

New Year's Message

How Does God Answer Prayer?

Matthew 7:7-8

Rev. Freddy Fritz

January 1, 2006

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Scripture

Today is January 1, 2006, the first day of the New Year. It is also the first day of our annual Week of Prayer. Therefore it seems appropriate to preach a message on the subject of prayer.

All Christians pray. Some pray frequently; others pray infrequently. However, all Christians have asked at one time or another, “How does God answer prayer?” With that in mind, let us read Matthew 7:7-8:

⁷ “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8)

Introduction

Martin Burnham was a missionary pilot for New Tribes Mission in the Philippines. In the summer of 2001 Martin and his wife Gracia were captured by the Islamic rebel group Abu Sayyaf. They were held captive for 376 days. During the rescue on June 7, 2002 Martin was killed in the crossfire. Later, reflecting on their ordeal, Gracia Burnham wrote these words:

Sometimes I wonder: why did Martin die when everyone was praying he wouldn't? Why does Scripture lead you to believe that if you pray a certain way, you'll get what you pray for? People all over the world were praying that we'd both get out alive, but we didn't.¹

Gracia asked God for deliverance, but it was not given to them—at least, not to Martin.

¹ Corrie Cutrer, “Soul Survivor,” *Today's Christian Woman* (July/August 2003), 50.

Shortly after Thanksgiving one of the New Tampa Christian Academy Moms stopped by my study to ask me to pray for her relatively young mother, who was seriously ill in the Intensive Care Unit at the University Community Hospital. I prayed that the Lord would restore her mother to health and strength. On the last day before the Christmas break I saw the NTCA Mom passing my study window. I ran out and asked how her mother was doing, and was surprised to learn that she had died just a few days earlier.

I had asked God for the healing of this woman's mother, and God had not answered my prayer.

I am sure you have had the experience of asking God for something, but it was not given to you.

Someone says, "I have been praying for my wife to get better, but she died."

Or, "I have been praying for my husband to get rid of the pornography, but I keep finding it."

Or, "I have been praying for a job, but I can't find one."

Or, "I have been praying for guidance, but none has come."

Or, "I have been praying for a baby, but I keep miscarrying."

Or, "I have been praying for (you fill in the blank), but God has not given it to me."

I could give many more examples, and you can add your own. You pray, and it doesn't seem as if there is an answer.

The Rev. Robert Murray McCheyne was the godly young pastor of St. Peter's Church in Dundee, Scotland for about five years before his untimely death at the age of only twenty-nine in 1843. During the early part of his tenure as pastor of St. Peter's Church, McCheyne was traveling. He wrote to his beloved congregation on the topic of prayer. He had been teaching on prayer and, apparently, had remembered something that he wanted to add to his comments about prayer. This is what he wrote:

I do not now remember all the points I was led to speak upon to you, but one, I think, was entirely omitted—I mean the subject of answers to prayer. God left it for us to meditate on now.

Oh, there is nothing that I would have you to be more sure of than this, that “God hears and answers prayer.” There never was, and never will be, a believing prayer left unanswered. Meditate on this, and you will say, “I love the Lord, because He hath heard my voice and my supplication” (Psalm 116:1).²

The Scripture is patently clear that God hears and answers prayer. After all, our text says, **“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).

But, the question still remains, “How does God answer prayer?” That is the question I would like to try and answer today.

The answer I am going to give you is not original to me. I heard this answer years ago in a sermon by Bill Hybels. He apparently heard it from someone else. And, interestingly, it is not very different from the answer that McCheyne wrote to his congregation at St. Peter’s Church in Dundee, Scotland in 1839.

Lesson

So, how does God answer prayer? Let me suggest the following memorable outline:

1. If the request is wrong, God will say, “No!”
2. If the timing is wrong, God will say, “Slow!”
3. If you are wrong, God will say, “Grow!”
4. If the request, timing and you are right, God will say, “Go!”

I. If the Request Is Wrong, God Will Say, “No!”

First, if the request is wrong, God will say, “No!”

Some prayer requests are wrong. Others are inappropriate.

² Bonar, A. A., & McCheyne, R. (1996, c1947). *Memoir and Remains of R.M. McCheyne*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation.; Published in electronic form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996. (electronic ed.). Chicago: Moody Press.

There is a tremendous amount of misunderstanding and wrong teaching about prayer today. More than a half century ago author A. W. Pink observed this problem. He wrote:

In the great majority of the books written and in the sermons preached upon prayer, the human element fills the scene almost entirely: it is the conditions which *we* must meet, the promises *we* must “claim,” the things *we* must do, in order to get our requests granted; and *God’s* claims, *God’s* rights, and *God’s* glory are disregarded.³

So many of our requests are self-centered and self-serving.

