

God Answers Prayer

Introduction. Prayer is an act of faith predicated on the fact that God hears us. If God does not hear or desire to answer, then prayer becomes a meaningless activity. However, the fact that God wants us to pray indicates that He wants to hear from us; and the Bible shows that, in fact, He wants to answer our prayers.

When Jesus stood at the tomb of Lazarus, ready to bring him out alive, He prayed, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always" (John 11:41-42). Jesus' confidence was strong enough to be able to say, "I thank thee that thou hast heard me." Our goal is to have this same kind of confidence. It is based on the faithfulness of God Himself.

I. Elijah: God Answers Prayer (1 Kings 17-18)

- A. Elijah was God's prophet during the reigns of Ahab (874-953 BC) and Ahaziah (853-852 BC) of Israel.
 - 1. Politically, Israel was in strong shape. Ahab had married Jezebel, daughter of the king of Tyre.
 - 2. Spiritually, there was major trouble. Jezebel brought Baal worship with her; and with her influence, Ahab was corrupt.
 - 3. Elijah was sent to turn the nation and its leaders back to the Lord, and he did this by predicting a drought in Israel.
- B. The drought came to pass, and Elijah followed God's instructions for his own provisions. He was told to go to a widow, who would care for him. Her care was rewarded by a miraculous supply of meal and oil that would not deplete.
 - 1. While Elijah was there, the widow's son became ill and died. Elijah took the child and prayed to God (1 Kings 17:21).
 - 2. The Lord heard the prayer and this convinced the widow that Elijah was from God (vv. 22-24).
- C. The prophets of Baal.
 - 1. Ahab, on meeting Elijah, called him the "troubler of Israel." Elijah pointed out that it was really Ahab causing the problems (18:18).
 - 2. Then Elijah gave a challenge. He told Ahab to gather the 450 prophets of Baal, along with the 400 prophets of the Asherah at Mt. Carmel.
 - 3. When they gathered, Elijah issued the challenge. They were to build an altar and offer a sacrifice. They would call on their god (Baal), and Elijah would do the same, calling on God. The "God that answereth by fire, let him be God" (v. 24). They agreed to the challenge. The prophets of Baal did this, and called on Baal to answer, but received no reply. Idols cannot answer prayer.
 - 4. Elijah then built an altar and put the sacrifice on it. He drenched all of it with water, filling a trench he had made around it. Then he prayed to God (18:36-37). God answered by sending fire down on the altar and consuming it. There was no question about who the true and living God was.
 - 5. The prophets of Baal tried to confess God, but it was too late. They were seized and put to death.

- D. These events powerfully demonstrate God's ability and desire to answer prayer. Though we should not expect miraculous answers today, we still pray to the same God Elijah prayed to.
1. James spoke of Elijah's prayers (James 5:16). To illustrate this point, James referred to Elijah's prayer with reference to the drought (James 5:17-18).
 2. Elijah "prayed earnestly." He was a great man of faith who did not doubt God's ability to hear and answer his prayers. What a great example for us.

II. The God Who Hears And Answers

- A. God is able.
1. God is often referred to as "Almighty." He is the "great, the mighty God" (Jeremiah 32:18). He has ultimate control over the heavens and earth, so certainly He can respond to His creation (Matthew 19:26).
 2. We cannot doubt God's power and strength. What is God unable to do for us (Ephesians 3:20; cp. Romans 8:28-39)? Not only is He able, He is willing and ready to bless us (Philippians 4:20). Our prayers are based on God's ability, desire, and faithfulness in answering (Psalm 145:18-19).
- B. Whose prayer does God hear? We know that God hears and desires our prayers (Jeremiah 33:3; Matthew 7:7; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). He will "give good things to them that ask him" (Matthew 7:11). But does He hear anyone's prayer?
1. He hears His children.
 - a) It is the privilege and right of one who can truly address God as "Father" (Matthew 6:9). Those have been born into this new spiritual relationship have the right to call Him "Father."
 - b) All the spiritual blessings associated with being His children are found in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). This is why we pray "in the name of Jesus." That phrase is not a formula, but it is an expression of everything that Jesus is to us (Colossians 3:16-17). It is through Him we have all our spiritual blessings, and it is through Him we can approach the Father.
 2. He hears the holy ones.
 - a) It is stated negatively in Proverbs 28:9 and positively in 1 Peter 3:12. Paul said that wherever men pray, they should lift up "holy hands" (1 Timothy 2:8). This means a life of purity in contrast to "wrath and doubting".
 - b) It is the prayer of a "righteous man" that can "accomplish much" (James 5:16). Refusal to repent of sins will result in God not listening to our prayers (Isaiah 59:1-2).
 3. He hears those who are persistent.
 - a) Jesus taught that people always "ought to pray and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1).
 - b) The following parable (vv. 2-8) illustrates persistence in prayer. A widow kept coming to a judge asking for protection, which he gave. This shows that we need to be persistent in coming to Him as His children.
 4. He hears those who are searching.
 - a) The teaching in Matthew 7:7-8 coincides with the one on persistence, as the idea of "ask," "seek," and "knock" is persistent. In other words, "keep on asking, seeking, and knocking."

