

How God Answers Prayer



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How can we be sure that God will answer our prayers? It is not enough that we affirm our belief in prayer. Thousands of mothers, for example, have believed in prayer and have asked God to protect their sons on the battlefield, only to receive a message that they had been killed. Nor does affirming our belief in prayer explain why, when a whole nation prays for peace, it often finds itself caught in a whirlpool of war.

On the other hand, there are thousands who are eager to testify that God has answered their prayers for the safety of their children. Other thousands will testify of the wonderful manner in which God has given them other special blessings they asked for. On the basis of experience alone, therefore, it may seem that God answers the prayer of some, yet does not answer the prayers of others.

However, this is not in keeping with what the Scriptures tell us about God. The Bible says that he is “no respecter of persons.” So, there must be some good reason why

God answers some prayers, and not others. If we can find that reason, it should help restore the faith of some whose prayers have seemingly gone unanswered.

Prayer is a very important phase of Christian experience. It is also practiced widely by the adherents of many other religions. The desire to pray is an acknowledgment of our dependency upon a Higher Power, the expression of a realization that we need help from some source outside of and higher than ourselves. Doubtless God is pleased with the sincere desire of all who try to contact him in prayer, because to this extent at least it is a recognition of his sovereign power.

The almost universal urge to pray is due to the fact that originally man was created in the image of God. As a result of man's fall into sin and death the divine image in his character has been much blurred, in many cases almost erased, yet remnants of it still remain, and one of its manifestations is the urge to pray. There may be millions who never pray, yet often feel that they should, and have a sense of guilt because they do not.

God is pleased with the spirit of prayer on the part of his creatures. But why does he hear the prayers of some, while apparently other prayers go unheeded? Jesus hints at the answer to this question in his observations

about the prayers of the scribes and Pharisees. They prayed to be seen and heard of men, Jesus explained, and thought God would hear them for their much speaking. By this we are reminded that there are proper and improper attitudes of prayer, as well as correct and incorrect methods. Many who spin their prayer wheels may be sincere, but their method is inappropriate.

The Scriptures also indicate that there are proper and improper things for which to pray. The Apostle James wrote: "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss." (James 4:3) It is vitally important to ascertain what we have the privilege of asking God to give us in the way of favors. We cannot expect to ask God for things which our fancy dictates, and have our prayers answered.

THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER

There is a divine purpose in prayer, and it is highly important that we keep this in mind if we are to understand why some prayers go unanswered. God did not design prayer as a means of finding out how he should manage his affairs here on earth. He is not looking to us to tell him what he should do. He has his own fixed plans and purposes, and if we are to receive the riches of his blessing it is essential that our prayers be in harmony with these. To use

the language of James, we ask "amiss" every time we petition God for blessings which he has not designed to give.

In the Scriptures various types of prayer are brought to our attention. Foremost among these are prayers of thanksgiving. God is undoubtedly pleased when his creatures recognize him as the source of their blessings, and because of this lift up their hearts and voices to him in thanksgiving.

There are prayers of adoration, prayers which give recognition to the glorious attributes of the Creator's character—his wisdom, his justice, his love, and his power. The desire to glorify God should be the motive for much of our praying.

Prayers for God's mercy are also appropriate. The Scriptures urge all Christians to seek divine forgiveness of their sins through the medium of prayer. Paul speaks of this as going "boldly to the throne of grace," there to obtain mercy and find grace to help in every time of need.—Heb. 4:16

Then, of course, there are the prayers which are requests for certain blessings, or favors from the Lord. It is with these that we are particularly concerned at the moment. Some pray for health, either for themselves or for others. Some pray for wealth. Some pray for protection while on a journey. Millions pray for peace. It has

often happened that citizens of countries which are opposing each other in war pray that their respective armies will be victorious. We will assume that all who go to God in prayer are sincere, and of course they ask him for the things which to them seem the most important at the time. But does the Bible justify us in the belief that all these prayers should be answered?

It might be that God would answer a mother's prayer for the safety of her son on the field of battle. Or it might be that prayers for the peace of a nation might be answered. But if and when such prayers are answered, it simply means that it was in keeping with his will to do so. God has a fixed plan, in keeping with which he is mindful of the human race. That plan was not made to satisfy the whims and wishes of his human creatures, nor will any amount of praying change his plans.

"Prayer changes things," they say, but it does not change God's plans. God is not looking to us, nor to the nations—not even to the United Nations—to learn what changes he should make in order to better conditions for us or for the world in general. How little confidence we would have in a god whose opinions could be swayed or plans changed by the eloquence of his people's prayers!

