

## *Unanswered Prayer*

**P.G. Nelson**

Prayer is problematic. Sometimes we pray for something, and what we pray for happens. Often what we pray for does not happen. Occasionally, what we pray for does not happen for us, but does happen for someone else who prays a similar prayer. How do we make sense of these experiences?

In some cases, the problem lies with us. James told his readers, ‘You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your pleasures’ (Jas. 4:3). Peter told husbands to honour their wives, lest their prayers be hindered (1 Pet. 3:7). However, even when we pray unselfishly, and honour others, we can experience the difficulties I have described.

In these cases, a simple answer is to say that we often do not pray according to God’s will. His ways are not our ways, and his thoughts are not our thoughts (Is. 55:8–9). When what we ask for does not happen, it is because God wants something better to happen. He still hears our prayers, but answers them in a different way.

However, this explanation does not help us when we feel that God is not answering *any* of our prayers. When we feel like this, we can doubt whether we are Christians, or whether God answers prayer at all.

Here I present a fuller answer to the problem.

### **God’s ability to answer prayer**

As the creator of the universe, God has all the power he needs to answer prayer. Jesus prefaced his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, ‘Father, all things are possible for you’ (Mark 14:36).

God can grant requests in essentially three ways.<sup>1</sup> If someone asks for X, and the natural flow of events is leading to X, he can simply let this flow take place. If, however, the natural flow is leading to Y, he can intervene at the point Y would happen and bring about X in an openly miraculous way. Alternatively, he can intervene in the natural flow of events at a point before Y would happen, and make the flow lead to X instead. An example of this is when Paul was caught in a storm in the Mediterranean Sea (Acts 27). In response to his prayer, God made the boat run aground on the tiny island of Malta. He did not do this directly – the storm still raged; the boat still drifted and tossed. No one saw him doing anything. Yet he so controlled the storm that Paul was kept safe.

### **Factors affecting how God answers prayer**

#### *Human freedom*

I here assume that God has given human beings freedom. I have explained elsewhere how this does not prevent him from controlling the world, and working out his purposes in it.<sup>2</sup> I further

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. P.G. Nelson, *God’s Control over the Universe* (Latheronwheel, Caithness: Whittles), 39–43.

<sup>2</sup> *God’s Control*.

assume that God wants human beings to worship him, trust him, and obey him (Deut. 6:4–5 etc.).

Now for men and women to be able to do this effectively, God must reveal himself to them so that they know what to do; but for them to be able to do this voluntarily, he must also hide himself from them so that they are not forced to do it. He has therefore carefully to measure his activity in the world, so as to make faith possible, but not pre-empt it (cf. Deut. 29:29; Is. 45:15; Matt. 12: 38–40, 13:10–17; John 20:24–29; etc.).

What this means for prayer is that God rarely answers petitions directly, in an obviously miraculous way. If he answered them in this way very often, human beings would be bound to believe, which is not his intention. His intention is that they should ‘walk by faith, not by sight’ (2 Cor. 5:7). He accordingly more often answers petitions indirectly, in ways that can less readily be interpreted as answers to prayer other than ‘by faith’.

God’s respect for human freedom also means that he does not continually give people the things they ask for even indirectly. He gives them enough of what they ask for to encourage faith, but not so much as to make faith easy. [Jesus did say, ‘whatever you ask in my name, this I will do’ (John 14:13–14 etc.), but this is a conditional promise, as I discuss later.]

### ***Freedom of others***

God’s respect for human freedom also constrains his response to prayers for others. We may wish to ask him to make someone do something good, or to stop someone from doing something bad, but we cannot expect him ordinarily to do this. We can only ask him to *encourage* someone to do something good, or to *discourage* someone from doing something bad, or to *compensate* for someone’s action. We cannot expect him to override a person’s freedom other than very exceptionally.

So, for example, we may want someone we know to be saved. But we know from Jesus’ parable of the barren fig tree that God does not force people to repent, but rather gives them time and suitable conditions in which to do so (Luke 13:6–9). So we cannot pray, ‘O God, *make* John repent,’ and expect God to do this, but we can pray, ‘O God, encourage John to repent.’

However, we do not have to recast all our prayers in this way, as long as we understand how God will answer them. Thus, Jesus taught us to pray, ‘your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matt. 6:10), knowing that God will not force human beings to be obedient (cf. Matt. 23:37 etc.). He likewise prayed himself that believers ‘may all be one’ (John 17) knowing that, on earth, they would not be. So we can pray, ‘O God, save John,’ as long as we understand how God will answer this. Indeed Paul encouraged prayers for the salvation of others (1 Tim. 2:1–4).

### ***The Curse***

A further constraint on prayer is imposed by the events described in Genesis 3. Because of the fall of Adam and Eve, God cursed the natural order, introducing into it pain, toil, and death. As a result, ‘the whole creation’ now ‘groans and travails’ (Rom. 8:18–22). Even believers ‘groan within themselves’ (23). One day the Curse will be removed, but this still lies in the future, when there will be ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ (Rev. 21:1–5) and ‘no more curse’ (Rev. 22:1–5).

