

Struggling With the Trials of Unanswered Prayer

It is a great frustration to ask God for something and not get an answer.

We pray for a friend to be healed, yet watch in horror as they die from a disease. We ask for a relative to get saved only to see them dive even deeper into sin. We pray for the future of a child only to see them perish from some tragic accident or self-inflicted wound.

We plead for God to liberate us from a harmful situation, yet see no rescue. Or, we press God for deliverance from a demonic stronghold or intransigent habit, yet see no change.

What makes it worse is that we read of people in the Bible who received swift answers to prayer. Others received answers, but had to persist in asking for months, years or even a lifetime. Still others died without seeing an answer.

Know this: life is a battle where even the holiest and most faithful of believers are forced to struggle with the trial of unanswered prayer.

A Biblical Perspective

There is no “one-size-fits-all” reason for unanswered prayer. Every situation is different, as is the spiritual life of every petitioner. There are clear principles, however, that should give us some understanding.

It's important to realize that the answer to some of our prayers may only come after we've gone to heaven. Why? One reason is that answered prayer needs to operate within the constrictions of the free will choices of everyone involved. For example, the answer to prayer for the salvation of a loved

one can never be the product of divine coercion. Nor can it be manipulated by the emotion-driven timetable of the petitioner. God has ways of arranging circumstances that make a positive decision compellingly attractive, however.

When we pray for something that is consistent with His revealed will, such as the salvation of a loved one (1 Tim. 2:4; Acts 16:31), God begins to work immediately, even though we may see no evidence of it.

Why the delay? Because there is more to realizing the answer than meets the eye.

Ultimately, the silence of God when we pray forces us to decide once and for all whether or not He is good. As Oswald Chambers wrote: "The core of all sin is the doubt that God is good."

Self-Deception

Sometimes we fool ourselves into thinking that we want deliverance from a sin when we really don't. For example, I prayed for years to be freed from the power of a besetting sin and got no relief. One night, the Spirit of God fell on me and I instantly knew that He had finally answered my prayer. My first thought was "Finally God, thank you!" but my second thought was "Oh no!"

You see, in that moment, I came face to face with the fact that I enjoyed the sin more than I loved God. I loved the pleasure and the temporary comfort that it brought. I was still dependent on it rather than God to weather the deep brokenness in me that remained unhealed. In essence, I had been pleading with God with tears, for years, for something I didn't really want.

After we have finally matured enough to mean business, God will then deliver us from the snare of the fowler (Ps. 91:3). In the meantime, we should pray for God to work in us a

genuine desire to be free (Phil. 2:12-23).

On occasion, God doesn't give us what we want when we want it because He sees in our heart that we are not yet ready to value and/or shepherd the answer—that once things get too hard, we will forsake what has been done for us. Jesus spoke of this in His parable of the seeds sown on rocky, thorny and good soil (Matt. 13:18-23). From God's perspective, the blood of His Son makes everything that His death and resurrection achieved very precious indeed.

In so many cases, God is trying to protect us from ourselves. We learn a very important principle in 2 Peter 2:20-22: that for those who have tasted of the holy gift of divine forgiveness and who return to a life of sin, it is better for them not to have known the way of righteousness. A similar sentiment can be found in Hebrews 6:4-8; 10:37-39, Galatians 4:8-9 and Luke 9:62. In His mercy, God withholds the answer so as not to put us in that position.

Biblical Reasons for Unanswered Prayer

The Bible has much to say about prayer. Let's examine some of the things that could delay or prevent an answer.

Salvation

You are not yet a true believer and thus have no "standing" before God (Acts 2:38, 4:12; John 3:16-18, 14:6).

Guarding Your Heart and Mind

You may not have properly engaged in the battle through guarding your heart and mind and are therefore not ready to participate in the answer (Phil. 4:7, 3:19; 2 Cor. 10:5).

Renewing Your Mind

You may still need to obey God's directive to pursue the renewing of your mind (Rom. 12:2; Col. 3:2-3; Matt. 22:37-38).

Understanding

Your understanding of what brings about answered prayer may be incomplete (Acts 17:11).

Quenching or Grieving the Holy Spirit

You may still be living in ongoing, unrepentant sin, or are in other ways quenching or grieving the Holy Spirit by your thoughts, words, beliefs or actions (Eph. 4:28-32; 1 Thess. 5:19-22; Ps. 66:18).

Marital Strife

Your earthly marriage may be characterized by anger and unforgiveness (1 Pet. 3:7; Eph. 4:26-27).

Love of the World

You may be, in a sense, withholding your love for God by holding on to a love of the world (1 John 2:15; ; Jam. 4:4; John 3:19).

