

# What About When God Doesn't Answer?

## *Question People Ask About The Christian Faith*

There have been times when I have thought it would be easier to be an atheist. Atheists don't have to grapple with the same questions Christians do. Atheists don't believe God exists, so the question "Why doesn't God answer when I turn to him for help?" is an irrelevant question for them. As far as they are concerned, there isn't a God to help. So the question is no big deal for Atheists. But it is a big deal for Christians. Here's why.

Because we believe that God is all powerful, then by definition, he can do anything. When Abraham was 100 and Sarah his wife was 90, God promised them a son. Sarah reacted with incredulous laughter to the idea of having a child at age 90. But the word of the Lord that came to Abraham and Sarah was **"Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:14)** When the city of Jerusalem was surrounded by the most powerful army on earth, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah when he was praying **"Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all mankind; is anything too hard for me?" (Jeremiah 32:27)** We find the same thing in the New Testament. Jesus said **"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened." (Matthew 7:7 & 8)** The Bible is full of these huge promises. On another occasion Jesus said **"I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." (Matthew 21:21-22)**

Which is all very cool, but for most of us, that doesn't square with our reality. We pray for sick people and they don't get healed. Single people pray for years for a marriage partner, and years later, they are still on their own. People out of work pray for jobs that don't materialise. In a church where I was Pastor we prayed for years for a young guy whose body was wasting away, yet the medical people could find nothing wrong. He lost his appetite. He lost the ability to speak. He was such a drain financially and emotionally on his parents they could hardly cope. The question we wrestled with was "Why doesn't God answer our prayers?" "Why does the Bible seem to promise so much, but God doesn't seem to deliver?"

What I'm going to share with you are only partial answers. If you or I had all the answers, we would know everything. And to know everything is to be God. The way we approach these questions is determined by our view of God. If you see God as someone who has to do exactly what you ask, then of course you will be uptight when you don't get what you want. If you see God as the sovereign God who understands the big picture in a way that you and I don't, then you will be much more accepting of things you don't understand. Here are some possible answers to the questions we have about why God doesn't seem to answer.

### **1. God Says "No".**

It doesn't matter how sincere we are, or how well intentioned we are, if the thing we ask for is inappropriate, God is going to say "no". There was a time when James and John came to Jesus with their Mum. I don't know if it was James and John who had this bright idea, or if it was their Mum, but they asked Jesus if they could have the two best seats in this new Kingdom he was setting up. Here's how Mark records it in his Gospel **"Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant."**

***These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared." (Mark 10:35-40)***

They were asking to be the new CEO's of the Kingdom. And did you note the way they asked? "We want you to do for us whatever we ask". Really? Are you shocked by that? If you are, listen to some of your own prayers. So often, that's the way we pray. We treat God as if he is our heavenly butler, who has to jump when we call. Jesus says to these two – you don't know what you are asking. The two best seats in the Kingdom of God were on two crosses next to Jesus. The answer Jesus gave was a very clear "no", because the request was wrong. There was another time when James and John got really ticked off with some Samaritans because they weren't willing to welcome Jesus. So what was their request to Jesus? Lord, can we nuke them? Can we call down fire from heaven to wipe them off the face of the earth? Not only did Jesus say "no", but he rebuked them for asking such a dumb thing. Because God loves us, he's going to say "no" if our requests are immature, short-sighted, self serving or blatantly materialistic. God knows our motives. Sometimes we pray things like "God change my husband", which sounds like a perfectly reasonable request, but if the motive for that prayer is that we don't want to face up to our own shortcomings, then the Lord is likely to say "no". And even when our motives are good, he may still say "no" because he has some other purpose that we don't understand.

This is where it gets really tough for us as Christians. Godly people are stricken with terrible diseases. Babies die for no apparent reason. Tragedies afflict righteous people and innocent people perish. We live in a world where we have to have answers for everything. We have to see the purpose in everything. We have to solve every problem. We have to fix everything that is wrong. We have to understand everything. But here's the thing. As soon as I have a God that I completely understand, he is too small for me to worship. God is not obligated to explain everything to me. He is the creator and I am the creature. I'm like a child whose parents love me enough to say "no", for my own good. As I mature, I may understand why they said "no". But it may be that I never completely understand.

