

## How is prayer answered?

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*The answer to prayer will mostly be for those prayers that are petitions. Prayer that is praise and thanksgiving does not require a specific answer other than the fulfilment of the implicit desire that God's Name will be glorified in the earth as well as in heaven. This article will consider the means available to God, how our and others' free will may affect the answer, the need for faith, and how the answer to prayer may be recognised.*

**A** NUMBER OF passages will spring to the readers' minds that remind us that there are no limitations on the Almighty's ability to answer prayer. However, there may be limitations that we impose on the Almighty that prevent some answers being possible. When God spoke through Isaiah to Israel He said: "Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither His ear heavy, that it cannot hear". There was no inability on the Lord's behalf, but Israel's behaviour and thinking prevented action for their salvation: "but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear" (59:1,2).

Sarah and Abraham, realising that they could never have a son in their physical condition (Gen. 18:11; Rom. 4:19), were rebuked and encouraged by the question, "Is any thing too hard for the LORD?" (Gen. 18:14). The subsequent conception and birth of Isaac demonstrated clearly that, as we would expect, the Creator of all could do what lies outside the power of man.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that the angels are "ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation" (1:14). They effect God's will in the earth. They are appointed to act on behalf of believers as well as managing nations and their rulers to bring about God's blessings, judgements and punishments. The angel to whom Abraham said, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25), had previously said, "Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down . . . I will know" (vv. 20,21). In practice, the other two angels went to Sodom to assess the situation

and to rescue Lot. One of these angels told Lot to escape for his life, "for I cannot do any thing till thou be come thither [to Zoar]" (19:22). These angels clearly were responsible for both Lot's rescue and the destruction of Sodom. It is heartening and amazing to see how the angel manifested God's mercifulness as he urged a very reluctant Lot to leave Sodom (v. 16).

Even when human beings are used to achieve the Divine purpose, the usual limitations that we might assume to apply in a situation are not the deciding factor. God can save with just a handful of people pitted against a vast multitude, as Gideon's experience shows. Indeed, the few (just 300) were selected precisely to prevent Israel assuming that the victory was by their own prowess and initiative (Judg. 7:2). The actual means employed were a dream and its portent for disaster that unsettled at least some of the Midianite host; the surprise appearance of whirling lights and the sound of trumpets; and the Divine input when the Lord set every man's sword against his fellow, to achieve a comprehensive rout of the aggressor.

### Natural and supernatural

We can view what God uses to effect His purpose and to answer prayer in two ways: by the use of natural means and the use of supernatural means. There are problems with this categorisation. The supernatural often looks natural, albeit happening at the appropriate moment and maybe with more than usual intensity. For example, most of the plagues brought upon Egypt to secure Israel's release were natural phenomena. However, the precision of the timing of their arrival and the scale of their manifestation showed the Divine hand at work. Indeed, we are in danger of thinking of natural phenomena as the outcome of some mechanistic arrangement working according to the 'laws of nature', whereas God actively initiates the 'natural order' through His angels. Psalm 104 makes this very clear, saying, for example, "He *causeth* the grass to grow" (v. 14, see too verses 15-24,28).

The failure of the Assyrians to take Jerusalem in Hezekiah's reign was achieved in a two-part intervention by God: "I will send a blast upon him, and he shall hear a rumour, and return to

his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land" (Isa. 37:7). The rumour of an Ethiopian invasion diverted Sennacherib, who was later assassinated by his sons; this would look natural to many observers. The blast was the loss of 180,000 troops in one night by the angel of death (v. 36). This was more obviously Divine intervention. The whole episode was the answer to a prayer for help. Hezekiah showed faith in God's ability to bring deliverance for the city and the nation, and was signally answered.

#### **Free will and the answer to prayer**

There is, in the light of the evidence in the previous section, no limitation on what the Almighty can do if He deems it appropriate. However, prayers made in faith are not always granted. Is this because our request is not good for us? Or is it because we could not cope with the consequences of what we ask for? Or does our prayer actually require God to override our free will or that of others?

When James and John, aided by their mother, asked for special positions in the Kingdom, Jesus said, "Ye know not what ye ask" (Mt. 20:22). They had not understood the consequences of their request, which would involve suffering after Jesus's example. In their case suffering would indeed be their experience, but the reward they asked for did not lie in Jesus's power to give them. Like James and John, we could ask for things that are not for us; and even if we were to aspire to them the cost might be beyond our capacity to give.

