

## Troubleshooting Unanswered Prayer

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Series: **PRAYER**

### Introduction:

#### The four purposes of prayer

We learn that in prayer...

- *we declare our dependence on God;*
- *we grow in our relationship with God;*
- *we ask and receive from God; and*
- *we build the kingdom for God.*

The longer I'm a Christian, from both my study of God's Word and personal experience, I find that those four purposes are true.

God wants to answer our prayers – He desires to grant the requests of His children. But you and I both know that sometimes our prayers are not answered. In fact, we'd all have to admit that many people pray and never get any answer. Why is that? What causes that?

Is this whole concept of prayer just a farce, a superstition, something we just con ourselves into and pretend that it works but it really doesn't? Or is prayer real, and God's promises about it are true, but we are somehow missing out on what is and is not acceptable prayer to God?

I think that most of us have seen enough answers to prayer that we believe that it is for real, and that God does hear and answer. So I think we need to ask another question: *Does God promise to answer everyone's prayers?* And the biblical answer is *No*. In fact, the Bible says that God has laid out some conditions to answered prayer. And I want us to look at those conditions, because until you meet the conditions for answered prayer, you're wasting your breath. On the other hand, if you do meet these conditions you have every right to expect that what you ask for will be answered in prayer.

## 1. AN HONEST RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. – John 15:7 (ESV)*

That's a beautiful promise. But in Scripture every promise has a condition attached to it. Some people just pay attention to the promise, never meet the condition attached to it, and then wonder why their prayer wasn't answered. The promise here is, "*ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*" The condition is at the beginning of the verse, "*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you.*"

How do you stay joined to Christ? By His words remaining in you. In other words, God says if we fill our minds with the Bible, the Word of God, then we will be in Christ. God requires that we listen to Him first before He listens to us. If I don't pay attention to what God says to me in His word, why should He pay attention to me when I talk to Him?

The starting point is to have an honest relationship to God. How? Through the Word of God – that's why Bible study is important. You ask, "Are you saying if I don't study my Bible I won't have answered prayer?" No, what I'm saying is that the more you understand the Bible the more you'll know how to pray effectively. In fact, if you're not spending time in the Word, there is no way you can really know what to pray for at all. Let me give you three questions to help you evaluate if you have an honest relationship with God.

***Question #1: Do I refuse to admit things that I have done wrong in the past?***

The Bible calls that unconfessed sin – it may be an activity, an attitude, or a habit. When we go our own way, do our own thing; it breaks our connection with God. When we try to hide things from God then that honest relationship is broken.

*If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. – Psalm 66:18 (ESV)*

*It's your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, he has turned away and will not listen anymore. – Isaiah 59:2 (NLT)*

So what should you do if you haven't been honest with God?

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. – 1 John 1:9 (ESV)*

What is confession? Confession is simply being honest with God. It's saying, "God, You're right. I was wrong. Please forgive me."

***Question #2: Am I currently ignoring any of God's principles?***

In other words, when God tells me to do something and I don't do it, or when I know I'm holding onto something that God wants me to let go of and I continue to hold onto it, that breaks my connection with God.

*Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. – 1 John 3:21-22 (ESV)*

You say, "How can I keep all of God's commands. Nobody's perfect. How am I ever going to get any answers?" God doesn't demand perfection – He simply demands obedience. Example: I tell a 3-year-old, "Go clean up your room." If 30 minutes later I go in and the room is half picked up and he doesn't have everything in the exact order I want it, do I get upset about it? No – he's only a 3-year-old, but he did the best he could. But if I come in a half hour after telling him to clean his room and he's in front of the TV watching his Veggie Tales video, then do I get upset? You bet. Why? Because as a parent, I don't expect perfection but I do expect obedience, an attitude of "I want to do what's right." So we ask, "Am I hiding something from God in my relationship? ... Am I doing what I know He wants me to do at this point?"

### ***Question #3: Do I really want God's will for my life?***

*And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him. – 1 John 5:14-15 (ESV)*

When we ask according to God's will then we have confidence in prayer and we know He's going to answer. Most Christians make a big mistake in prayer: they go around constantly saying, "God, is it Your will that I ask for this?" over every little item. The real issue is not *God, what is Your will regarding this specific circumstance?* The real issue is "Am I in God's will as a person?" If my life is in harmony with God, then my desires are going to be in harmony with God.

St. Augustine said: "Love God and do what you please." Why did he say that? Because if you really love God with all your heart, you're not going to want to do what displeases God. You get your life in God's will and say, "To the best of my knowledge, I'm trying to do what's right, Lord. I want to live in Your will." Then you ask according to your desires.

## **2. A FORGIVING ATTITUDE**

More than any other characteristic in the Bible except perhaps faith, the number one discipline related to prayer is forgiveness. I have dealt with this one in my own life – After being wrongly treated by a group of people; I harbored a deep bitterness against them for a couple of years. I didn't even realize how bad it was, until after I forgave them. It is hard to describe to you the freedom that I felt before God once I rid myself of the bitterness that I'd allowed to grow in my own life.