“THY WILL BE DONE”

In their prayers, God's people should have uppermost in mind and heart the desire that his will be done in all their experiences. We have an outstanding example of this in the case of Jesus. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when the Master was facing arrest and death, “anguish and dismay came over him, and he said to them [his disciples], My heart is ready to break with grief ... he went on a little, fell on his face in prayer, and said, My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Yet, not as I will, but as thou wilt.”—Matt. 26:38,39, *New English Bible*

It was God's will that Jesus suffer humiliation and death as the Redeemer and savior of men. This important feature of the divine plan had been foretold by the holy prophets of the Old Testament. Jesus wanted above everything else to have the divine will accomplished, regardless of what it meant to him. He affirmed this later, when he was about to be arrested. Peter drew his sword to protect his Master, who said to him, “Put up thy sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?”—John 18:10,11

The followers of Jesus have the privilege of suffering and dying with him. Paul spoke

of being “crucified” with him, and he also wrote, “To you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.” (Gal. 2:20, Phil. 1:29) We are called upon to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, so we know that it is not God’s will to spare us from all hardship. Thus, as with Jesus, our chief concern should be that the Lord’s will might be done in our mortal bodies. The Lord’s will might be that for a time we enjoy certain earthly blessings, but the burden of our prayers should not be for these, but for his will to be done.

Jesus enlarged upon this point when he said to his disciples that as long as they were abiding in him and his words were abiding in them, they could ask in prayer for whatever they desired, and it would be granted unto them. (John 15:7) This might seem like an assurance that we are privileged to ask God for anything which we may happen to think of and want. But not so!

Note the condition attached to this statement by the Master—“If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you.” To abide in Christ means to be a member of his body, he being our Head. This means that his thoughts become our thoughts, and his plans our plans. If our wills have thus been

wholly surrendered to God, through Christ, we will have no will of our own, hence our prayers will not be requests for what we want, but only for those things which are in harmony with the will of our Head. By thus praying in harmony with the Lord's will, we can be assured of favorable answers.

This is in harmony with another statement made by Jesus to his disciples in which he informs us that the Heavenly Father will be pleased to give the "Holy Spirit to them that ask him." (Luke 11:13) To be filled with the Spirit of God means to have his thoughts dominate our thinking, and for our lives to be conformed to those thoughts. Then we will not be asking God for blessings except those which he has promised to give, and so there will never be any question about one's prayers being answered.

"THY KINGDOM COME"

In response to the disciples' request, "Lord, teach us to pray," Jesus gave them what is now familiarly known as "The Lord's Prayer." In this model prayer we are given a guide to what we may pray for.

An important part of this brief outline of prayer is the proper method of approach to God—"Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name." (Luke 11:1,2) In the Scriptures, Adam is styled a "son of God."

(Luke 3:23,38) But when he sinned he lost his sonship, being alienated from God and sentenced to death. Adam's children, the entire human race, are likewise aliens and strangers to God, so they cannot properly address him as "our Father which art in heaven." This is a privilege which belongs exclusively to those who have repented of their sins, accepted Jesus as their personal Savior, and devoted their lives to God in full consecration to do his will. Such are represented as having received God's Spirit of sonship, and thus have become his children.

As the children of God, these will desire above all else to honor the name of their Father. So by word and by action their attitude will always be, "Hallowed be thy name." To properly hallow our Heavenly Father's name implies that when we approach him in prayer we will do so in the manner outlined for us in the Scriptures by Jesus. He explained that our prayers should be offered in his name.—John 15:16

There is a reason for this. As members of the justly condemned race, we have no standing at the divine throne of grace except through Jesus, our Advocate. In his name, and through the merit of the shed blood, we are privileged to go "boldly" to the throne of grace to seek forgiveness, and

all the other blessings which our loving Heavenly Father has promised to give. (Heb. 4:16) If we properly hallow his name we will never presume to approach him except through Jesus.

When we follow the example of The Lord's Prayer, our requests will not be so much on our own behalf as they will be for the blessing of others. This is indicated in the opening petition: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." (Matt. 6:10) The answer to this request will be an answer to much for which people have prayed throughout the centuries. That answer will satisfy the legitimate desires of all people. It will mean peace, and health, and everlasting life for all who conform themselves to the righteous laws of the Lord's kingdom.

The blessings which the human race craves, and for which millions pray, were all anticipated by God and provided for through the kingdom which he has promised by all his prophets. In these promises we find many details of the blessings which it will guarantee to the people, including the restoration of those who have died. No, God has not been unmindful of the suffering of the people, nor has he turned a deaf ear to their cries for help; and his answer to their prayers, when in his due time it

comes, will be far beyond anything that they have ever dared to hope.