In other circumstances, what we earnestly want, and, from our perspective, for the best reasons, is not actually for our ultimate good. In this context we can think of Paul and his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7-9), or the experiences of Joseph as "the word of the LORD tried him" (Ps. 105:19). Joseph's faith and spiritual development allowed him later in his life to see all the trouble he had experienced as part of God's plan for greater good to save the lives of the whole family by a great deliverance (Gen. 45:4-8).

#### **Faith**

Faith is basic to our relationship with God: "But without faith it is impossible to please [God]: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). This statement is illustrated in the lives of numerous faithful men and women whose lives were changed by their faith

in God and His Word. It follows that we need to have more than an academic belief in God's existence; our lives need to be affected by it. When the blind man asked Jesus to heal him, the response was: "According to your faith be it unto you" (Mt. 9:29). The woman with an issue who secretly touched the hem of Jesus's garment was told: "thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace" (Lk. 8:48). In contrast, Jesus could not help more than a few sick folk in Nazareth, and was caused to marvel "because of their unbelief" (Mt. 13:58).

An aspect of faith in prayer is our need to persist because the answer is not necessarily immediately forthcoming. An obvious example is the requirement to pray for God's Kingdom to come: "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (6:10). Another example is the parable of the unjust judge, which was given "that men ought always to pray, and not to faint" (Lk. 18:1), and provides the lesson that the Almighty, the just Judge, will "avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him, though He bear long with them" (v. 7).

An appropriate example of persistence in prayer is that of Zacharias, father of John the Baptist. The Angel Gabriel told him, "thy prayer is heard" (1:13), at a time when both he and Elisabeth were "well stricken in years" (v. 7). Our faith is displayed by persistence in prayer, particularly for those things that relate to the fulfilment of God's revealed purpose: "ye that are the LORD'S remembrancers, take ye no rest, and give Him no rest, till He establish, and till He make Jerusalem a praise in the earth" (Isa. 62:6,7, RV). It is almost as though our prayers are essential to the moving forward of God's purpose. If this is so, then the importance of earnest prayer regularly undertaken cannot be overemphasised. If we want God's ways to be implemented on the earth, not only must we do them, but also we must diligently seek from His revealed Word what He has said and urge Him to bring the fulfilment.

#### **Recognising the answer**

There is no limitation on the part of the Almighty to answer our prayer, and our prayers can be made for the right reasons and with persistence. But how do we know if our prayers are answered? Is it possible that the answers come in a way that we fail to recognise?

In some cases the answer is dramatic, instant and obvious. Peter's call to Jesus as he began to

sink in the water, “Lord, save me”, was instantly answered with a stretched-out hand and a rebuke: “O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?” (Mt. 14:30,31). Some may object that this is too specific, and not the kind of context in which we operate, where Jesus is not visibly present. Hezekiah, in the dire strait of siege and provocation by a powerful enemy, prayed to God, on the basis of His supremacy over all gods and Israel’s special relationship with Him. He was answered within hours in the dramatic events already referred to.

When Peter was in prison and the believers met to pray for him, both they and he were not expecting the rapid release that took place through angelic intervention. Similarly, Zecharias in the temple could not believe that his prayer had, in fact, at long last, been answered. Perhaps the lesson here is about reflecting on our experiences subsequent to our prayers, so that we can see that a particular turn of events was, in fact, the answer to our prayer.

Perhaps, too, as in the case of Nehemiah, the instant or short-term answer to our prayer is the opportunity, which we in faith have to grasp, to open up the fuller answer that we prayed for. This fuller answer may require time for it to come to fulfilment—as in Nehemiah’s case, where he had to arrange his journey, travel to Jerusalem, get support for the project to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and carry through the project in the face of opposition from without the city and failures by those within.

Sometimes the answer to prayer may be long-term, or may be limited by lack of mature faith or by the limitations of our own personal developments.

