

HOW PRAYER WORKS

July 13, 2001

1 John, Chapter 5, Verse 14. Men, it has always been my practice to pray that God would send men into my life with whom I could share my faith in Jesus Christ. Over the last couple of weeks, I've been talking about this tremendous saga of my computer problems. I have not had e-mail now and this is the last day of the third business week I've not had e-mail. My computer got fried by lightning; one of two different problems that it had. They replaced the mother board on Monday, and on Wednesday, I ended up with a whole brand new computer. I have a whole brand new printer. I also blew up my printer. I've had quite an experience over the last few days. By the end of the day on Monday, I had no less than five different techs in my office, in my home, trying to sort this thing out. Finally, it dawned on me what the problem was. So I stopped asking God to send me men with whom I could share my faith. You want to know what? As soon as I stopped praying, I got my computer fixed. Every single tech was different. You'd think that the company could figure out that there might be some advantage to the cumulative knowledge of the problem, and they would send the same tech back over and over again. But they don't, so I had an opportunity to share my faith with five different techs. Then I prayed that God would stop sending me techs.

Let's take a little review. We're doing a series on prayer. We're going to do three sessions. The first is, "Why Should We Pray?" The second is, "How Does Prayer Work?" which we're going to do today, and the third is, "What to Pray For." Last week, just to review, when we looked at why, we talked about what we should pray because of what happens when we don't pray. We also took a look at what happens when we do pray, and we talked briefly, or at least introduced the subject of why we don't pray. Talking about what happens when we don't pray, we said that even when you are at your very best, we will tend to look at the data and still come to the wrong conclusion. We also said that there are reasons for things that happen when we do pray and there are incredible promises, and that when we pray in Jesus' name and ask and believe that in faith God will answer and when we abide in Jesus, that he promises to answer our prayers. When we started looking thing of why we don't pray, and I talked to you about the power that we have. We have more power than if a person had enough power to command anybody by e-mail, the President, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CEO of the largest corporation, the editor of the Washington Post. If one person had the power to tell those people to do anything you wanted them to do, ask them anything you wanted them to do, and they would do it, you'd have more power than that. The problem is not that we don't have enough power. The real problem is that we have too much. So, God must put limits on what he will give us in prayer.

This morning we are going to start talking about how prayer works. Here's the problem. Let me set this up for you. This is the problem you have. This is the problem that I have. The problem is this. Sometimes I pray, and I don't get what I want. Other times I don't bother to pray, and I do get what I want. So isn't prayer simply an exercise in wishful thinking? That's the problem that we have. You all know that in our experience we often don't get the things that we ask God for, and lots of times we don't bother to ask and we get it anyway. Sometimes it looks like prayer is simply wishful thinking.

What I want you to do is to picture how prayer works practically. Think of yourself going to your boss, if you have one, and asking him for a raise. That's what prayer is like; wishful thinking. Or prayer is like when you ask your wife if you -----. It's asking somebody for something. The kind of prayer we're going to talk about this morning, and there are many kinds of prayer, we're going to focus on prayers of petition, where you are asking God for a particular thing. You are petitioning God for something in particular.

When you or I ask anyone, including God, for something there are only four possible answers. Think about this. There are only four ways that God could answer prayer. They are what? What's the first thing that God could do? The first way that prayer works is that God grants the request. What else could someone do when you ask them to do something for you? They could obviously say, "no," or they could deny your request. What's another thing that could happen? Maybe wait, postpone, delay - let's just call that postpone. Postpone the answer. Can I have a Harley, honey? We'll see, we'll see. What else could

happen? You grant something else. You can ask God for something, you can ask your wife for a Harley, and you can get, like me, maybe a little green plant instead. So grant something else.

I confess that I have been thinking about this all week. I also confess that I'm less than perfect. Can anybody think of any other possible answers to a request that can't be satisfied by one of these four responses? I think you could say that no answer at all is going to be satisfied by one of these things. Actually, that's a very good point. The problem is that, as we're going to see, is that God never gives a "no" response. I think that's what you're going to see in our message this morning. But that's actually a pretty good catch.

Now, picture that you are a father and you have four sons; four very different sons. These four sons all come to you, their beloved father, they come humbly, they come boldly, and they all ask you for the exact same thing. You, being a perfect, good, all-wise father that you are, know the differences in these four sons, and, therefore, even though each of these sons asks for the exact same thing, you give each of them a different answer. This is reality. Is this not reality? I am talking reality, right? What I want to show you is, using that little example, the father and four sons, the four different ways that prayer works when we pray.