Over and over again, when Jesus talks about prayer He talks about forgiveness. Why? Because nothing will kill your prayers faster than resentment. When you hold a grudge, when you nurse an ill feeling, when you allow bitterness to grow in your life, it knocks out the effectiveness of your prayers. Maybe you're praying and not getting an answer because you're holding a grudge

against somebody today – you need to forgive before you can expect an answer. What do you pray every time you pray the Lord's Prayer?

*Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. – Luke 11:4a (NLT)*

If you're holding onto some kind of grudge today, the only person it is hurting is you and your relationship to God.

### 3. A GENEROUS NATURE

Let's make this real simple: *If you expect God to bless your life you must be willing to bless other people's lives with the same benefits God has given to you.* That is a basic Scriptural principle:

*Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered.* – **Proverbs 21:13 (ESV)**

God says if you pay no attention to other people's legitimate needs, why should He pay attention to your needs? God wants us to be like Him, so He sets as a pre-requisite for blessing our lives the requirement that we are a blessing to other people. If we ignore those who are in obvious difficulty around us, what right do we have to expect God to bail us out?

*Whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.* – **1 John 3:22-23 (ESV)**

God says that one of the ways we keep His commands is by loving other people. How do we love other people?

*But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? – 1 John 3:17 (ESV)*

One of the ways we prove that we have loved is that we're willing to be generous with other people. I wouldn't presume to ask God to bless my business if I weren't willing to give back a portion of what He had blessed me, with a tithe of 10% or more. You say, "I ask God for good health." What are you going to do with that healthy body after you've got it? Are you going to spend all the effort and energy on yourself or are you willing to help other people? One of the conditions for answered prayer is to be willing to help those less fortunate with the blessings that we are given.

#### 4. **A FAITH THAT GOD WILL ANSWER**

If you don't believe that God is going to answer, why even bother asking? The Bible makes it abundantly clear that faith in God's ability to answer is a requirement for any type of prayer.

*And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith. – Matthew 21:22 (ESV)*

*Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. – Mark 11:24 (ESV)*

In both of these passages Jesus is not speaking about prayer for anything in particular – He says "whatever you ask" – He's placing no limits here – the only condition is belief. You can't doubt – You must expect God to answer. The only kind of prayer that God answers is the prayer of faith.

What is faith? Is faith believing that God can do it? "I believe God can do it!" That's not faith – When you believe God can, that's just a fact. God can do it whether you believe it or not. "I believe God might do it." That's not faith either – that's hope. "I believe God will do it." That's faith! Not believing God can do it, not believing God might do it, but believing God will do it. We see so little in our lives because we expect so little in our lives.

Once two blind men came to Jesus and asked him to heal them:

*When he entered the house, the blind men came to him, and Jesus said to them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” They said to him, “Yes, Lord.” Then he touched their eyes, saying, “According to your faith be it done to you.” And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them, “See that no one knows about it.” – **Matthew 9:28-30 (ESV)***

*“According to your faith be it done to you.” Not because of your ability, not because of how good a person you are but “According to your faith be it done to you.”*

The fact is, if you have met the conditions of Scripture – you have an honest relationship to God, you have, as far as you know, no bitterness toward anyone, you're willing to share the results with other people, and you're asking God in faith and expecting – you have every right to expect God to answer.

## 5. AN AUTHORITATIVE APPROACH

*Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. – **John 14:13 (ESV)***

*Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full. – **John 16:24 (ESV)***

What is so special about Jesus' name? What does it mean? I heard a story once that helps to illustrate this. A pastor friend took his young son and about fourteen of his son's friends to the carnival for a birthday party. He bought a roll of tickets and he'd stand at the front of every ride and as the kids came by – his son and the fourteen friends – he gave everybody a ticket. He was just handing them out. All of a sudden he looked up and realized there was a little boy with his hand out asking for a ticket that he'd never seen in his life. He stopped and said, "Son, are you

with my son's party?" "No." "Why should I give you a ticket?" The young boy turned around and pointed to the man's son and said, "Your son said you'd give me one." So he gave him one.

Here's the point: I don't have any right to get any prayers answered from God. What makes me think I should get my prayers answered? God doesn't owe me anything. When I come and pray and ask God for requests, I don't ask on my own merit but I come on the merit of His Son Jesus Christ. I come and say, "Father, I'm coming to You because Your Son said so. I'm coming because of what Jesus Christ has already done for me on the cross and He said I can ask in His name. God, I'm coming in Jesus' name and by His authority."

### **Conclusion:**

Which of these conditions have you been overlooking? Maybe you've been holding a grudge. Maybe you've been nursing resentment and you have allowed bitterness to build up in your life. Maybe you've been refusing to admit some wrong in your life. You've known it was there but you didn't want to go to God and say, "You're right, God, that's wrong. I admit it." Maybe you've prayed but you've never really expected God to answer. Maybe you've been unwilling to share God's blessing with other people. Maybe you've been hesitant to give back to God a tenth or more of all the things He's been blessing you with. Have you been praying in Jesus' name? You can't pray in Jesus' name unless you know Him as a friend, as your Lord, as your Savior, as the director of your life. The most important question is, "Do you have an honest relationship with God?" I'm not talking about church membership, I'm not talking about being religious, I'm talking about a relationship. You can have that today, if you'll just turn your life over to Jesus Christ.