

Series: Hard Questions for Thoughtful Christians and Inquiring Skeptics

Title: *If God answers prayer, why are so many of mine unanswered?*

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Thesis: The Bible is filled with verses and illustrations of the effectiveness of prayer, and of encouragements to prayer. The history of the Christian church is replete with examples of godly men and women of prayer. Despite this, many devout believers struggle with unanswered prayer. You may be asking, "Why do some of my prayers get answered and others do not?" Or, "Is there something wrong with me, or with the way I pray that would explain why God doesn't answer my prayers?" Don't feel alone with your questions, because many Christians, many Old and New Testament believers struggled with the same issues.

Anne Graham Lotz, daughter of evangelist Billy Graham, said, **"I have three unanswered prayers in my life. I've been praying them for a long time. I feel that I have God's word to claim. I feel that He's given promises; but I haven't seen the answers, and in a couple cases don't even see evidence that He is moving at all to answer my prayers, and this has gone on now for several years."** When you have unanswered prayers, like this, there is a temptation to be offended with God, to resent him, and to feel like he doesn't love you, or isn't really blessing you, or that you've done something to displease him. If we are not careful, this can turn to bitterness, and then rather than falling on our knees in prayer, we may withdraw from God. We may still attend church and even be in a Bible Study, but inside we decide not to pray again because God hasn't answered this prayer, or several prayers, so why do we think He's going to answer any of our prayers? If this is where you are this morning, my desire is that this message will give you hope, restore your trust and confidence in God, and renew your passion for prayer.

I love to hear little children, and new believers pray, because they have not learned all the "churchy" expressions we pick up after knowing the Lord awhile, or after attending seminary.

There is a story of a young pastor in his first church. He is unsure of himself and being fresh out of seminary, filled with the language of theological study. He is praying before a church gathering, leading them in corporate prayer. Raising his hands and changing his voice he prays: "We approach you, O sacred ground of all being, who dwells beyond language in ineffable splendor. Thou who art both paradoxically imminent and transcendent at once..." and as he takes another breath, an old saint in the front row says, "Son, just call him Father and ask for something." There is a lot of wisdom in that.

Children think that if you really want a prayer to be answered, you ask your pastor to pray it for you. Here are some prayers a pastor was asked to pray...

- Dear Pastor, please say a prayer for our little league team. We need God's help or a new pitcher.

- Dear Pastor, please pray for me tomorrow. I think I forgot to do my homework.
- Dear Pastor, please say a prayer that my mother can lose 20 pounds. She tried Weight Watchers and that didn't help. Now she needs a prayer.

Some General Questions:

1. **What is prayer?** A helpful definition is, **“Prayer is the avenue through which we learn to depend on God, and to align our needs and wishes with his will.”** If your idea of prayer is simply telling God what you want – a shopping list with “Amen” at the end, you’ve got prayer all wrong. Prayer is not “storming heaven” with our demands until God gives us what we want. Prayer is a desperately expensive business – expensive in time, in giving, and in loving. Someone said, **“Prayer is doing God’s work, God’s way.”** Prayer is not so much getting what *you* want as asking God to give you what *he* wants you to have. E. Stanley Jones said, **“If I throw out a boathook from the boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God.”**
2. **Does God encourage us to pray?** Yes, both by invitation and by example. There are at least 85 prayers in the Bible, not counting many Psalms which have prayer included within them. A common question from Christians is, “Since God already knows our needs, why should we ask him to meet them?” The most direct answer to this question is simply that God likes to be asked. We like our children to ask us for things that we already know they need, because the very asking enriches and deepens the relationship. P.T. Forsyth said, **“Love loves to be told what it already knows – it wants to be asked for what it longs to give.”** God who is love, asks us to ask for what we need.
3. **Does God hear and answer prayer?** Yes, again. To be theologically accurate, the fact that any prayer seems to be unheard or unanswered is due to our failure to understand the nature of God. I believe God hears every prayer, and that every prayer gets an answer, but the answer may not be what we would like it to be. Haven’t we said to our children, “I can’t hear you when you speak to me in that tone of voice,” meaning I won’t respond to your request unless you speak to me with respect. In the same way, God said to rebellious Israel, **“Since your hands are full of blood, even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen.”** Isaiah 1:15,16. Even though God does sometimes answer our prayers with a “No” or a “Wait”, there are many, many more times when the answer comes through with a loud and clear “YES!” The Apostle John’s first letter sums it up so well. He writes, **“We have such confidence in him that we are certain that he hears every request that is made in accord with his own plan. And since we know that he invariably gives his attention to our prayers, whatever they are about, we can be quite sure that our prayers will be answered.”**(5:14,15). With this understanding then, let’s wade into the deep, deep waters of the topic of what appears to us to be unanswered prayers.