On one occasion, James and John, two of Jesus’ disciples, went to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus 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 (Mark 10:35-38). And he denied their request because it was wrong.

On another occasion, when Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, he was not welcomed into a Samaritan village. When the disciples James and John—again!—saw this, they were incensed and asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?”

Here was another wrong request. Jesus not only denied their request, but actually rebuked them (Luke 9:51-56).

Are you and I capable of making requests of God that are wrong? I know I am. I have made wrong requests in the past. And I probably will make wrong requests in the future. Are you and I capable of making requests of God that are self-centered and self-serving? I know I am. Are you and I capable of making requests of

³ Pink, A. W. (1996). *The sovereignty of God*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic ed.). Simpsonville SC: Christian Classics Foundation.

God that are materialistic, short-sighted, immature, or simply not part of God's plan for us? I know I am.

The first church I served as an Associate Pastor was in Beaver Falls, PA. Early in the history of the church they started looking and praying for a piece of property on which to build a permanent home. After much prayer they found a small piece of land in the middle of a residential community. In spite of the church's fervent prayer the residents of the community strenuously opposed the church's presence in their neighborhood. Eventually, the leaders sensed that God was saying, "No!" So they started looking elsewhere for land. Within a short time, the church found much more land in a much better location at a much better price.

So, if you have been praying diligently about a matter, and if you sense that God is not answering your prayer, you may want to review your request. By the way, that is why it is useful to keep a prayer journal. It helps you to review your prayer requests.

As you review your request, you may want to ask some of the following questions:

- Does this request contradict the clear teaching of Scripture?
- Is this request self-centered and self-serving?
- Does this request promote God's claims, God's rights, and God's glory?

God is sovereign, and he is ultimately concerned about his own glory. If your request is wrong, God will say, "No!"

II. If the Timing Is Wrong, God Will Say, "Slow!"

Second, if the timing is wrong, God will say, "Slow!"

You and I live in an impatient society. The slogan of so many of us is, "I want it, and I want it now!" We have become so accustomed to having things done quicker and quicker.

There was a time when dinner took at least 30 minutes to prepare and cook. Now, if the microwave doesn't get it heated in 30 seconds, it needs to be replaced!

There was a time when “fast food” meant that your waiter provided you with quick service at your dining table.

There was a time when it took a computer the size of our sanctuary days to perform complex calculations. Now, we have computers that fit onto our laps that perform those same calculations in fractions of a second.

And so, it is hardly surprising that when we offer up a request to God we expect him to answer instantly!

Do you remember the story of Joseph in the Old Testament? Joseph’s brothers became jealous of him because of his dreams. And so they captured him and sold him into slavery. Joseph ended up in Egypt where, in the providence of God, he eventually rose to the position of Prime Minister of Egypt. I am sure that Joseph cried out to God every day for deliverance from his terrible situation. And yet, almost twenty years later, God used him to rescue his family from the devastating famine ravaging the region.

After praying who knows how many times, Joseph finally understood God’s timing and purpose, so that he was able to say to his brothers, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20).

God knows what is best. His ways are not our ways. God said in Isaiah, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. . . . 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).

We need to learn to trust God in every situation, for as the apostle Paul said, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Be careful that you don’t presume to know better than God how and when he should answer your request. God has his reasons for delaying the answer to your requests.

God may be delaying the answer because he knows that he has other plans for you that you do not yet know about.

God may know that your character is not yet ready to handle the answer to your request, and so he is forging your character so that you can handle the request.

God may be delaying the answer to your request because you need to develop more patience, or more trust, or more endurance, or some other trait.

So, if your request is wrong, God will say, "No!" If your timing is wrong, God will say, "Slow!"

III. If You Are Wrong, God Will Say, "Grow!"

Third, if you are wrong, God will say, "Grow!"

From time to time people share with me some matter about which they have been praying. They have been praying about the matter for quite a while. However, they are not getting the answer they want. So, what do you think they say? "Why isn't God answering my prayer? After all, Jesus said, '**Ask and it will be given to you.**' I have been asking, and it isn't being given to me. I don't think God is hearing me. Or, he is not able to answer my prayer."

Do you see what happens? It is much easier to point the finger at God. If a prayer is not being answered, we think, then it must be that God is the problem.

Rarely does anyone say to me, "Pastor, do you think *I* might be the problem? Do you think the reason I am not receiving the answer to my request is because there might be something wrong with *me*?"

The Psalmist says, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, The Lord will not hear" (Psalm 66:18, *NKJV*). In other words, if I am leading a life of disobedience to God, if I am breaking God's law, God will not answer my prayers. Of course, God hears me in the sense that he sees and hears everything, but the Psalmist is insisting that God will not answer my prayers if I am dabbling in sin.

