

The God We Want
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Psalms 145:1-5
Numbers 11:1
Psalm 44:8-26

Do you get what you want?

Generally speaking, are your needs met? Are your wants satisfied?

I'll get back to those questions in just a second but first let me tell you a story.

I grew up in a great neighborhood. By great, I mean full of boys my age. We had a blast. Riding bikes on paths in the woods, tackle football in the mud and snow, playing baseball with plastic ball and bat, shooting hoops so Dean Smith would offer us a scholarship, and when it rained battling each other in board hockey games for the Stanley Cup, passing the puck behind the net and making all sorts of fancy hockey moves. Hey, not bad for southern boys.

One of our favorite pastimes when it rained, though, was playing a game we invented using dice and Baseball cards. You put the baseball card of the batter down in front of you, imagining you were that player. We did the public announcement routine. And now batting third, averaging 288, right fielder, and then we would say his name and roll the dice. Roll two ones you just hit a single, two twos was a double, two threes was a triple. Roll two fours, fives or sixes and you've got yourself a homerun. Non-matches were strikes. And, of course, three strikes and you were out of there.

It was fun, especially if you were lucky enough to have the baseball cards of your favorite team, mine being the Los Angeles---Don Drysdale, Sandy Koufax---whip the Giants and everybody else Dodgers.

So the highlight of my week was to go to Manning's grocery store which was at a place called Four Points or Cherry Street Extension, across the street from Tom's Drive-In, home of the world's best and greasiest hot dogs. If we were lucky we got a hot dog after going to Manning's, but what made me really feel lucky was if my choice of baseball card packs produced a LA Dodger or some Hall of Famer.

The cards were located at the checkout line. I would shuffle through all the packs as if doing so somehow helped me get the card or cards I wanted.

Sometimes I got what I wanted but mostly,---mostly I didn't get what I wanted. Mostly I got cards of players I had never heard of and had never wanted. I got just enough of the cards I wanted to keep me buying, keep me coming back for one more chance to get what I wanted.

I'll ask you again, Have you gotten what you wanted?

Let me help you answer that question with a series of questions.

The last time you went to the hair stylist did you get the haircut you wanted? Did you get your money's worth?

If you went to the gym did you get the body you wanted?

God help us. That's all I'm saying.

When you got a car, did you get the car you wanted?

When I was in college I wanted a boring but good on gas mileage Nissan, a B200, I think they called it. My father, who would drink poison before buying a foreign made car, bought me instead a Ford Mustang which was a duplicate of, get this, a duplicate of the Indianapolis Pace Car. It had large orange horses racing down both sides.

By the way, before she knew me Vicky and the other girls in her dorm suite called my car "The Orange Pumpkin."

Speaking of being a student, did you get the report card you wanted?

If you went to college, did you get the courses and teachers you wanted?

I learned getting the right courses and right teachers was almost as important as getting busy studying when it came to making good grades. Just watch the football players and take the courses they took, I learned. Courses like rocks for jocks, or the less fun title, Geology 101.

Yes, it's an important question, Have you gotten what you wanted?

Did you get the gene pool with the good health you wanted?

Did you get the doctor or surgeon you wanted?

Did you get the job you wanted? Is your job something you enjoy or something you endure?

Did you get from your parents' estate what you wanted?

Of course-----of course, getting material things is the least of it.

And so I also ask, did you get the close friends you wanted?

Did you get the brothers or sisters you wanted?

My oldest brother, Steve, had some speech problems when he was young. Yes, preacher man had trouble talking. When my mother was pregnant with Ken people asked Steve what he wanted and he said a “Thister. I want a Thister” But he didn’t get the “Thister” he wanted. He got a brother. And then two more brothers. No Thisters for Stevie.

Well, nobody asked me if I wanted older brothers.

In addition to siblings, did you get the mother you wanted?

Did you get the father you wanted?

Did you get the spouse or partner you wanted?

Did you get the love you wanted?

And here’s one more question, one perhaps you’ve never asked, perhaps never even thought of asking or imagined the need to ask. This may be a surprising question because the answer may seem self-evident, obvious to you, but here’s the question. Have you gotten the God you wanted?

Has God been with you each and every day?

