

Prayer, Part 5

There are several “loose ends” regarding prayer that I have wanted to “tie up” for several weeks, as well as an additional topic or two I’ve wanted to address, so this morning I’m going to take the opportunity to cover all of these loose ends and mini-topics.

Subject One: Four Possible Answers to Any Given Prayer Request

- Dan William first drew my attention to this distinction a couple of weeks ago and I’ve wanted to address it ever since he mentioned it. He forwarded a short write up that a friend had done and I’ve taken this segment almost directly from that.
- When it comes to prayer I can see that there are (at least) four possible ways in which God may answer. There is the actual request itself that God may say “yes” or “no” to, but there is also the desire behind the request that God is aware of that he may say “yes” or “no” to. Allow me an example: suppose I ask God for a brand new BMW. The request is straight forward enough, but there is also something behind the request, something that I (we) typically are not quite as focused on, and that is the desire that longs to be fulfilled—in this case I want to be happy. Therefore the request actually has two parts to it:
 - 1. The BMW
 - 2. The desire to be happy
- My assumption when I ask for the car is that I think it will make me happy, so I want it. Now God responds to both aspects in my request. In this case, God may say “yes” to my request and give me a million dollars, but he may say “no” to the desire behind it. In this case, he would someone how give me a brand new Beemer but not give me the happiness I was seeking. Conversely, God may so “no” to the automobile but say “yes” to the desire behind it, in which case I wouldn’t get the money but God would ensure that I was happy. However, God could also say “no” to both, in which case I would not get the money or the happiness; and, of course, God could say “yes” to both (both the money and the happiness). All of this to say that it seems that there is more involved than simply a “yes” or “no” answer. So in the end the various possibilities look something like this:
 - BMW—Yes
 - Desire to be happy—Yes

 - BMW—Yes
 - Desire to be happy—No

 - BMW—No
 - Desire to be happy—Yes

 - BMW—No
 - Desire to be happy—No
- The Bible is filled with examples of all of these possibilities.

The Request for a King:

- *1 Samuel 8:5-9, 19-20*— “⁵and they said to him, “Behold, you have grown old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint a king for us to judge us like all the na-

tions.”⁶ But the thing was displeasing in the sight of Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.”⁷ And Samuel prayed to the LORD. The LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them.”⁸ Like all the deeds which they have done since the day that I brought them up from Egypt even to this day--in that they have forsaken Me and served other gods--so they are doing to you also.⁹ Now then, listen to their voice; however, you shall solemnly warn them and tell them of the procedure of the king who will reign over them.” ...¹⁸ Then you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel, and they said, “No, but there shall be a king over us,²⁰ that we also may be like all the nations, that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.”

- The Jews wanted to have a human king they could see (petition), so they could be like other nations (desire to be happy). God answered their petition yes, and permitted them to pick out their own king. They wanted someone who was taller, stronger and more handsome than the kings of the nations around them; by this criterion they picked Saul. Their desire to be happy with a human king was answered no; Saul turned out to be a terrible king and the Jews suffered miserably as a result.

A Request for Meat in the Desert:

- ***Psalm 106:13-15***, “But they soon forgot what he had done and did not wait for his counsel.¹⁴ In the desert they gave in to their craving; in the wasteland they put God to the test.¹⁵ So he gave them what they asked for, but sent a wasting disease upon them.”
- KJV, ***verse 15***—“And He gave them their request, But sent leanness into their soul.”
 - They longed for the Egyptian meat and food they used to eat. God answered their petition “yes”; He sent them quail. But the desire for satisfaction or “food happiness” was not answered; instead, they suffered terribly from it and thousands died.

The Request for Ishmael to Live Under God’s Blessing

- ***Genesis 17:18***, Abraham prayed that Ishmael, the son of Hagar, might be his heir. “And Abraham said to God, ‘Oh that Ishmael might live before You!’”
 - God said no to Ishmael becoming his heir, but yes to the desire behind it—to have an heir—he eventually had Isaac.

Paul’s Request for the Thorn in the Flesh to be removed

- ***2 Corinthians 12:7-10*** Paul prayed three times that God would remove his thorn in the flesh: “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”
 - God answered no to the petition, because the suffering was designed to strengthen him spiritually and so be less prone to pride. His desire, however, to continue to grow in grace and so glorify God was answered “yes.”

Subject Two: What Does it Mean to Ask in “Jesus’ Name”?