## **2. God says "Not Yet"**

One of my computers at home runs Windows XP. My work computer runs Windows 7. My laptop runs Vista. Vista drives me nuts, because it takes so long to boot up. We live in an age where we want everything, and we want it now. It takes forever for the lift to come, or for the photocopier to warm up. Remember the old days when you had to wait while the film was processed for your camera. Wasn't that a pain! If the vending machine doesn't give us what we want right away, we give it a kick. Sometimes we treat God like the big vending machine in the sky. We punch in the request, and if he doesn't deliver right away, we give him a kick.

Sometimes God delays his answers to test our faith. Sometimes he delays to give us a chance to think things through a bit more. Ruth Graham was the wife of Billy Graham. She once said that she was glad that God didn't give her what she wanted straight away, or she would have married the wrong man – several times. Sometimes God delays in his answers because he wants to develop qualities of endurance, trust, patience or submission within us. Spiritual growth comes through pain, struggle, hardship and disappointment. And get this people. God is more interested in forming the character of Christ in us than giving us what we want when we want it. When God speaks through the prophet Isaiah, he says this "**For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts"** (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Now here's the interesting thing. There are many of us in this room today who have had to wait to see our prayers answered. And I suspect most of us that have had to wait would say that the waiting was worth it. Through the waiting we have seen more of the character and purposes of God. Through the waiting, God has been able to work more of the character of Christ into our lives.

### 3. God says "Grow".

The bible gives some other reasons why prayer isn't answered. I don't have time to cover these in depth, so I'm going to list them fairly quickly. They are all to do with issues in the life of the person who is praying. Here they are.

- **Prayerlessness.**

**"You do not have, because you do not ask God"(James 4:2)** Many times, the reason why we haven't seen answers to prayer is because we haven't prayed fervently, persistently and expectantly. Many times, we intend to pray, and we wish for the result, but we don't actually pray. And the scripture is pretty blunt. We don't have because we don't ask.

- **Unconfessed sin.**

**"But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2)** Unconfessed sin cuts off our communication with the Father. If you read through the Old and New Testaments, you will see a whole list of sins that caused God to turn a deaf ear to people's prayers. Cheating God. Cheating the poor. Men cheating on their wives. Any hidden sin in our lives causes God to take no notice when we pray. On the contrary, James tells us that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. The more sin is dealt with in our lives, the more powerful our prayers.

- **Unresolved relationship conflicts.**

**"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23-24)** This is one of the biggest reasons why many of our prayers are not answered. We come to God with grudges and resentments against other people, and then we wonder why our prayers are not answered. When we pray, we need to be able to honestly say to God that we have done absolutely everything in your power to restore a broken relationship. If we can't truthfully say that, then we are always going to have problems with God hearing our prayers. When we pray, God knows our hearts. He knows our motives. We may fool others, and we may even fool ourselves, but we can't fool God.

- **Selfishness.**

**"When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." (James 4:3)** So many of our prayers are based around getting what we want - our happiness, our peace, our comfort, our needs, our rights and our convenience. We just want a happy, satisfying, problem free life. Yet when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, it was about God's name being revered, about God's kingdom and God's will being done.

- **Uncaring Attitudes.**

**"If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered." (Proverbs 21:13)** God has a bias toward the poor and the needy. If we harden our hearts to those in need around us, that will have a direct effect on our prayers. If you want to read how God feels about his people caring for the poor, read Isaiah 58:3-9. If your prayers are not being answered, open up that scripture, read it, and open up your heart before the Lord. See what God reveals to you.

- **Inadequate faith.**

**"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does".(James 1: 5 -8)** The starting place for prayer is believing that God is all wise, all powerful, and all knowing. It's believing God is able. And if you are beginning to doubt that, go back and read the

scriptures to see what God has done. Review what he has done in your own life. Read stories of what he has done in the lives of others. Pray with others who do believe that God answers prayer. All of these things will build your faith and enable you to pray believing prayers rather than "hope so" prayers.

God wants us to grow. As we share communion today, if there are any of these issues that are blocking your connection with God, I urge you to deal with them today.

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