Has God been with you in your most difficult times?

Has God protected you from harm? Tell the truth.

Has God provided justice for you? Have the scales of right and wrong, righteousness and unrighteousness, good and evil been balanced? Or have you been left more than once with the short end of the stick?

Has God done all the things God is supposed to do? Is God as great as everybody says God is?

The course I hated the most in Seminary, with the exception of Evangelism 101, the course I had to bite my tongue in frequently was Systematic Theology, a course in which we explored the omnipotence of God, the omniscience of God, the magnificence of God, the sovereignty of God, the wisdom of God, the holiness of God, the immutability of God, the foreknowledge of God, the righteousness of God, the infinite perfection of God.

Getting the picture?

God sounds pretty good from that description. God appears to be the God we want, the God we desperately need, a God who would never fail us or forsakes us, a God we can count on, a God who is perfect in every way.

God, by definition, has to be perfect, right?

I've often wondered if we have to have a perfect God because so much of our lives are less than satisfactory. Or put another way, do we expect God to be perfect in all the ways our lives are not perfect? Is our view of God our way of dealing with, addressing unmet wants and needs? Is our theology an over compensation for lives that are filled with unmet wants and needs?

The God many people have is a God beyond criticism. Just like some people think patriotism means not criticizing the United States, some Christians think being Christian, being truly Christian, being super Christian means one cannot criticize or complain about God.

To be sure, you can find this perfect God in the Bible. Psalm 145, for example, is about as glowing of an assessment of God as you can get. "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable. . . .On thy wondrous works I will meditate." I'd say that's giving God a straight A report card.

You will also find in the Bible the idea that complaining to God is not such a good idea. Numbers 11:1 reports that in the wilderness the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes; and when the Lord heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them, and consumed some outlying parts of the camp.

You'll think twice about complaining next time, won't you!

And yet, despite Psalm 145 and Numbers 11 the Bible, not in one place, but in numerous texts, complaining about God is legitimated. The Church's scripture witnesses to people saying, "God, you are not the God I want. You are not the God I need. God, please start acting like God." And so God is not---is not a God beyond criticism after all.

When's the last time you complained to God other than what we did earlier in the worship service?

Have you ever thought that some of the stuff you dish out to other people, some of your anger, for example, might be better directed to God?

In her book *Saving Graces*, Elizabeth Edwards reflects on the death of her son, Wade, and shares that in the aftermath of that tragedy she became a part of an online grief group for parents who had lost children, a group that, unfortunately, became quite contentious. Most people in the group were Christians but there were also non-Christians, and doubters in the group. Tension arose when Christians celebrated that their family's religious practices were their dead children's passport to heaven.

What had been a place of solace quickly became a place of war.

Edwards writes: The dialogue was full of pain, even among the believers. There were those who had had faith that God could have intervened and saved their child, but that for some unknown reason God did not.

For her part Edwards notes: I never accepted a God who might have chosen to intervene in the death of my son but did not, who could have decided to stop the invisible wind that killed my son, but decided to do nothing. I listened to the Bill Moyers PBS series Genesis in which someone stated that what was not admirable could not be God's motivation. Another participant responded that we don't have the God we want, we have the God we have.

Let me repeat that. We don't have the God we want, we have the God we have.

Both were right, maybe, Edwards concludes. "God did not cause our children to die and did not wish them pain or suffering, and it was not that---this time and not another---God allowed such a terrible thing to happen. I came to understand and accept a God willing to stand back and not intervene in accident, disease, violence. It may not be the God we want-----certainly it is not the God we now want-----but it is the God we have. . ."

I'll ask you again, Have you gotten what you want?

Have you gotten what you needed?

Have you gotten all the God you wanted and needed?

From my perch, Numbers 11 is not true. Even Jesus complained to God. Even Jesus felt forsaken by God and Jesus let God know that in no uncertain terms.

From my vantage point, Psalm 145 is true, but best I can tell so is Psalm 44.

Here's a prayer. May we get all the God we want and need, and if we don't, may we be honest enough to let God know it. And may we direct the stuff that needs to go to God and not lay it on other people, other people who don't need our misdirected stuff because their life is difficult too.

And God's people said-----Amen.