God may choose to not hear or answer our prayer because:

1. **We have no relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Matthew 7:21-23.** “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers!’” God does not ordinarily answer the prayer of a non-Christian. But God can do anything he desires, so he may choose to do this. However, the central truth of scripture is that our relationship to God is through his Son, Jesus Christ who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” John 14:6. Therefore God does not usually answer the prayer of someone who rejects Christ as the Savior of the world, such as an unconverted Jew, a Muslim, a Mormon, or a Buddhist, or an unsaved member of an Evangelical Free Church. Of course, the sincere, repentant, faith-filled cry of a sinner is one that God will answer every time, whoever is praying.

God may choose to not hear or answer our prayer because:

2. **We do not believe God can answer. James 1:5-7.** The person who doubts will not receive anything from the Lord. This is pretty straight forward. If we do not believe God can answer our prayer, then our prayer will not be answered. I like the way J.B. Phillips paraphrased James 1:5-7. “**But he must ask in sincere faith without secret doubts as to whether he really wants God's help or not. The man who trusts God, but with inward reservations, is like a wave of the sea, carried forward by the wind one moment and driven back the next. That sort of man cannot hope to receive anything from God. The life of a man of divided loyalty will reveal instability at every turn.**” Divided loyalty will result in an ineffective and unfruitful prayer life.

God may choose to not hear or answer our prayer because:

3. **We are “cozy with evil” Psalm 66:18; Psalm 24:3,4; Isaiah. 1:15-17; 59:1, 2; I Peter 3:7.** The Bible is very clear about this reason for unanswered prayer, as you can see from the many texts referenced in the outline. Turn with me to the two passages in Isaiah. 1:15-17 “**When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.**” Isaiah 59:1, 2 “**Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.**” Psalm 66:18 in the Message says, “**If I had been cozy with evil, the Lord would never have listened.**” Husbands here this morning, one example of sin that will hinder your prayers is if you are not treating your wife with respect. Peter says, “**Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives,**

and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” George Sweeting, former president of Moody Bible Institute, told the story of a student who came to him for counseling. The student was depressed, God seemed so distant, his prayers seemed to hit the ceiling of his dorm room and go no farther. Dr. Sweeting asked permission to visit the student in his dorm room. Once there the problem was easy to diagnose, when Dr. Sweeting saw the posters on the walls, and the magazines on the lamp table. The bottom line is this. If it appears God has turned a deaf ear to you, it’s not that he cannot act on your behalf. It may be that you have un-confessed sin in your life, or an uncooperative attitude in regard to something the Holy Spirit has put his finger on, or a broken relationship you are unwilling to repair. Such things in our lives grieve God’s Spirit and cause our prayers to be ineffective. Seek forgiveness, clean your hands and heart, draw near to God and he will draw near to you.

God may choose to not hear or answer our prayer because:

4. **We are asking God for something outside of his revealed will. “Whatever you ask according to my will, you will receive.” I John 5:14,15** You need to ask yourself, “Is what I am asking for within the revealed will of God?” God will not do anything for us that is against his will for us. I have had Christians say to me, “I am asking God to help me divorce my wife so I can marry someone who is more spiritual than she is.” Or, “I realize now that I married the wrong man so I am praying that God will bring the right man into my life”. Prayers like this will not have the assistance of the God who hates divorce, the God who keeps his promises, and asks us to keep ours as well. Since God has revealed his will to us in the Bible, in most situations we can know whether or not a particular request falls within his will. However there are some things for which we will probably not know from scripture if it is God’s will, such as: Is it the right time to change careers? Should I move from one community to another? Should I buy a Ford or a Honda? Would it be better for me to go out for the soccer team or the tennis team? Should we paint the house yellow or blue? It is much more difficult to determine God’s will on these questions. Should you pray about them? Why not! It may also help to move in a particular direction and see what happens. God may open or close some doors as you pray and move ahead.