- The first week I turned to the topic of prayer I used the following two passages:

- **John 14: 12-14**—¹²“I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.
¹³And I will do whatever you ask *in my name*, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.
¹⁴You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.”
- **John 16: 23b-24**—“I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask *in my name*.²⁴Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.”
- I’ve mentioned a couple of times that it appears that these two passages are like a spiritual blank check. The question that needs to be raised is, “Are they really blank checks or is there some kind of exception to them?”
- It seems clear to me that both passages have built within them an “exception clause,” if I can use that kind of term. Notice that in both passages Jesus states that he’ll answer whatever we ask “in his name.” That, it would appear, is the key. What does it mean to ask “in his name”?
 - The best way to answer that is to find out what John meant when he used that expression. The same John that wrote the gospel of John also wrote *1 John*. In that book, John says almost the exact same thing but in different words. “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything *according to his will*, he hears us.¹⁵ And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him” (*1 John 5: 14-15*).
 - Notice that John is saying almost exactly the same thing here as was stated in the Gospel of John 14 and 16, but here the condition is “according to his will.” In other words, “in my name” is equivalent to “according to his will.” When we ask for something “in Jesus name” it means that we are asking for something “according to God’s will.”
 - Herein is the issue: If God desires for the request to take place he will certainly answer “yes,” however if he has something else in mind (i.e., it is not his will), then he will say “no.” I don’t pretend to like this bit of news, but it does seem to be what the passages are teaching.
- Obviously there are a great many other factors in prayer. Prayer will also be unanswered because we do not always know how to pray as we ought (Romans 8:26), and we do not always ask in faith (James 1:6-8). When prayer remains unanswered we must continue to trust God, who “causes all things to work together for good” (Rom. 8:28 NASB), and to cast our cares on him, knowing that he continually cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). We must keep remembering that he will give strength sufficient for each day (Deuteronomy 33:25) and that he has promised, “I will never fail you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5; cf. Rom. 5:35-39). Joseph no doubt prayed earnestly to be rescued from the pit and from being carried off into slavery in Egypt (Gen. 37:23-36), but many years later he found how in all of these events ‘God meant it for good’ Gen. 50:20.”¹
- **Carson**: “Prayers in his name are prayers that are offered in thorough accord with all that his name stands for (i.e., his name is not used as a magical incantation...). Such prayer is never abstracted from the Father; for the Son’s purpose, even as he answers the prayers of his followers, is to bring glory to the Father (v. 13). During his ministry on earth, the Son’s consistent aim, and his achievement, was to bring glory to his Father (5:41; 7:18; 8:50, 54). That was, no less, the Son’s purpose in completing his mission by going to the cross (12:28) –

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 391-392.

which was simultaneously the means by which the Son would be supremely glorified (12:23). Now in the splendour of his exaltation, the Son's purpose does not change: he enables his own to do 'greater things' in order that he may bring glory to the Father."²

- **What Is Praying "in Jesus' Name"?** "Clearly it does not simply mean adding the phrase "in Jesus' name" after every prayer."³
- Paul says that not just our prayers but everything we do is to be done in Jesus' name: *Colossians 3:17*—"And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."
- **Leon Morris**: "This does not mean simply using the name as a formula. It means that prayer is to be in accordance with all that the name stands for. It is prayer proceeding from faith in Christ, prayer that gives expression to a unity with all that Christ stands for, prayer which seeks to set forward Christ himself. And the purpose of it all is the glory of God."⁴
- **Perseverance**: We also must continue to pray. Sometimes an answer, long awaited, will suddenly be given. **George Müller** wrote, "I have persevered in believing prayer for more than fifty-two years for some, and will continue until the answer comes."⁵
- **Samuel Chadwick**—"Satan dreads nothing but prayer...The Church that lost its Christ was full of good works. Activities are multiplied that meditation may be ousted, and organizations are increased that prayer may have no chance. Souls may be lost in good works, as surely as in evil ways. The one concern of the devil is to keep the saints from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray."⁶
- **Hebrews 11: 6** "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who *earnestly* (evkzhtou/sin^ from evkzhte,w) seek him."
 - ^ "To exert considerable effort and care in learning something – to make a careful search, to seek diligently to learn, to make an examination."⁷
- **Joshua 1:8**—"Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may *be careful*^ to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."
 - ^ "Shamr" Prudent
 - **Jeremiah 29: 13-14a**: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the LORD."

² D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 497.

³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 379.

⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John in New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 646.

⁵ As quoted in Andrew Murray, *Andrew Murray on Prayer* (New Kensington: Whitaker House, 1998), 216.

⁶ Samuel Chadwick, <http://www.theoldtimegospel.org/forms/prequest.html>.

⁷ Johannes P. Louw & Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. (United Bible Societies: New York, 1989), n. p.

