

Oct. 18 "God's Response to Our Prayers" Romans 12: 9-21

Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, "Pray ceaselessly." How does God respond to our prayers?

We can find the answer in the story of Joseph in the Old Testament.

Joseph was the youngest of the twelve sons of Jacob. He was a bright teenager. But he was spoiled and arrogant. He often angered his eleven brothers by humiliating and downgrading them.

The brothers had enough. One day they bound Joseph and left him in the wilderness for dead. He was later discovered by travelers and sold to Egypt. We can imagine Joseph, full of hatred, swearing vengeance against his brothers.

Joseph became a slave servant for a rich Egyptian family. But when he refused the sexual overture of the lady of the house, she accused him of molestation.

He was imprisoned as a sexual criminal for several years. Not a single day must have passed that he did not swear vengeance against his brothers.

In prison Joseph was given a chance to interpret the meaning of the strange dreams that the king of Egypt had dreamt.

Joseph's interpretation was this: Egypt would be blessed with seven years of good crops but then they would be followed by seven years of famine.

Joseph advised the king that Egypt must be frugal during the good years in preparation for the bad years that would surely come.

The grateful king promoted Joseph to the position of minister of domestic affairs.

Sure enough, famine struck the entire Middle East as Joseph had predicted. People from the neighboring countries came to Egypt to buy food. Joseph's brothers were among them.

Now Joseph found himself at a crossroads between vengeance and forgiveness. He was tormented by the choice. He anguished over it. He sweated blood over it.

Then comes the climax of the story. After days of deep soul searching, Joseph finally chose forgiveness over vengeance. His words to his brothers are heart-felt and moving. The Bible describes it this way.

"Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph. Come close to me.' When they had done so, he said, 'I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt. Now do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here.' Then Joseph threw his arms around his brothers and kissed all of them and wept over them."

What can we learn from the story of Joseph about God's way of responding to our prayers?

God may not give us what we ask for. After all, he did not fulfill Joseph's desire for revenge. What does God do? He speaks to our consciences in a still small voice, persuading us to seek not what we want, but what God wants.

God works quietly. God works patiently. God works mysteriously by providing us not what we want but what he wants. Not only that. He strengthens us and transforms us so that we can choose what he wants us to choose. Let us remember. God transformed Joseph from an avenger to a forgiver.

The story of Joseph is our story. God continues to persuade us to seek not our wills but God's will. God enables us to be loving in the world where hatred is the way of life; he enables us to be forgiving in the world where conflict is pervasive; he enables us to be truly human in the world where humanity is denied more often than not. So, as Paul admonishes us, let us pray ceaselessly.

Despite all the problems in the world, God sustains us and gently persuades us to be his witnesses. He coaxes us. He persuades us. He entreats us. He transforms us. Thanks be to God.