We're at 1 John, Chapter 5, Verse 14, and the first thing I want us to look at is that God may grant prayer. How much confidence can we have that God will answer our prayers? "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us, and if we know that He hears us, " watch this, "whatever we ask we know that we have what we've asked of Him." Interesting. When we say that God answers prayer, are we saying that God can answer prayer or that God will answer our prayer?

Last week I introduced an idea at the end that the difficulty for us is not that we don't have enough power, but that we have too much so God must put limits around our prayers. This is an idea that I have developed from C.S. Lewis, C.S. Lewis' idea. Lewis read in Pascal that God has, through prayer, given human beings the dignity of causality. Then Lewis took that a step further and said, "That's true, but it's also true that God has given us two forms of causality. We can make events happen. We can be agents of causality through labor, and we are agents of causality through prayer."

I want to read a couple of passages out of Lewis to you so you can get the sense of how much power we have and it's relationship to God's will in this text and why it is prayer in accordance to God's will that he grants. "Prayers are not always granted. This is not because prayer is a weaker kind of causality, but because it is a stronger kind. When it works at all, it works unlimited by space and time. That is why God has retained a discretionary power of granting or refusing it except on the condition that prayer would destroy us." Then he gives this wonderful illustration that I think should really help you grasp this. "It is not unreasonable for a headmaster to say, such and such things you may do according to set rules of this school, but such and such things are too dangerous to be left to general rules. If you want to do them, you must come and make a request and talk over the whole matter with me in my study, and then we'll see." That's it. And so, God does grant, and we can have confidence that He does grant all prayers that are made in accordance with His will. All prayer that is made in accordance with the will of God is answered.

The second thing that God may do, and this is the second way that prayer works, is that God may grant something else. Turn with me, if you would, to Romans, Chapter 8; Verse 26. If you ask for something from God, why would God give you something else? There are a couple of reasons. In Romans 8, Verse 26, we read, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for," do you catch that, "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."

Over in the last part of Verse 34 it says, "...even Jesus...is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." One reason that God would grant something else is because we don't even know how to pray for what we really need. We're asking for a fish and he wants to teach us something altogether different. He wants to build a skill into our lives as how to catch fish. This whole concept of prayer needs to be understood in the context of the greatness and the goodness of our Holy God; that God is altogether good, he's altogether great and powerful, He's utterly holy in his character and nature, and He knows the plans he has for us, plans to prosper and not to harm us. He's a good God, and our prayers are always made in the context of the greatness and the goodness of God.

In the Chronicles of Narnia, Lewis' character, Susan, sees Aslan??, the lion, which is the Christ figure, and she asks of Aslan???, is he safe? The answer, "No, he's not safe, but he's good." So, when we make our prayers to God, we must understand that we don't know what God's will is. We might think we have it. We might think we're zooming in on it, but the exact precise will of God we often do not know. Even when we do know it's after the fact. We don't know how we ought to pray. One reason that God grants something else other than what we pray is that we don't know what we need, and he wants to often give us less because that's what we need. Is there any doubt that a good, great and Holy God would give you exactly and precisely what you need, what you most need? Sometimes that's less.

I can remember imitating King David whose son lay ill because of his sin with Basheba. I can well remember trying to imitate David and lying on the grass behind one of my real estate projects that was not working out and pleading with God to deliver me. He gave me something else, because that's what I needed, and I thank Him for that. Sometimes He wants to give you more, more than you could dare to ask or imagine because you don't even have enough faith to do what God's will is.

Watch this. Two years ago, Man in the Mirror, the ministry, twenty-four months ago, we had done business with about 150 churches and had 20,000 students, 20,000 men who had been through our seminars twenty-four months ago. Our BHAG, our Big Holy Audacious Goal, was that by the end of 2003 that we would have touched 275,000 men and have 100,000 men a year going through our programs. We're getting close to the end of 2001; only two years ago 150 churches; 20,000 men. Twenty-four months later we have now done business with 15,000 churches; from 150 churches to 15,000 churches that we've done business with. Twenty-four months ago we had touched 20,000 men; twenty-four months later, we have touched over two million men through our ministry. You can't explain that. You can't explain that. That is so much more than I would ever have dared to ask or imagine. God brought along this idea of the mini book give-a-way. Now we've done it twice. It's a phenomenal example of God granting something else. Sometimes he's going to grant you less; sometimes he grants you more. Sometimes he grants what you want.