God may choose to not hear or answer our prayer because:

5. **We have not prayed about it. James 4:2 “You have not because you ask not.”** This may be the most common reason why God doesn’t answer prayer. We don’t remember to pray, and God does not answer prayers that are not asked. **Illus.** When I was a junior in college I roomed with a good friend, and we decided to rotate cooking the meals on a weekly basis. It was not unusual for one of us to just stop and get some things at the grocery store, whether or not it was our week to prepare the meals. If I did this, Gary would ask, “Did you get such and such?” I would say, “No, why didn’t you tell me we needed that?” He would reply, “I just

thought you would know.” We treat God and prayer in the same way, and then wonder why God doesn’t respond to our needs.

FB Meyer, a well-known Bible teacher said, **“The great tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer, but un-offered prayer.”** Billy Graham said he thinks heaven is filled with answers to prayers for which no one has bothered to ask.

God may answer our prayer, but the answer is not what we want or expect.

1. **God may say “No” if we ask for the right thing with the wrong motives. James 4:3. “You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.”** The reason behind our request is as important as the request itself. We are praying to the God who knows us, inside and out; the God, **“who searches every heart and understands every motive behind our thoughts.”** I Chron. 28:9. Imagine praying this for your children, “Lord, help our children to be successful. Bless them real good, Lord.” But the Lord looks in our heart and sees the reason we want him to bless them is that in a few years we want them to take care of us, and they are going to need a lot of cash. This may be a foolish example, but with the cost of health care and senior residences, I can understand why those of us nearing our retirement years may be praying such things for our kids. The key is to ask yourself, “Are my motives right?” The Lord knows, and I believe he will help you answer that question if you are sincere in asking it. God is pleased to respond to prayer when we have unselfish motives. Good King Hezekiah asked God to protect him and his city, Jerusalem, from the armies of the Assyrians, and here was his reason for asking for protection. **“Now, O Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O Lord, are God.”** God heard and granted Hezekiah’s request. Hezekiah had right motives.

2. **God may say “No” when we ask for things that are not good for us. James 1:17, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.”** The creator of the universe is not under any obligation to say “Yes” to every prayer, and that’s a good thing, considering some of the things we request. God knows what is best for us, and what is not best for us, and like a human parent, he will not give us what he knows is not good for us. When our boys were quite young, and before it was illegal to do so, they asked if they could ride in the back of a pickup I had borrowed. I said they could not, and when they asked why, I said, “Because I love you too much.” Evidently that made an impact on them, because one of them reminded me of that answer recently, some 25 years after the incident occurred. Understanding this principle, someone told God, **“In very love refuse whate’er thou seest our weakness would abuse.”** Sometimes God says “No” because he loves us too much to say “Yes”.

3. **God may say “Wait and trust me”, because he has a different plan for us. John 11:21 “Martha said, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’”** In John 11, Jesus received word from Martha and Mary that his very

good friend Lazarus, their brother, was ill. Their message implied, “Lord, please do something about it. Either intervene, or heal him, but don’t let him get worse.”

But instead of responding as they wanted, Jesus stayed where he was two more days. When he finally came to their home, Lazarus was dead, and had been in a tomb four days. It is easy to understand Martha’s despair, and her outcry which basically said, “Lord, I needed you, you weren’t here for me, and now look at the mess I’m in!” As you know, this situation ended on a happy note, because it was Jesus’ purpose all along that he would reveal his glory by raising Lazarus from the dead. But Martha, who did not know Jesus’ purpose, was confused, hurt, and maybe felt betrayed. In retrospect she most likely saw why Jesus delayed, why he didn’t give her what she wanted. Jesus had a greater purpose in mind. This is good for us to remember too when God doesn’t answer in the way we want him too. I, like you, have prayed for people who are sick, and rather than recover, they get worse and die. How can the death of our loved one or our friend be part of God’s good purpose for us? In Romans 8:26, 27 Paul says, **“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.”** Many unanswered prayers by godly people are actually answered prayers; they’re just answered according to the will of God’s Spirit, not our own will.