Take the case of a mother who prays for the safety of her son on the battlefield. She loves him, and nothing could mean more to her than his safe return to the family home. But he does not return, and her first thought may be that God does not care, that he has no pity. How differently she would feel if she could believe that God has provided a homecoming far more satisfactory than ever entered her mind when she prayed!

How little does a mother sometimes know of the hardship and suffering her child may be saved by falling asleep in death. After all, both the mother and her son are members of a dying race, and the difference between dying on the battlefield and dying later of old age is only a momentary one when compared with the endless stretch of eternity. It is from this standpoint that we must learn to view the subject of prayer and the manner in which God answers our petitions.

The very fact that we pray to God is acknowledgment of our belief that his wisdom and power and love far exceed our own. Yet we often forget this, and feel that he has not honored our prayers because he has not answered them as we would have,

through the exercise of our own minimal abilities. The length of our condemned life is very short. We judge accomplishments by whether or not they reach maturity within this short time of which we have knowledge. But we should not judge God's works from this standpoint.

The Scriptures speak of God as being "from everlasting to everlasting." (Ps. 41:13; 90:2) He is under no necessity to complete any particular phase of his plan within our short lifetime, not even if it has to do with our individual requests. If we prayed to God today for some special blessings which would be in keeping with his will, and the answer did not come until tomorrow, or even the day after tomorrow, we would not lose faith in him, but would rejoice when the answer did come. God has his "tomorrows" also. His days are not measured by hours, for they are ages, and in his "tomorrow" age, the thousand-year period of Christ's kingdom, all those blessings which the world has legitimately craved, and for which millions have voiced requests to God, will be abundantly showered upon humanity. In recognition of this, the people will then respond: "Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him ... we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation."—Isa. 25:9

“AS IT IS IN HEAVEN”

We have already learned that God will answer no prayer which is not in harmony with his will. In the greatest of all prayers, The Lord's Prayer, this principle is clearly set forth. It asks God for blessings upon the people of earth—not any sort of supposedly good things which they may crave, but things in harmony with his will. “Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.”

What great latitude he has given us about things in harmony with his will! God's will is done in heaven, and it is his purpose it shall be done in earth to the same degree. We do not know, of course, all the ways God's will is done in heaven, but we can be reasonably sure that the evils which now exist on earth do not plague the lives of those in the spirit realm we call heaven.

There is no war in heaven. War is an evil which is not in harmony with the divine will. Should we, then, pray for peace? Certainly! Indeed, we could not pray for God's will to be done in the earth as it is in heaven without praying for peace. But our prayers for peace should be in keeping with God's plan to establish peace, and that is his kingdom plan. He has promised to set up a kingdom, to establish a government. Jesus will be the King in that government. “The

government shall be upon his shoulder,” wrote Isaiah, and “of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end.”—Isa. 9:6,7

Doubtless God looks with sympathy upon the yearnings of mankind to abolish war. When international tension is at a high pitch and war seems inevitable, devout people on both sides feel compelled to pray for peace. The differences which threaten to precipitate war may be resolved or they may not be, but we know that ultimately there shall be universal and lasting peace. Not because the nations will at last find a workable formula for peace, but because “The Prince of Peace” will take over the rulership of earth and the prayer “Thy kingdom come,” will be answered.

Christ’s government is symbolized in the Scriptures as the “mountain of the LORD,” and in Micah 4:1-4 we read that the time will come when the people will say, “Let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for the Law shall go forth from Zion, and the Word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into

pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken it."

What a wonderful program for disarmament! It is God's program, and when we pray for peace, and for the nations to disarm, let us do so with the assurance that God will hear, and that he will answer our prayers in harmony with his will, which will be the kingdom way. "He maketh wars to cease," prophesied David.—Ps. 46:9

"NO MORE DEATH"

There is no death in heaven. Sickness and death have resulted from the sin of our first parents, and are among the evils which God has promised to destroy. Shall we, then, pray for health, and ask the Lord to save the lives of those near and dear to us who may have been stricken with serious illness? Yes, but always with the understanding that we want the Lord's will to be done, and with the knowledge that it may not be his will to grant health and life to those for whom we pray until these blessings are made available for all during the thousand years of Christ's kingdom.

