

When God answers prayer...

Intro: One of the privileges we have in being children of God is the opportunity to speak with God in prayer. At times we may be hindered from praying because we are confused or discouraged by what we may perceive as a lack of response from God.

Today I want to affirm to you that God always answers our prayers; but that He does not always answer the same way.

Sometimes God says “No”.

Our request is not in God’s will or plan for us or others.

Consider the prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. He came before the Father without sin and prayed to Him:

And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt.” (Matthew 26:39)

What Jesus asked for, God could not do in view of His redemptive plan. It was not God’s will that Jesus escape the suffering of the cross. It was a necessary part of God’s plan to save us all! God had to say “no” to that prayer to save our souls! Aren’t you grateful that God said “no” to that prayer? Had He not said “no” we would have had no hope of eternal life.

But notice that Jesus had such a wonderfully submissive attitude in his prayer, “yet not as I will, but as you will”. Perhaps it was on this basis that the Hebrew observed about Jesus:

In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. (Hebrews 5:7)

And so, we should see that God may at times answer prayers in this way because of His sovereign wisdom in knowing what is best not only for a particular individual, but what is best for the whole of mankind. We cannot always see what He sees. And knowing God’s love and knowing God’s answer to Jesus should help us with that and encourage us to simply accept His will, even when he says, “no” to our prayers. We can know that we have been heard and we can be satisfied that He knows best and His purpose is most important.

Sometimes God says, “Slow”

Our request is not God’s will at this particular time. Sometimes God may be willing to answer a prayer request, but not on our schedule. Instead he may ask us to patiently wait awhile..

Do you remember the story of Lazarus and how Mary and Martha, seeing that their brother was dying sent word for Jesus to come.

The sisters therefore sent to Him, saying, “Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick.” (John 11:3)

They knew Jesus' love for Lazarus and they thought he would come right away and heal him. But Jesus did the most remarkable thing; he continued his teaching as if there was nothing to be concerned about, waiting two more days before making the journey to Bethany. Jesus tarried beyond the Jordan until he made it clear to his disciples that Lazarus had died; then he went to the place that Lazarus was and Mary met him with deep sorrow:

Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." (John 11:32)

What Martha and Mary could not see was that Jesus had a plan to do something far greater—not just save their brother from death, but to bring him back to them from the grave. Little did they know when Jesus didn't come that His answer was not "no", but "slow". He was saying "wait and watch me do something far greater than anything you ever imagined".

Sometimes in life we must not be confused when the answer seems to be "no"; instead the answer may simply be "slow". What God may be saying to us is, "I have something even greater in store for you, if you will only wait for me and trust me!" Sometimes we become impatient with God, and we quit praying. We quit trusting Him. What blessings do we miss because we gave up on God too soon, mistaking "slow" for "no". Jesus urged us not to give up on God too quickly.

Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, (Luke 18:1)

Sometimes God says, "Grow"

Our motives are wrong.

Sometimes God cannot answer prayers because our motivation is questionable. Even though we may be asking for a good thing, we may be asking for the wrong reasons.

You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. (James 4:3)

Sometimes our prayers are motivated by worldly attitudes. If God said, "yes" to us, He would only reward attitudes that His word discourages; so, instead of saying "no" God says "grow". He says, "Get your heart right with me first so that I can bless you!"

For what reason do you want material blessings? For you or for God? Do you want money so that you can buy an expensive car or so you can help do God's work? Do you want health so that you can travel or so that you can visit the sick?

Anytime we don't receive the answer to prayer as we had hoped we should take a moment to do some serious soul searching. Why am I disappointed? Why did I really pray?

Sometimes God says, "Go"

Our request, timing, and spiritual condition are okay...Yes!

In 1 Kg. 18 we read about Elijah coming before God in the presence of the Israelites. He was seeking the glory of the Lord and he was praying for Him to bless His people and to help them see that He was the true God.

Thus, he called upon the Lord to end a three-year long drought.

So Ahab went up to eat and drink. But Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he crouched down on the earth, and put his face between his knees. (1 Kings 18:42)

In this case there was no overriding principle that made it necessary for God to say “no”.

The needs of the people now were urgent and they had learned to put their faith in God. For three years they had waited. During that time God had been saying “slow”! I want you to trust me and not the false gods of Canaan.

There was no questionable motive. Elijah only wanted to glorify God and the people now needed to see that He was the true God.

So God didn’t say, “grow”.

God answered the prayer—promptly and powerfully.

James reminds us that Elijah’s example teaches us an important lesson.

“The effective fervent prayer of the righteous can accomplish much” (Jas. 5:17).

James gives this illustration to show us the great power in prayer to heal the sick, to comfort the bereaved, to support the needy, to open doors to teach, to change the destiny of nations.

Conclusion: Almost every service we pray and I hope every day you pray, asking God to bless you and to bless others. I hope that His answers will not confuse and confound us, but instead instruct and encourage us to “pray without ceasing”. Even when the answers to prayer disappoint, don’t give up on God.