- **2 Chronicles 15: 12-15**—“They entered into a covenant to seek the LORD, the God of their fathers, with all their heart and soul. 13All who would not seek the LORD, the God of Israel, were to be put to death, whether small or great, man or woman. 14They took an oath to the LORD with loud acclamation, with shouting and with trumpets and horns. 15All Judah rejoiced about the oath because they had sworn it wholeheartedly. They sought God eagerly, and he was found by them. So the LORD gave them rest on every side.”
 - **Mark 12:29-30**—“The most important one,’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart and with *all* your soul and with *all* your mind and with *all* your strength.”“
 - **Psalms 145:19**—“He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them.”
 - **Hebrews 5:7**—“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.”
 - **Daniel 9:19**—“O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name.”
 - **Amos 7:2**—“When they had stripped the land clean, I cried out, “Sovereign LORD, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!”
- **Unanswered Prayer:** “When we face unanswered prayer, we join the company of Jesus, who prayed, ‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done’ (Luke 22:42). We join also the company of Paul, who asked the Lord ‘three times’ that his thorn in the flesh be removed, but it was not; rather, the Lord told him, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Cor. 12:8-9). We join the company of David, who prayed for his son’s life to be saved, but it was not, so he ‘went into the house of the LORD, and worshiped’ and said of his son, ‘I shall go to him, but he will not return to me’ (2 Sam. 12:20, 23). We join the company of the martyrs throughout history who prayed for deliverance that did not come, for they ‘loved not their lives even unto death’ (Rev. 12:11).”⁸
 - **Unanswered Prayer:** “When prayer remains unanswered we must continue to trust God, who ‘causes all things to work together for good’ (Rom. 8:28 NASB), and to cast our cares on him, knowing that he continually cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). We must keep remembering that he will give strength sufficient for each day (Deut. 33:25) and that he has promised, ‘I will never fail you nor forsake you’ (Heb. 13:5; cf. Rom. 5:35-39).”⁹
 - **If God Already Knows Our Needs, Why Pray?:** “Prayer is not made so that God can find out what we need, because Jesus tells us, ‘Your Father knows what you need before you ask him’ (Matt. 6:8). God wants us to pray because prayer expresses our trust in God and is a means whereby our trust in him can increase.”¹⁰ God does not only want us to trust him. He also wants us to love him and have fellowship with him. This, then, is a second reason why God

⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 392.

⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 391-392.

¹⁰ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 376.

wants us to pray: Prayer brings us into deeper fellowship with God, and he loves us and delights in our fellowship with him.

- **Grudem:** “A third reason God wants us to pray is that in prayer God allows us as creatures to be involved in activities that are eternally important. When we pray, the work of the kingdom is advanced. In this way, prayer gives us opportunity to be involved in a significant way in the work of the kingdom and thus gives expression to our greatness as creatures made in God’s image.”¹¹
- **Grudem:** “If we were really convinced that prayer changes the way God acts, and that God does bring about remarkable changes in the world in response to prayer, as Scripture repeatedly teaches that he does, then we would pray much more than we do. If we pray little, it is probably because we do not really believe that prayer accomplishes much at all.”¹²

Prayer with faith:

- **Grudem:** “Jesus is apparently saying that when we ask for something, the kind of faith that will bring results is a settled assurance that when we prayed for something (or perhaps after we had been praying over a period of time), God agreed to grant our specific request. In the personal communion with God that occurs in genuine prayer, this kind of faith on our part could only come *as God gives us a sense of assurance that he has agreed to grant our request.*”¹³
- **If We Say, “If it be Your Will” at the End of a Prayer is it a Lack of Faith:** “To add, ‘If it is your will’ to a prayer is still very different from not asking at all. If my children come and ask if I will take them to get ice cream, but then (feeling in a cooperative mood) add, ‘but only if you think it’s right, Dad,’ that is still far removed from not asking me at all. If they had not asked, I would not have considered going to get ice cream. Once they ask, even with the qualification, I will often decide to take them.”¹⁴

Why does God delay in answering our requests?

- **Sometimes God delays in answering so that our faith will grow**
- **Charles Spurgeon**—“Every promise of Scripture is a writing of God, which may be pleaded before Him with this reasonable request: ‘Do as Thou hast said.’ The Creator will not cheat His creature who depends upon His truth; and, far more, the Heavenly Father will not break His word to His own child. ‘Remember the word unto Thy servant, on which Thou hast caused me to hope,’ is most prevalent pleading. It is a double argument: It is Thy Word, wilt Thou not keep it? Why hast Thou spoken of it if Thou wilt not make it good? Thou hast caused me to hope in it; wilt Thou disappoint the hope which Thou hast Thyself begotten in me?”¹⁵

Subject Three: The Lord’s Prayer:

¹¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 377.

¹² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 377.

¹³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 384.

¹⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 384, footnote number 10.

¹⁵ Charles H. Spurgeon, <http://www.theoldtimegospel.org/forms/prequest.html>.

- **Matthew 6: 9-13**—“⁹ Pray, then, in this way: Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. ¹⁰Your kingdom come Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day our daily bread. ¹²And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. [For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.]”
- ⁹ Pray, then, in this way:
- Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.
- ¹⁰Your kingdom come Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven.
- ¹¹Give us this day our daily bread.
- ¹²And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
- ¹³And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
- [For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.]”