Unforgiveness

You may be withholding forgiveness from one or more people (Eph. 4:31-32; Matt. 5:24b,18:35).

Lack of Reconciliation

You may have neglected or refused to seek reconciliation with someone you have sinned against or who has sinned against you (Matt. 5:23-24; 2 Cor. 5:18-19).

Lack of Reverence

Your prayers may be casual, high-handed, cavalier, impolite or in some other way not in accordance with the majesty of God (Heb. 5:7).

Doubt

You may not be asking in faith (James 1:6-8, 5:15; Heb. 11:1, 6; Mark 11:24; Rom. 10:17).

A Lack of Persistence

You may not have gone to the length of being importunate or tenacious in your asking (1 Thess. 5:17; Luke 18:1-8).

A Worldly Request

You may have been asking for something that is not good or wise in the eyes of God (Matt. 7:7a, 8a, 11c).

Wrong Motives

It may be that you have been praying with wrong motives, such as praying to be seen by men (Jam. 4:2d-3b; Matt. 6:1-6; Heb. 4:12-13).

Selfishness

You may have been asking for your “greeds” rather than your needs (Phil. 4:19).

Lack of Divine Intimacy

You may not be living out of an intimately loving relationship with God (Matt. 22:27; John 14:20, 15:7-8).

Idolatry

You may not have sought, received, examined and appropriately responded to God’s revelation of idolatry in your life—intellectual or otherwise (Eph. 5:3-5; Col. 3:5; Rom. 1:24-25; Ex. 20:3).

Impoverished Love

You may lack a genuine love for God, the brethren and/or those who do not know God (Luke 6:38; Eph. 3:17b-19; John 14:15; Prov. 21:13).

Not God's Will

You may have been asking for things that are not according to His will (1 John 5:14; Rom. 12:2).

Unformed Will

You may not have been seeking God, His kingdom and His will with all your heart (Phil. 2:12-13).

Fasting

Your request may be the kind that requires not only prayer, but fasting (Mark 9:17-29, KJV).

The Name of Jesus

You may not have been asking in Jesus' name (John 14:13-14, 15:16, 16:23b-24).

Timing

You may be unaware of the greater or related issues that surround a perfect answer to your prayer (Hab. 2:3; Eccl. 8:6).

Eternal Purposes

Your request may not be in accord with God's ultimate plans and purposes (Dan. 2:21; Eph. 1:7-10, 18-23, 3:10-11).

A Review

In brief, answers to prayer come most often when you are:

- In a saving relationship with God.
- Fully engaged in guarding your heart and mind.
- Fully engaged in the renewing of your mind.
- Sufficiently grounded in God's Word that you have a good

understanding of its principles.

–No longer grieving or quenching the Holy Spirit through sinful behavior.

–Living in harmony with your spouse.

–No longer in love with the world and the things of the world.

–No longer living with unforgiveness toward anyone.

–Reconciled with everyone, to the degree that they have made it possible.

–So much in love with Jesus that you approach Him with the respect and reverence that He deserves.

–Asking in faith, without doubting.

–Persisting in prayer.

–Asking for “good gifts” (by God’s definition).

–Asking with godly motives.

–Asking for something that you need (as opposed to something you merely fancy).

–In an abiding (lasting and intimate) relationship with God.

–Seeking *first* His kingdom and righteousness.

–Asking from a place of love for God and all men.

–Asking in accordance with His will.

–Asking while seeking God with all your heart in every way.

–Fasting as necessary for the more difficult situations.

–Asking *in His name* (by His power, authority and according to His character).

–Trusting God for His perfect timing in bringing the answer.

–Yielding to the possibility that the greater purposes of God in salvation history must take precedence above all things.

Once you have met these and possibly other criteria, God will answer your prayer, supply all your needs and provide you with “good gifts” from above (Jam. 1:17).

If you are a new believer, God will probably not require adherence to all of the criteria listed above. He will respond according to the light that you have. However, He will call you to grow in faith, which will lead you into all truth, with its accompanying responsibilities (John 16:13-14; John 8:31-32).

Prayer forces us to decide whether God is good or not. When the fat lady finally sings, we will completely understand the reasons for the parameters that He has established and praise Him for them. Then begins the wonderful life.

Ultimately, the chief end of prayer is that the Father be glorified (John 14:13). It is in knowing Him that we can be set free from the things of this world and the entanglements of the kingdom of darkness.

Remember, God may have an overriding purpose in answering your prayer in spite of these basic principles, but all things being equal, these are issues that may need to be addressed when encountering unanswered prayer. {eo}

Excerpted from Why Aren't My Prayers Being Answered.

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