Thus, believers cannot expect God to remove the effects of the Curse in this life, other than very exceptionally. Jesus did remove effects of the Curse when he was on earth (he healed the sick, restored the disabled, and even raised the dead), but he emphasized the temporariness of this. When he came across a blind man, he told his disciples, ‘We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. *While I am in the world, I am the light of the world*’ (John 9:4–5). It is true that he later told his disciples that they would do ‘greater’ works than he did (John 14:12), but ‘greater’ here must refer to spread of the gospel: their works could not have been greater in any other way. Rather, he went on to warn them, ‘In the world you will have tribulation’ (John 16:33). This included, besides persecution, effects of the Curse: famine (Acts 11:27–30), poverty (Gal. 2:10), sickness (Gal. 4:13–14, Phil. 2:25–27, 1 Tim. 5:23, 2 Tim. 4:20), natural disasters (2 Cor. 11:23–28), and death (1 Cor. 15:6).

Thus, Christians can only pray for removal of effects of the Curse in the way Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane:<sup>3</sup>

‘Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. But not what I want, but what you want.’ (Mark 14:36)

### ***The Devil***

Another effect of the events in Genesis 3 is that the snake became the Devil. God punished him by reducing his powers, but did not completely remove them (Gen. 3:14–15). Only in the last days will God render the Devil impotent (Rev. 20:10).

What this means is that the Devil also plays a part in what happens in the world. Christians can pray that God will deliver them from evil (Matt. 6:13), but not that he will take it completely away (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43).

### ***Refinement of faith***

A further constraint on prayer is God’s desire to *refine* the faith of his people. This involves putting them into situations [or allowing the Devil to put them into situations (Job 1–2)] in which maintaining faith is difficult, and holding on to it leads to a deepening of it.

The apostles taught believers to expect God to refine their faith in this way (Rom. 5:1–5, 8:17–39; 2 Cor. 1:3–7; Heb. 12:4–11; Jas. 1:2–4; 1 Pet. 1:6–7, 4:12–19). Paul even made the anguished cry, ‘Abba, Father’, proof of having the Spirit (Rom. 8:15–17).

All this means that God treats believers in two very different ways. On the one hand, he encourages young believers by answering their prayers in ways that they can see. On the other hand, he tests the faith of older believers by *not* answering their prayers in ways that they can see. Paul prayed three times for his ‘thorn in the flesh’ to be removed, but the Lord said to him, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Cor. 12:7–10).

God also treats unbelievers in two opposing ways. On the one hand, he encourages all but the most hardened unbelievers to repent by making life unpleasant for them when they sin. On the other hand, he leaves the most hardened unbelievers to their own devices and lets them

<sup>3</sup> On James 5:13–18, see my article, ‘James’ instructions to ill Christians’ (on-line).

prosper. This explains the anguished cry of the psalmist over the prosperity of the wicked (Ps. 73).

God thus allows some people to prosper and others to suffer, as summarized in the following table. For those whose belief or unbelief is weak, he acts in one way; for those for whom it is strong, he acts in another. The result is an inversion of experience as faith or wickedness grows.

	Believers	Unbelievers
Weak	prosper	suffer
Strong	suffer	prosper

## Jesus' teaching

Jesus taught his disciples to pray in faith (Mark 11:22–24). He further told them, as I mentioned earlier, 'whatever you ask in my name, this I will do' (John 14:13–14; 15:7, 16; 16:23–24). However, praying 'in the name of' Jesus implies praying in a way that is consistent with his teaching. This is explicit in John 15:7: 'If you remain in me *and my words remain in you*, ask whatever you want, and it shall be given to you.'

Christians can therefore pray for the things Jesus taught – for God's name to be revered, his rule to come, and his will to be done; for daily bread, forgiveness of sins, and protection from evil (Matt. 6:9–13). Here 'daily bread' doubtless includes the 'bread of life' (John 6) and Holy Spirit (Luke 11:1–13), given to enable believers to live as they should (Rom. 6:15–8:14, Gal. 5:13–26, 2 Pet. 1:3–11). Christian leaders can also ask Jesus to help them to resolve conflicts in church (Matt. 18:15–20).

Jesus' teaching therefore leads us to expect answers to prayer, but only in certain areas. Many of the things we ask for lie outside these areas. In other areas, we have to say, 'not what I want, but what you want' (Mark 14:36), and rely on the Spirit to pray correctly for us (Rom. 8:26–27).

## Conclusion

God's ways are not our ways, and his thoughts are not our thoughts (Is. 55:8–9). Yet Scripture does throw some light on why God apparently answers some prayers and not others. He works in the world to bring people to faith and then to refine their faith. This leads him to treat them in contrary ways. We may sometimes feel that he is not answering our prayers, but, in reality, he is working in all things for our good (Rom. 8:28–30).

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