We know that all diseases will then be cured. "The inhabitant [in that day] shall not say, I am sick," wrote Isaiah. (Isa. 33:24) Describing some of the blessings of Christ's kingdom, Paul wrote that Christ will reign until all enemies are put under his feet, and that the last enemy to be destroyed is death. (I Cor. 15:25,26) When in vision the Apostle John saw the kingdom of God established on the earth, he discerned that as a result there would be "no more death, ... neither shall there be any more pain."—Rev. 21:4

When we pray for health and life, let us grasp the meaning of this larger provision the Creator has made to grant these blessings, not merely to us and to our loved ones, but to all of mankind who will seek them through humility and obedience during the thousand years of Christ's reign. This we do when we pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven."—Matt. 6:10

"FROM THE LAND OF THE ENEMY"

God's ways, and the provisions he has made for his creatures, are always much better than those conceived by human wisdom. We pray for health, protection, peace, but who has ever thought of praying that their beloved dead be restored to them?

But God, in his plan, has gone beyond what we have presumed to pray for. He has promised to bring back the dead!

How many mothers have been heart-broken over the loss of a precious little one. One of these is referred to by the Prophet Jeremiah. Her name was Rachel. Jeremiah wrote, "A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted." The Prophet continues, "Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the LORD; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy."—Jer. 31:15,16

Death is man's greatest enemy, and it is God's plan to restore to life all who are in the "land" of death. This great favor is also included in our petition, "Thy kingdom come," for during Christ's kingdom all who are in their graves, in the condition of death, shall hear the voice of the Son of man, and shall come forth.—John 5:28,29

The restoration of man to life is described by the Apostle Peter as "restitution," and he tells us that following the second coming of Christ there shall be "times of restitution of all things," promised by all God's holy prophets since the world began.—Acts 3:20,21

UNDER VINE AND FIG TREE

Many pray for wealth, or at least for economic security. There is a measure of fear, or uncertainty, on the part of nearly everybody as they face their declining years. Will we be financially secure when we reach the age when it is no longer possible for us to earn a living? It is understandable that anyone who believes in God and thinks of him as one who loves and cares, should look to him in prayer respecting the need of financial security.

We know, of course, that there are millions of people in the world who are not financially secure. There are also millions who are literally starving and without proper food, clothing, and shelter. God loves all these, and while we would appreciate it if he blessed us with a more favorable situation in life, is it not better to rejoice in the loving provision he has made to care for all the poor and needy in his own due time and way? This is what he has promised to do!

In God's promises the thought of economic security is symbolized by the idea of dwelling under ones own "vine" and "fig tree". The prophet declares that everyone shall thus be blessed, and God's provision will be so complete that fear will be removed because "none shall make them afraid."—Micah 4:4

In the prophecy of Isaiah, a similar assurance is given us concerning God's blessings for the world in the age to come. This prophet of God tells us that then they shall not build houses for others to inhabit, and they will not plant and another eat, but the people shall long enjoy the works of their hands. They will enjoy the fruit of their labor forever if they continue to obey the righteous laws of the kingdom which then will be ruling the world.—Isa. 65:20-25

This chapter of Isaiah's prophecy indicates that the blessings of God in that kingdom age will be poured out upon the people in answer to their prayers. "Before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear." (vs. 24) This has not been the experience of the vast majority so far, because his time has not come to extend the favors for which they have asked, and because he knows their experiences with adversity will help them to appreciate the blessings he will provide for them throughout the eternal years.

When the kingdom is established, how different it will be. The blessings the dying race longs for will then become available even before they think of praying for them. "Before they call, I will answer." And when they do learn to ask him for his bounties,

the answers to their prayers will be so real and so immediate that it will seem as though they came before the petitioner had finished his prayer. "While they are yet speaking, I will hear."—Isa. 65:24

"OUR DAILY BREAD"

The answer to the prayer, "Thy kingdom come" includes many material blessings for which devout people of the world customarily pray, but so often fail to receive. We rejoice that the time is coming when these legitimate material blessings will begin to flow to "all the families of the earth," as God promised Abraham. (Gen. 12:3) Meanwhile, it is well to consider how God answers the prayers of his consecrated people now, the prayers of those who have the privilege of addressing him as "Our Father which art in heaven."

These, more earnestly than any others, have continued to pray for God's kingdom to come. At the same time they have had the privilege of asking God for their own immediate daily needs, since Jesus taught them to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread."

This is a very moderate request, and when made in the proper spirit, is acknowledgment that the Lord knows best what our daily needs may be, and that we will

be satisfied with whatever provision he considers wise to make. Besides, for those who are walking in the sacrificial footsteps of Jesus, it is important to recognize that our spiritual needs are more important by far than the material. Bread is used in the Scriptures to symbolize truth, the truth of the Gospel, the truth of the Word, the truth of the divine plan. God has promised to feed us abundantly with this Bread of Life, so we can pray thus with full assurance, knowing that our petitions are primarily for the spiritual food which he has promised, and therefore in harmony with his will.

