



How God Answers Prayer

Jesus assures us that our prayers will be answered: “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you” (Matt. 7:7, NRSV).

Yet sometimes we wonder. We may pray that a broken relationship be healed, that a loved one recover from serious illness, that a friend succeed in some new venture—but then things don’t turn out as we had hoped. We wonder if our prayers were answered. Or even heard.

Can we believe Jesus’ promise, “For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matt. 7:8, NRSV)? “Everyone”? Every time?

The Good News of God’s Love

Yes, through the ages Christians have affirmed, out of their own triumphant experience, that God does respond to faithful prayer. God hears, understands, cares, and acts.

Christians have discovered the gospel, the good news of God’s love. The Creator and Redeemer loves each of us more than we do ourselves, wants what is best for us, is actively at work for our good.

“Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then who are evil, know how to give good things to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:9-11, NRSV).

God hears prayer. And, far beyond our imagining, God responds.

How Our Prayers Are Answered

God’s response to prayer is not always what we expect. Sometimes the answer is hard to discover. Sometimes it is hard to accept. But if we listen with care, we will discern the answer. It may take any of these forms:

1. God may say yes.

When our prayer for others or for ourselves coincides with the good that God wills for our lives, we may find that what we sought actually comes to pass. We rejoice in God’s goodness and give thanks for gifts received.

2. But God may answer our prayer with *no*.

What we request may run at cross purposes to the divine will for human life. Or, even though good in itself, there may be a still greater good that God is preparing for our lives. God’s *no* is hard to accept. We may be confused, even angry. Our trust in God may waver. Yet, if we continue to listen, we will surely find the meaning in God’s denial and find the *yes* beyond the *no*.

3. Or God may say *wait*.

God is not in as big a hurry as we are. We may not yet be ready for what we think we need. We may need to do some more growing first, to prepare the way for God’s gift. We may need to change some circumstance in our lives before we could even begin to use what God has to offer. And in waiting, we may learn to pray a different prayer, to seek and find what is more in keeping with God’s will for our lives.

4. Or God may respond, not with what we sought, but with something better.

It may be something we might never have thought of on our own. This is often the case. With our limited view of human needs, we pray for one thing, only to discover the “answer” is quite another. We may not even see this answer at first, or if we see it, we may be disappointed. But as we live into this new answer, we often find it is far richer, deeper, more lasting than anything we had in mind.

The Mystery of Prayer

Prayer is not like magic. Primitive peoples used to believe in magic. A rain dance, for example, if properly performed, would automatically bring the rain. If it did not, the dancers must have made a mistake.

But prayer is different. It is a mysterious conversation with the living God. In the course of the conversation we clarify, and perhaps change, our own hopes. For example, we may begin praying that a dying loved one be spared. But in dialogue with God, our prayer matures and we may soon find we are seeking a deeper relationship with our suffering loved one, or insights into how to share God's love with him/her, or firmer personal resources for coping with our loss.

This means that *prayer is more listening than asking*. In this "conversation with God" we need to spend more than half our time trying to hear. What is God's will for this situation? Where is God moving? In what direction is God leading? What changes are already occurring to me? What new attitudes and behaviors are expected of me?

Yes, *behaviors*. For the answer to prayer is not fully received and accepted until it is outwardly expressed. Our prayer is inevitably linked with our action.

Ours is an active Sovereign, who is moving us and all creation toward the day of shalom, God's reign of righteousness, wholeness, peace, and justice. Every prayer for whatever purpose, and every answer of the loving God, is an opportunity to take new steps into the coming kingdom.

Prayer is a mystery. We do not know just how it works. But we do know that when, in faith, we come into conversation with the living God, our dearest hopes are heard, refined, and, yes, answered.

Gracious God, we come asking . . . seeking . . . knocking. We come into conversation with you, sharing our heart's desire. We listen, knowing that out of your love for all your children, you will respond. Help us discern your answers, accept them and build them into our lives, and act. In the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Adapted from a leaflet written by George E. Koehler for Discipleship Resources.