The apostle Peter is even more specific. He teaches husbands the importance of treating their wives properly, otherwise their prayers will not be heard. Listen to how he puts it in 1 Peter 3:7:

“Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, *so that nothing will hinder your prayers.*” Husbands, could it be that God is not answering your prayers because you are not treating your wife right?

The Old Testament describes how the entire congregation’s prayers were not being answered by God. God had given the people clear instructions about bringing the very best to him in worship. The people were to bring their finest lambs and first fruits to God. But, instead of doing that, the people took the best to market in order to get the best price for them, and they gave God the dregs, the worst, and the leftovers. God spoke to them through the prophet Malachi. In essence, he said to the people of God, “After disobeying and dishonoring me, you have the audacity to seek my favor? You’ve got to be kidding! You mock me with your disobedience. You deliberately try to deceive me. You rob me in your tithes and offerings. And now you expect me to bless you? Don’t be deceived. God is not mocked!” (cf. Malachi 3:6-12).

Brothers and sisters, if you do not honor God and his word, why should God listen to you and your word?

I am convinced that most of our requests are not answered because we are wrong. There is some sin in our lives that we are not repenting of. I suspect that most of our prayer requests are not wrong; they are probably right. I also think that the timing may be off sometimes, but God’s timing is always right. However, I believe that most of our prayers are not answered because we are not dealing with the sin in our lives.

So, if your prayer is not being answered, examine yourself. Ask God to show you if there is some sin in your life of which you need to repent. It may be an obvious sin. Or, it may not be so obvious. In either case, examine yourself and ask the Lord to show you your sin so that you can repent of it, and have the Lord answer your prayer. The Lord promises that he will do so in 2 Chronicles 7:14, where he says, “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from

their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

God wants you to repent of your sin so that you can grow in Christ. Then, you will discover that your prayers are in accordance with his will, and he will hear and answer your prayer.

So, if your request is wrong, God will say, “No!” If your timing is wrong, God will say, “Slow!” If you are wrong, God will say, “Grow!”

IV. If the Request, Timing and You Are Right, God Will Say, “Go!”

But, fourth, if the request, timing and you are right, God will say, “Go!”

God is a relational being. And he has created us as relational beings too. He delights to have his creatures come to him in prayer and make requests of him. However, those requests must be in accordance with his will in order for him to answer them positively.

One of our greatest challenges as parents is to teach our children to make appropriate requests. When our children are very young, they are constantly asking, “I want this! I want that! I want! I want!” Most of the time, wise parents say, “No!” because the request is for something harmful or inappropriate. And as children get older, the requests they make are increasingly appropriate.

We have just celebrated Christmas. I asked many of the children what they got for Christmas. Some got toys. Some got games. Some got clothes. All of those gifts are appropriate for the respective age of the child. But, there was one child who said that all she wanted for Christmas was money.

“Why money?” I asked, thinking that the child wanted to put the money toward something special. Perhaps she wanted to buy a big gift. Or perhaps she wanted to put it in her savings account.

I was told that she wanted the money so that she could send it to help persecuted Christians in other parts of the world. That is a request her father was delighted to answer!

In the same way, God is delighted to answer requests that honor and glorify his name. God is thrilled to answer requests that advance his kingdom. God is eager to answer requests that are in accordance with his will.

So, if your request is wrong, God will say, “No!” If your timing is wrong, God will say, “Slow!” If you are wrong, God will say, “Grow!” But, if the request, timing and you are right, God will say, “Go!”

Conclusion

God is not some kind of celestial slot machine. You don’t pop in a quarter or two’s worth of prayer, hit a button, and expect to receive exactly what you want.

God is not a genie in a bottle. You don’t rub the bottle with your prayer, and expect God to pop out, and do as you bid.

Gracia Burnham’s questions made her realize it isn’t always easy to comprehend God’s nature. She wrote:

I used to have this concept of what God is like, and how life’s supposed to be because of that. But in the jungle, I learned I don’t know as much about God as I thought I did. I don’t have him in a theological box anymore. What I do know is that God is God—and I’m not. The world’s in a mess because of sin, not God. Some awful things may happen to me, but God does what is right. And he makes good out of bad situations.⁴

God is sovereign. He does exactly as he pleases.

I want to echo Robert Murray McCheyne, who said, “Oh, there is nothing that I would have you to be more sure of than this, that ‘God hears and answers prayer.’ There never was, and never will be, a believing prayer left unanswered.”

If you keep this outline in mind as you pray, you will find great help in knowing how God answers prayer. Amen.

⁴ Corrie Cutrer, “Soul Survivor,” *Today’s Christian Woman* (July/August 2003), 50.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org