But what if the answer is no? Without a direct answer, as Paul received when he “besought the Lord thrice, that it [the thorn in the flesh] might depart from me” (2 Cor. 12:8), we might find the situation perplexing. The answer to Paul, which he gladly accepted, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (v. 9), can assure us that even difficult circumstances can be coped with because our Father is using them for our profit and His ultimate glory. We have the assurances: “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee” (Heb. 13:5); and: “God is faithful, Who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

The supreme example of the answer being “No!” is that of Jesus in Gethsemane: “And he went forward a little, and fell on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto Thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what Thou wilt” (Mk. 14:35,36). Although this prayer was essentially said three times, the way forward for Jesus was clear. In his extremity an angel was sent to strengthen him.

What exactly happened we know not, but Hebrews records that “Jesus . . . for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame” (12:2). Maybe the angel at least reiterated the Father’s promises that would come to fulfilment through Jesus’s sacrifice, as well as the part Jesus would play in the new creation developed through his work. Nor should we discount the idea that in extremity in His service God would send an angel to strengthen us. We may not, of course, realise that it was an angel, for “some have entertained angels unawares” (13:2).

Unless we have become reprobate like Saul, the first human king of Israel, then there will be an answer to faithful fervent prayer. It may be instant but it can also be long term, requiring our persistence and trust in our God. Again Jesus’s example is there to encourage us: “Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him That was able to save him from [out of, RV mg.] death, and was heard in that he feared . . .” (5:7). We note that Jesus was not spared death, but raised from the dead. So, too, we may be required to suffer for our own and sometimes for others’ benefit, but such suffering faithfully borne will be rewarded ultimately.

### **Conclusion**

“The LORD’S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither His ear heavy, that it cannot hear” (Isa. 59:1); “there is nothing too hard” for the Lord (Jer. 32:17,27); “the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and His ears are open unto their prayers” (1 Pet. 3:12). We are encouraged, “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Mt. 7:7). On occasions the Lord God will answer us speedily and decisively, and individual brethren and sisters can testify to this in their own experiences. But also the wisdom of God may require us to endure faithfully for a longer-

term answer which will be much more appropriate for us; for He is not willing that any should perish. And when the answer is “No!” then a humble acceptance of the situation will be needed, because the ultimate blessing will more

than compensate for our losses and disadvantages now, as Paul wrote: “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).

## What hinders prayer?

Trevor Maher

*“Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up a cry or prayer for them: for I will not hear them in the time that they cry unto Me for their trouble” (Jer. 11:14);*

*“But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking” (Mt. 6:7).*

**P**RAYER IS ONE of the most important elements in a believer’s life of discipleship. Without prayer we will not succeed in the struggle against our natures, or reach the Kingdom. The fact, therefore, that God would choose not to hear or listen to our prayer is a sobering and arresting thought. So often we take it for granted that, when we pray, our prayers will automatically be received in heaven by God through the mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ. We accept that God may not reply in the way we would prefer, but the act of praying and the assurance of it being heard is of great comfort and reassurance, bringing peace of mind.

When we read the Scriptures and meditate on them, God is speaking to us, revealing His mind and purpose. When we pray to God we are speaking to the Creator and Sustainer of all life, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and our hearts and minds are revealed to Him at this time of communication. Our **attitude** of mind, the **approach** we take, the **activities** we engage in before and after prayer—these three aspects all contribute to the acceptance or otherwise of our prayers.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, and our ways are not God’s ways: “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9). In view of this we do well to heed the words of God through the prophet when He says, “to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at My word” (66:2), if we are not to have any hindrance in our prayers to God. Before looking at specific examples where God refused to hear

prayers, we want briefly to consider the symbol of prayer in the Scripture, that of incense.

### “My prayer . . . incense”

The golden altar and the incense that was burned on it teach us important principles in regard to our prayers. The altar stood at the veil between the holy place and the most holy place. It stood before the ark of the covenant and its mercy seat. Twice a day, morning and evening, the priest would burn incense on the altar when he entered the holy place to trim and refill the lamps of the golden candlestick, at the time of the daily sacrifice.

The symbology of this act of burning incense is explained by other passages of Scripture: “And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel’s hand” (Rev 8:3,4). Another passage in Revelation speaks of the twenty-four elders falling down before the Lamb, “having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours [the Greek is the word translated ‘incense’ in 8:3,4] which are the prayers of saints” (5:8). The psalmist also refers to this symbol of prayer when he says, “Let my prayer be set forth before Thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice” (141:2).

The times of the evening and morning sacrifice were also to be times of prayer, and so it was fitting that the cloud of incense should rise up from the golden altar then. The word translated