

“The Best Prayers in the Bible” (Part 6)

Isaiah 38.1-6; 2 Corinthians 12.7-10; Daniel 10.1-14

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So what about those times when you pray, and God doesn't answer ... or God says *no*?

Several of you gave me stories from your own lives about times when you felt that God answered your prayers. One of you asked God for help loving someone who was hard to love ... and he provided an opportunity to you to do just that. One of you asked God to take away a really bad headache ... and he did. One of you asked God to help you find a missing hearing aid ... and he did. One of you told me a story of someone *else* you know, who prayed for her dying husband to get better, and to give them another child ... and he did. Clearly, there are times when God answers prayer. Hezekiah, one of the kings of ancient Judah, was terribly ill, so ill that the prophet Isaiah thought he was surely going to die, and Hezekiah prayed, and God heard his prayer, and Hezekiah lived for another fifteen years. There are times when God answers prayer.

But what about the times when God *doesn't*?

You know, there were only about five people – out of this entire congregation – who told me stories about God answering their prayers. Maybe there were some who meant to, but never got around to it; maybe there were others who have a story to tell, but elected not to. Whatever the reason, I only heard from about five of you. It makes me wonder: is our collective experience with prayer more often the *opposite*? The times when we pray, and we don't get what we ask for? You ask God to make something to go away, and it doesn't go away. You ask God to help a troubled relationship, and nothing seems to change. I remember vividly a time, some years ago, when I was part of a prayer group at a church in another state, and a beloved member of the church was battling leukemia. She had just been told that she probably wasn't going to survive. Our prayer group had a vigorous discussion about *what do we pray for, now?* We decided to be gutsy and bold and ask God to restore her to full health ... and she died a few weeks later. Are there times when God says “no”?

The apostle Paul tells of a time in his own life when God said “no.” He says that he was given a “thorn in his flesh” to “keep him from being too proud.” He describes this thorn as “a messenger of Satan to torment me.” He doesn't explain what it was. An illness? An addiction? A struggle with temptation? The passage is open to different interpretations. He prayed to God that it would go away ... and it didn't go away. He prayed a second time ... and a third ... and nothing changed. Paul had to

carry out his ministry with this thorn in his flesh, and the humility that came with it. God had said, “No.”

Why would God say “no”?

Some scripture verses appear to say that God will answer *all* our prayers: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” (Matthew 7:7) Other verses suggest it depends on how we ask: “Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” (Mark 11:24) “Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.” (Matthew 21:22) So if God says “no” to our prayers, does that mean that we just don’t have enough faith? Or what about this verse: “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.” (Isaiah 59:2) Does God sometimes say “no” to our prayers because of our own *sin*? If we can get our life straightened up, *and* if we have enough faith, *then* will God answer all our prayers?

I stumbled onto an article at bible.org,¹ written by a woman named Sue Bohlin who works for a parachurch ministry. She offers 11 reasons why God might say “no” to prayer. Her list includes:

1. Sin in our lives
2. To say yes would bring harm we don’t foresee
3. God has something far greater in store for us
4. We pray at cross purposes with other believers
5. We pray for things where a “yes” is impossible
6. We pray for things that are already determined
7. We get discouraged in prayer by thinking God has said no when in fact He’s said nothing at all
8. God’s “No” is not rejection, but redirection
9. God’s “No” isn’t punishment, it’s preparation
10. God’s “No” will sometimes bring greater glory to God
11. God’s “No” opens the door to an adventure with God

That’s just a quick summary; she explains each of those in more depth, and offers several scripture verses to support what she is saying. Honestly, it’s a good list; it’s one of the most thorough and well-grounded lists like that I’ve ever seen, and I think her article could help *many* discouraged Christians.

But I think she missed at least *one* possible reason why it sometimes feels like God says *no* to our prayers. I need credit to the Christian writer John Eldredge for this one; he was the one who helped me see it. It’s illustrated best in the book of Daniel. Daniel has a revelation that there will be a terrible conflict. He is greatly distressed, and he starts praying to God for understanding. Three weeks later, an angel appears to Daniel. The angel explains that Daniel’s prayer was heard. God heard Daniel’s prayer, and God sent that angel to Daniel in response to his prayer. But it took three weeks for the angel to get there. Why? The angel explains: “For twenty-one days the prince of the Kingdom of Persia blocked my way.” Wait a minute – you mean that not only does God sometimes send angels in response to our

¹ <https://bible.org/article/when-god-says-no-reasons-unanswered-prayer>

prayers (we talked about that last week!), but also that sometimes those angels can't get to where they're supposed to go because there are other powers and forces in this universe that hinder them? Yes, that is *exactly* what this scripture passage is saying. Now I know, some of you are having trouble with this concept. Angels are one thing, but now we're also talking about ... what? Demons? Fallen angels? Dark princes in the spiritual realm, who stand opposed to God and God's ways. In this case, a dark spiritual force that is having a negative impact on the entire kingdom of Persia, like a great dark cloud covering the whole surface of the land, and the angel from God is having trouble getting through. He says that Michael, one of the greatest of the angels, came to help him, joining the fight against the dark prince, which allowed Daniel's angel to get past him. The angel finally makes it to Daniel – 21 days after God dispatched him – to give Daniel the understanding Daniel had asked for in his prayers. And when the angel leaves, he tells Daniel he has to go back and rejoin the fight against the dark prince.

In other words: *sometimes when you pray, God wants to say yes, but his efforts are hindered by the spiritual powers of darkness. Sometimes, angels have to fight their way through the darkness to bring you the light that you asked for. Sometimes they can't – because the darkness is too thick. It's like a plane that's trying to reach Houston – but there's a huge hurricane, and the plane simply can't get to Houston that day. Dallas, maybe. Austin, perhaps. But not Houston. Not as long as that hurricane is there. What if it's the case that there are times when God genuinely wants to come to your aid – but the angel he dispatches simply can't get to you in a timely fashion because of forces blocking the way?*

I know. Some of you are thinking this is too far-fetched. Too far out there. But is it any more far-fetched than the notion that God raised Jesus from the dead? That the Word became *flesh*? Be careful that you don't fall into the trap of believing in *some* of the great spiritual truths of the Bible and rejecting others. We are all products of modern ways of thinking, and some of this doesn't come easily or naturally to us. Don't let our cultural biases become a stumbling block for you to perceive and understand what's *really* going on in this universe of ours.

After all, what is prayer? It's *an attempt to influence what's going on in the spiritual realm*. We have the audacity to ask God to change a situation. If we don't believe that God has the power to change anything, then there's no point in praying. But if we *do* believe that God has the power to change things, if we *do* believe that God actually *hears* what we mere mortals utter in our prayers, then can we also envision that there might be *spiritual agents* whom God might dispatch to help us ... *and* sinister forces that might stand in their way? Prayer isn't just asking God for something, and then sitting around to see whether God says yes. Prayer is sending a *beacon* into the spiritual realm – a beacon which *God* sees ... but maybe *other* forces see it too. They might not *want* God to answer your prayer.

Which is why we should never offer *wimpy* prayers. If we want our prayers to actually *do* something, to make an *impact*, we need to offer them with *conviction*. With *authority* – the authority that comes from Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, the Son of God, second person of the Trinity, to whom has been given “all authority in heaven and on earth.” We'll talk about *that* in a couple weeks....

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