord and that is fine with me!*

And so, with that settled, I have enjoyed this week. I've written essays, planned and helped conduct a worship service, enjoyed being with friends and family – it's been a normal week. When I get the test results I will either be glad that I had not worried needlessly or I will have to "look to the end" again.

This idea is not new with me, of course. I found it in the Psalms long ago, in Psalm 73, for example. Asaph says he envied the arrogant when he saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles, he thought, and always enjoyed good health. They are always carefree while their wealth increases. Asaph, on the other hand, tried so hard to be good, but was plagued all day long and punished every morning.

Then Asaph entered the sanctuary and understood the final destiny of the wicked. How his attitude changed after that! He admitted he had been embittered, senseless and ignorant to envy the wicked. From now on God would be enough for him.

I am the kind of person who feels more comfortable watching a movie or reading a book if I have a general idea how it ends. Does the main character survive or not? If I know that much, at least, my mind is at ease. Now I can let the story unfold from the beginning. This will explain why I like the following story so much:

A Sunday School teacher asked his eighth grade students to read the whole book of Revelation in one sitting some time during the week. One of the girls in his class was eager to do the assignment, so after dinner on Sunday she told her mother that she did not want to be disturbed; she would be reading that afternoon. Time passed and then the girl burst out of her room and ran to her mother. "Mom! I've been reading all about the end times and guess what? We win! WE WIN!" Now that's "looking to the end"! I don't bother my mind about the end of this age. It is enough for me to know God wins, and that I am on his team.

God is looking for people who will trust him enough to say "yes" before they know the questions; to sign a blank piece of paper and let God write on it whatever he wants; to pray with meaning "Your will be done." Perhaps you are one of them already. Isn't it a wonderful way to live, even through the tough times?

If you are still debating, consider what Jesus said in Luke 6:46: "*Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?*" Can you hear the contradiction there? If Jesus is our Lord, surely obedience is expected of us. We love Isaiah 65:24, don't we?: "*Before they call I will answer.*" Likewise, shouldn't we answer God before he calls? And shouldn't our answer be "yes"?