- b) But it also shows the attitude of one who is searching for what is right. This appears to be why God heard the prayers of Cornelius (Acts 10:2, 31). Though Cornelius was not yet a Christian, he was devoutly seeking for help about the truth. God will hear these prayers.
 - 5. He hears those who ask according to His will.
 - a) Prayer is not to be compared to a spoiled child demanding and getting anything he wants (James 4:3).
 - b) Instead, our prayers need to be according to God's will (1 John 5:14). Like Jesus, our prayers need to be "Thy will be done" (Matthew 26:39, 42).
 - 6. He hears those who ask in faith.
 - a) James said that one who asks for wisdom must ask in faith (James 1:6-7). We cannot approach God with a "if you are there" attitude.
 - b) God is faithful. He will do His part, and we must trust that if our prayers will be effective.
 - 7. He hears those who keep His commandments.
 - a) We have confidence not only to enjoy access to God in prayer, but to receive answers from His too (1 John 3:22).
 - b) There is an objective, moral reason, namely because we obey his commands and, more generally, do what pleases him. Obedience is an indispensable condition of answered prayer.
- C. When God says "No."
 - 1. Though we can understand God's ability to answer prayer, does it not at times seem like He is either saying "No" or at least putting off His answer?
 - 2. God is God and we are not. Practically, this means that God knows what is best for us. Like a parent who tells a child "No" because of the knowledge that it is not good for the child, or knowledge that something better is coming, God may essentially say "No" because He has something better for us, or because it is not good for us. In these cases, we need to trust God that His answer is best.
- D. Sometimes God says "wait." Perhaps what we take to be a "no" could essentially be "wait a while." God does everything in His own time, since He is not on our time (2 Peter 3:9). Job is a good example of this. He did not have all the facts, and he needed to wait on the Lord and His time. Habakkuk, also, was told the same when he cried for God to take action against the wicked in his day.

III. How Does God Answer Today?

- A. He answers through providence! Providence is the idea that God is in control of His universe and He can carry out His purpose to its ultimate consummation. In other words, God can, with His omniscience and omnipotence, change what happens in this world.
 - 1. It involves His foresight and forethought, with proper management over His creation. It is God's continuing activity of preserving and governing the whole world by His wisdom, goodness, and power for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose and for the glory of His name.

2. This is illustrated in the story of Joseph (Genesis 37-47). God aided Joseph in his rise to power in Egypt, even though he often had to deal with bad circumstances due to the sin and abuse of others. God was still with him.
- B. Some considerations about providence.
1. God does not act providentially in any way that would conflict with His nature or will. He will not lie, or become faithless, or influence anyone to do something that is wrong (James 1:13-14). His activities will always be in harmony with who He is.
 2. God does not interfere with or override man's free will. We always have the choice of obeying or rejecting God's commands. God can use others to accomplish His purposes, but we are still responsible for the choices we make. For example, Assyria in Isaiah 10:5-7 and the Chaldeans in Habakkuk 1:5-11. God may open doors of opportunity through circumstances, but He does not change our freedom to choose right and wrong.
 3. Though some answers to prayer are miraculous in Scripture, not all are. Providence has to be distinguished from the miraculous.
 - a) A miracle is a work of God that is above natural law; it suspends or supersedes the laws of nature (walking on water, instant healing of the lame, etc.).
 - b) Providence uses the laws of nature to accomplish the ends. Note the contrast between the miraculous and the providential:
 - (1) The virgin conception of Jesus was miraculous (Matthew 1:18-25). The conception and birth of Samuel was providential (1 Samuel 1:19-20).
 - (2) Jesus controlled the raging sea miraculously (Matthew 8:23-27). God providentially sends rain (Acts 14:17; James 5:16-18).
 - (3) When Paul received a vision from Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10), getting there involved several days taking natural means of transportation. Yet God was with them through it all.
 - c) In the miraculous, God worked directly by suspending or interfering with the natural. In providence, He uses the natural to fulfill His purposes.
 - d) Miracles, as we see in Scripture, are not to be expected today (cp. 1 Corinthians 13:8-12). But God still works providentially. Our faith in His ability to answer our prayers is based in the fact that He is still at work in the world. We may not understand exactly how He does everything He does, but we do not have to. All we need to do is trust Him, and know that He will always do what is right and best for us (Matthew 6:25-34).

Conclusion. Prayer is a privilege. It is something that can be taught and learned. It is what we do by faith in communicating with God. Our God is a kind, loving, powerful, and omniscient God. We pray to Him because we believe He hears us and answers our prayers. We are dependent on Him for this life and its necessities.

I am deeply indebted to Doy Moyer for the use of his material.