The third thing that God can do is to deny a request. You have a son who comes to you. You know he's a rebellious spirit. You know his motives are not correct. Why would God deny a request? Well, we'll look at two reasons. Turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew, Chapter 26; Verse 39. While you're turning there, I'm going to read to you from James, Chapter 4; Verse 3. One reason God denies our request is, "When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." So the Lord denies that request.

In Matthew, Chapter 26; Verse 36: "Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled.' Then he said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.' Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.'" You've been here, right? Now watch this. "Yet not as I will, but as you will." Another reason that the Lord may deny your request, you have to understand that the cosmos and the little tiny world within it, God has built a great amount of free play into the world. But he also has a divine purpose, an everlasting purpose of bringing all things into conformity with the good purpose of His will. You can look in Ephesians I for that if you want. Sometimes God is going to deny a prayer request because of the bigger picture of what He's trying to do in your life and in the world.

The fourth thing that can happen here is that he can postpone. Now why would God delay? We don't have time; we not going to look at it, but I'm going to give you the address. Luke, Chapter 1; Verses 1-8 is the parable or story that Jesus tells of the widow who went to the judge for justice, and he denied her, and she kept going. Finally, he said, "Look, just to get this woman out of my hair, I'm going to give her what she wants." Jesus uses this as an illustration of why you should persevere in prayer. A lot of times just in the process of what God is doing in someone's life, he's tried to work some things in and out of their character, and he postpones an answer.

Yesterday I had a call from my brother, Pete. Some of you have heard about Pete if you've been here for a while. Pete is a younger brother. I prayed for my brother for 20 years to become a Christian. For the first 19 years of praying for him, I prayed earnestly, regularly, virtually daily and with faith believing that God would bring my brother into the kingdom. During the 20th year, I continued to pray, but at the end of that year, I realized that I no longer believed that God could save my brother. I had stopped believing and praying in faith. When I recognized this, I confessed it, I repented, I humbled myself and I began, once again by faith, to pray in faith. Then on St. Patrick's Day, 1994, my brother burst into the middle of a staff meeting, that's just the way he is, and with a big, loud voice said, "I just wanted everybody here to know that I just prayed and invited Jesus Christ to be my Savior and Lord." That was 1994. So, I've been praying that the Lord would help him to grow, help him to grow, help him to grow. He called me yesterday. About a year ago, the lights just came on. He joined a church; started to get active in church. Then he found out there was a men's Bible Study, so he joined the men's Bible Study. So he's calling me up quoting scripture to me now on the phone. This is the guy who was cursing Jesus ten years ago, calling me up on the phone quoting scripture to me. Yesterday I'm on the phone with him, and he says he just got a letter from his church and they've invited him to be a leader and take some training for the ALPHA program which is a very well-known European program for sharing your faith. It's making it's way now into the United States. So he's going to become an evangelist. Then he asked me, "Do you think you could help me get lined up with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes?" So we did that, and then yesterday he told me he met with Del Wright who used to be a leader here back when he was a student at UCF, then he went to work for FCA after he graduated from college. Now he's the area director. Some say he's the best area director we've ever here for FCA. So my brother met with him and he's going to become a volunteer with the FCA.

So was that a good thing or a bad thing that God postponed his answer? He's an altogether good God. The application here for us this morning is how we should respond to . First of all, come humbly into the presence of a Holy God knowing that He is good; that he has the power to do whatever it is that is in your best interest. Second, come boldly into the throne room of grace because, as the verse said, this is the confidence that we have, but when we pray, according to His will, He does hear an answer.

Finally, when you leave the place of prayer, leave with gratitude, recall all of the incredible blessings that God has given you. From time to time you hear about a person who will say, "I always took for granted my health until I didn't have health. I always took for granted that I had money until I didn't have money. All the things that we have that we can be thankful for, thank God. This is how prayer works. Sometimes he grants; sometimes he grants something else. Sometimes he denies, and sometimes he postpones. But he always gives us exactly what we need.

Let us pray:

Father, I suppose that just for myself, the action point for me is to have the humility to confess, Lord, that you do know so much better than I what is the best answer to each of my prayer requests and what I need. I need to have more humility. Lord, I also need to have more confidence, to come more boldly, and to be more grateful. Lord, each of this is this room is utterly and completely dependent upon you for every good thing whether we ever acknowledge that or not, it's still true. So, Lord, help us to be men of prayer knowing that as you are the good father that your desire is to give every good gift to us, and you will do that according to the perfections of your perfect knowledge about us. Amen.

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