The Spirit of God prays for us in accordance with God’s will, and His prayers will always be answered. I know that we can trust God with our unanswered prayers. I also know his purpose for us, though different than our desire, is loving. We may never understand why things turned out as they did, we may never see how it was for our good, but we can learn to release our questions to his sovereign and loving will. Luis Palau said in regards to prayer, **“Whatever the answer, your best interest is always in God’s mind.”**

- 4. God may say “Yes, but not now.” because his timing is different than ours.** **Luke 18:1 “Now he was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not lose heart.”** One danger in unanswered prayer is that we quit praying too soon. We like to have things immediately. At a restaurant, if our food order is not back in a few minutes we become irritated. Some pizza places will give you the meal free if it is not served within the promised time period. We carry these same expectations into prayer. If we pray for something and don’t get an immediate answer we begin to wonder what is up. We review the possible roadblocks to answered prayer, to see if we did something wrong.

If the delay continues we may grow weary of praying, and assume that God is saying “No”, and so stop praying about it. What may be the case is that God is asking you to hang in there, be persistent in prayer, and not give up. Luke 11 and 18 include two parallel parables that emphasize three things: (1) the ready availability of God, (in contrast to the neighbor already asleep, and the grumpy judge); (2) that God is a willing and receptive listener; and, (3) that

prayer is more than just a means to getting what we want from God. Some times God delays his answer because we are not yet ready for what he wants to give us. In hindsight I have often been thankful for God's delay. Dotty and I tried to attend a pastor's retreat center in western Texas three summers ago. We had our dates reserved, as did another pastor and wife with whom we looked forward to sharing the week. Things became complicated and with regret we had to cancel. However, this summer became the perfect time for us to have a similar experience, in Wisconsin, and during my sabbatical month. We were better prepared in so many ways to have the maximum benefit from our week there. I also believe God allows delays so we focus our hope in him, not in the answer we desire from him. During the time of waiting he gives us himself, his peace, his strength, and we grow in patience, in perseverance. The time of waiting is not wasted, but is greatly used by God in our lives.

5. **God's desire to answer our prayer may be frustrated by the free will of another person. I Timothy 2:1-4, "God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."** The most common unanswered prayer seems to be the prayer for a family member or friend to accept God's offer of eternal life. You may say, "I've prayed for my friend to become a Christian but nothing seems to have happened. He, or she, is not closer to making that decision than before I begin to pray for them. Isn't this the kind of prayer that should receive a "Yes" from God?" In his paraphrase of I Timothy 2:3 J.B. Phillips says, **"In the sight of God our Savior this is undoubtedly the right thing to pray for; for his purpose is that all men should be saved and come to realize the truth."** Why then does this prayer often seem unanswered? It is sad but true that the people for whom we pray are not puppets upon whom God forces his will and purpose, but free agents who can refuse God's offer of eternal life, who can choose to reject Christ as Savior, and who can choose to spend the rest of this life and eternity separated from God and his love. So the effectiveness of our prayer is all bound up with purpose of God and man's rebellious attitude towards him. It may be that your friend or family member will eventually open up to God's love, because as long as he or she is alive, the door is still open. God is faithful, he has provided the way through Christ, and His Spirit will continue to bring conviction. It probably grieves God more than it grieves you to see a person reject his Son. Don't quit praying for their salvation, as long as they and you are alive. I once had the joy of praying the sinner's prayer with a 96 year old man whose wife had been praying for him over 50 years.

What should our response be to these things?

1. **As much as possible, get rid of the obstacles that block effective prayer.** If I may be so bold, keep this sermon outline in your Bible for future use. Refer back to it as a reminder of potential roadblocks to effective prayer.
2. **Choose a time and place everyday to spend time with God in two-way dialogue (God speaks to you in his Word, and you respond in prayer).** Choose a time when you are alert, fresh, rested. If you don't pick a time, you won't get it done. Choose a place that is quiet, private, where you have the least possibility for

interruptions. If you are a parent of pre-school age children, it may have to be at the neighbor's house. If you don't choose a place, you won't get it done. I think you will find that people will respect your time with God when you make it a priority.

3. **Develop a heart to know God, not just to ask him for things. "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart". Psa. 37:4.** God wants you to know him, his heart, his passion, his love. When we begin to see prayer as a way to know God, then we will begin to see prayer as he intended us to see it. Spending time alone with God is time spent with the Lover of our Souls, time with the One who rejoices over us as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride. Listen to these words from the Song of Solomon, the words of the bride speaking of her Lover: "Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my beloved; I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste. He has taken me to the banquet hall, and his banner over me is love. He says to me, 'Arise, my dear friend, and come with me.'" God calls each of us to come to him in his banquet hall, to delight ourselves in him, to rest in his love. Prayer is responding to the invitation of God. **God calls all of us to arise, and come to him.**