“AS WE FORGIVE”

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” This portion of The Lord’s Prayer can be uttered sincerely only by those whose hearts are filled with the same spirit of love which prompted our Heavenly Father to send his Son into the world to be the Redeemer and Savior. This love provides for the forgiveness of sinners, who have trespassed against God by disobeying his laws. He is willing to forgive us, but only on the condition that we have the proper heart attitude toward those who sin against us. Certainly this is a searching test of our sincerity.

God forgives his people because he considers that their Adamic imperfections are covered by the merit of the redeeming blood of Christ. This means that the one who prays is a wholehearted believer in Christ, whose acceptance of Christ is so unreserved that he has given up all else to follow his Master. Only such can go to God in prayer, asking forgiveness in Christ's name.

“DELIVER US FROM EVIL”

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” The first temptation mentioned in the Bible was that of mother Eve. She was tempted by the fallen Lucifer, through the serpent, to disobey the law of God. The transgression of God's law the Scriptures designate as sin, and the word temptation is used to describe any effort, allurements, or enticement to sin. The Devil is the greatest of all tempters, and he uses many and various agencies by which to present his sinful appeals to those he endeavors to lure away from God and into the paths of unrighteousness.

“God tempteth no man,” wrote James. (James 1:13) This means that we can depend upon it that God will not lead us into temptation; so in our prayers we claim this assurance.

How hope-inspiring is the contrast to this—"Deliver us from evil." The Devil, the archdeceiver, has throughout the centuries exerted his influence upon man, and especially upon the people of God, to alienate them from their Creator. The result has been tragic—a world largely controlled by sin and selfishness—"this present evil world." (Gal. 1:4) But God has promised deliverance from "the snare of the fowler," and from the evil which the fowler has engendered in the world.—Ps. 91:3

God's promises of deliverance are of personal concern to all who are following in the footsteps of Jesus, for they assure such that Satan will not be able to ensnare nor entrap them. As individuals, God delivers us daily from Satan's pitfalls of error and sin. "The angel of the Lord," wrote the psalmist, "encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them." (Ps. 34:7) What a reassuring promise, and how glad we are to claim it as our own when we pray, "Deliver us from evil."

There is a still larger deliverance for the people of God, for the entire church of Christ in the "first resurrection" to reign with Christ. (Rev. 20:4,6) Jesus said that the gates of hell shall not prevail against his true church, and in fulfillment of this promise, the gates of hell—the death

condition—will be opened wide, and all who have suffered and died with Christ will be released from death, and will be exalted to glory to reign with him throughout the thousand years of his kingdom.

For this glorious deliverance the church has waited throughout all the centuries of this present Gospel Age. The true disciples of Christ have known that this deliverance would not come until he returned. Paul knew this and wrote that a crown of righteousness had been laid up for him which he would receive at “that day,” and added that all who love Christ’s appearing would likewise then receive a “crown.” —II Tim. 4:8

In Jesus’ great prophecy concerning this end of the age—the prophecy in which he identifies so many of the conditions in the world today—he said to his disciples, “When ye see these things”—and his disciples living now are seeing them—“then look up and lift up your heads; for your redemption [Greek: deliverance] draweth nigh.” (Luke 21:31,28) The fact that “these things” foretold by the Master signaling the near approach of the church’s deliverance from this present evil world are now clearly discernible in the daily parade of news, gives us confidence that very soon the last remaining ones of Christ’s true

followers will be delivered, exalted to glory, honor, and immortality with him, and that then the blessings of his much prayed for kingdom will begin to flow out to a suffering and dying humanity.

We pray, "Deliver us from evil," not only because we are longing to be free from an evil world, but also because we know the answer to this petition will mean the answer to our other petition, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." Thus viewed, even that part of a Christian's prayer which means most to him is at the same time unselfish in outlook, since it also contemplates rich blessings for all mankind.

These are the prayers God is pleased with; that is, unselfish prayers. While God is pleased when his people seek individual guidance, forgiveness, and spiritual strength from him, he also wants them to be interested in all whom he loves, namely the entire world of mankind. We show our interest in his plan for blessing the people when we pray, "Thy kingdom come," for it will be through that kingdom that he will provide a "feast of fat things for all people." It will be in that kingdom that death will be swallowed up in victory, and tears wiped from off all faces.—Isa. 25:6-8; Rev. 21:1-5

Above all, let us continuously thank God for his love that made provision for the eternal joy of all. Let us not only praise him individually in our prayers, but also tell the whole world about his love. Tell them that through Christ provision has been made for them to live, and that soon his kingdom will provide peace through “The Prince of Peace,” and health and life for all through the Redeemer and Savior of the world. ■