

ANSWERS TO PRAYER

We pray for recovery from illness or for a loved one to be spared, yet we continue to live with a disability or the loved one is taken. How do we relate such things to Jesus' unrestricted promises that we shall receive whatever we ask for in His name?

In John 16:23 Jesus makes the solemn pronouncement: "I tell you the absolute truth, if you ask the Father for anything, He will give it to you in My name." We must take such passages together with statements about prayer elsewhere, which add "according to His will", and "believing." In 1 John 5:14 we read: "We have confidence in God that if we ask for anything according to His will, He listens to us." That includes recognising the place of the cross in Jesus' redemption, and our acceptance of God's will, even when it means grief and suffering. After all, all of us are mortal, and all of us expect ultimately face death, no matter whether we pray that we might be spared death until the Lord's return, as Paul did in 2 Cor 5. We pray, not that our will be done, but that His will be done. That means praying that our will conform to His, in trust that all is for the best. That should be self-evident for us.

We must pray in Jesus' name. St Paul wrote to the Ephesians (2:18): "By one Spirit He [Jesus] enables both of us [Jews and Gentiles] to come to the Father." We have access to the Father through Jesus. If we go to the Father with our petitions, we can do that only through Jesus, who has opened the way to the Father by removing the roadblock of sin. So we ought to pray, remembering that Christ by His death on the cross has made it possible for us to go to God. That is what it means to pray in Jesus' name.

Some statements of Scripture speak about our prayers and God's answers to them in unqualified ways that can mislead us into success and prosperity theology. In some wings of Protestantism there is a theology of success and prosperity that we have to beware of. So a word of warning is needed. It assumes that the moment a person becomes a Christian all his troubles are over. It assumes that, if God is giving good weather, good crops, good prices, and availability of goods needed at good prices, then we have a gracious God.

Examples in Scripture suggest that sometimes God does not hear prayer in ways we ask or expect. Did the Father hear Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane to be spared the bitter cup? Yes, by raising Him from the dead. Did God take away Paul's thorn in the flesh, his "messenger of Satan"? He heard Paul's prayer by teaching him that His grace was all he needed, and that, when Paul was weak, he appreciated God's grace all the more. Was God breaking His unconditional promises when He told Paul, "What you already have is best for you"? The apostle Paul had what he called a "thorn in the flesh." Three times he asked the Lord to remove it, but it was not removed. Yet Paul did not say, "The Lord has not answered my prayers." God wanted better things for Paul than relief from his special trouble. Paul recognised that the Lord's answer was that Paul should bear this affliction. God had given him "the messenger of Satan" to keep him from feeling proud because wonderful things had been revealed to him. The Lord wanted Paul to know that God's grace was enough for him, and that God's power was at its best when Paul was weak (2 Cor 12:7-10).

Moses' prayer to see the Lord's glory was only partly answered, from Moses' point of view. He saw only the Lord's back, not His face (Exod 33:18-23). Moses pleaded with the Lord to let him go over to see the good land beyond the Jordan. Because the Lord was angry with him and would not listen to him, the Lord said, "That is enough. Do not speak to me any more about this matter." Yet He allowed him to look in all directions over the land from the top of Mount Pisgah. Surely Moses' prayer was answered when he was allowed to stand with Elijah and Jesus on the mount of transfiguration, within the Promised Land. God told David that Bathsheba's child would die because David had made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt because of his adultery and murder. David pleaded for the baby's life after the Lord struck him. The child died. Yet Bathsheba had another son, Solomon (2 Sam 12:14-24).

We still live under the cross, and there is likely to be more Christian truth in a path of suffering, for our benefit, than a string of successes, with everything going in ways we would like.

Does God answer all prayers of believers? Yes, but sometimes, perhaps often, in ways we do not expect. Does He ever say, "Wait?" Yes, indeed. Does He ever say, "No"? That depends. A child that asks its mother for a sharp knife to play with will, we hope, not get the knife, but a wise mother will give it a better and more interesting thing to play with that will not harm the child. When the Lord, in His wisdom, says "No" to some request in the manner for which we asked, we should not doubt that He has indeed, as a loving Father, who wants what is good for us, heard and answered what we have prayed for. We shall thank God for having answered us as He wants, in love. For that is what we, as Christians, according to the new nature, also want. We confess that God knows what is best far better than we do.

We cannot say what God's reason might be for allowing a wife or husband to be taken when the family seemed to be happily settled in their lovely home, with their children and grandchildren around them. It was a little like Abraham and Sarah's situation, with Isaac in the home, all going nicely with God's promises apparently on the road to glorious fulfilment. God upset Abraham's well being by asking him to sacrifice the promised son, Isaac. Yet (and we do not dare to say how), in eternity, looking back, all our families are going to praise God that He has worked out all things according to His will, in love, for the good of everybody in the family who loves Him (Romans 8).

God has His purposes for not dealing with us exactly as we would like. It is often impertinent for us to suggest what purposes God might have in dealing with us in certain ways. Sometimes it is a wakeup call. Sometimes it is a straight testing of faith, in order to have it refined. God knew from the outset that Abraham would pass the test about offering up Isaac, but in the thick of it Abraham did not know whether he would come through it.

In spite of the conviction that God often hears prayer in remarkable ways, in His power, wisdom, and love, we cannot escape the fact that God often comes to human beings with the appearance of baffling contradictions. In such times we need to cling more than ever to His ultimate love to us in Jesus' cross.

When the Lord does not give us some blessing we have prayed for in this life, that does not mean that He has not heard and has not answered. His answer can be "Yes" or "Not now", or "Not in the way you want, which would not be best for you" according to His divine wisdom.

As Christians, we do not want to ask anything that is against what God wants. Our old, sinful natures want to get things that God does not want, but not the renewed human being in us. As Christians "we have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16). What we want and desire ought to be the same as what God desires and wants.

Sometimes we may also fail to recognise that God has answered our prayers because He has answered in ways in which we had not planned them. We had them all figured out in advance. We wanted God to do this or that! So did Naaman, when he came to the prophet Elisha to be healed of leprosy. Naaman became angry when Elisha told him to go and wash in the Jordan, without even coming out of house to meet him (2 Kings 5:11-12). In his mind Naaman had determined how Elisha should proceed. We often want to deal with God in much the same way. We make up our own minds how God should answer us. When He does it differently, we are disappointed and complain that God has failed us. If we say, "Thy will be done", that consigns the way in which God answers our prayers to His wisdom.

When we pray we should not take the attitude: "It probably will not do any harm: but it may not do much good, either." We should not have the attitude: "Perhaps God will listen to us." We should pray with confidence. When we pray we should believe, yes, know, that whatever we ask in Jesus' name, whatever is according to what God wants, He will indeed give us according to His promises to hear our prayers. God keeps His promises. For us, as Christians, there is no unanswered prayer. We must accept that sometimes God allows us to go through the torment of doubting His love and goodness. However, in the end He gives us, through the ordeal, more perfect submission to His will, and a stronger conviction that, in spite of everything, He does really love us in Christ, who also went the way of the cross.