

Reflections on Unanswered Prayer

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Why might God not answer prayer? There are several possible reasons.

1. His Sovereign Plan

Ephesians 1:11 tells us that God “works all things according to the counsel of his will...” God has a grand plan that He is working out down through the course of history. Many times the things that we are asking for do not fit into that plan. I believe that as His children, God will give us anything that is good for us and is consistent with His sovereign plan for history. “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us” (1 Jn. 5:14). Anything. Within the confines of His sovereign plan.

2. Sin in Our Lives

There are times that what we are asking for is good and consistent with God’s sovereign plan, but the Lord chooses to withhold it from us because there is sin in our lives. If we have truly trusting in Jesus for salvation, sin never affects our status as children of God. But it can interrupt our fellowship with Him and cause our prayers to be unanswered. For example, Peter warns husbands, “Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered” (1 Pet. 3:7). Psalm 66:18 tells us, “If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.”

3. Lack of Faith

This might be viewed as a subset of the previous category but is worth looking at on its own. Sometimes we have reacted so far against Word of Faith name-it-and-claim-it theology that we forget that the Bible does make statements like: “And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. And he marveled because of their unbelief” (Mark 6:5-6).

...one anthropologist recounts the experience of a fellow anthropologist named Jacob Loewen, who was doing Bible translation among the Choco people in Panama. The wife of his host, Aureliano, was dying from what was obviously pneumonia... While Loewen had translated the promise of healing in Jas 5:14-15, he knew that he did not have faith to pray. Nevertheless, reading this passage, the local believers prayed with him for her healing, and he rallied slightly. By the next morning, however, she was dying again, so the local believers anointed her with oil, without inviting Loewen, and this time she rose from the bed completely well, returning immediately to her household labors. When Aureliano declared happily that God’s Spirit had

chased away the fever spirits, Loewen noted that they had not invited him and his Western colleague to pray this time. Aureliano apologized but noted, “It doesn’t work when you and David are in the circle. You and David don’t really believe.”¹

4. Lack of Persistence

“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1). There are times that the Lord desires to answer our prayers but we give up too soon. George Muller said: “The great point is never to give up until the answer comes. I have been praying for fifty-two years, *every day*, for two men, sons of a friend of my youth. They are not converted yet, but they will be! How can it be otherwise? There is the unchanging promise of Jehovah, and on that I rest. The great fault of the children of God is, *they do not continue in prayer; they do not go on praying; they do not persevere*. If they desire anything for God’s glory, they should pray until they get it.”² Following Muller’s advice, if there is something that is good that we desire from the Lord we should continue to pray for it until (1) the request is granted, (2) the answer is clearly no, (3) we die. If we give up before any of these points, let us not lament that God has not answered our prayers.

5. Wrong Motives

James is clear: “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (Jam. 4:3).

6. An Eventually Surprising Answer

There are times when we think that our prayers have gone definitively unanswered, but in the grand scheme of God’s plan there is actually a surprising answer waiting. It may not correspond to the details for which we prayed but nevertheless can be recognized as an answer to our prayers. We usually think of Jesus’ cries in Gethsemane as going unanswered because, after all, the Father did not take the cup of the cross from Him. But the letter to Hebrews gives us a slightly different perspective on this: “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence” (Heb. 5:7). The author of the letter to the Hebrews sees Jesus’ prayer as having been heard in an important way. The Father did not ultimately abandon Him to death. He was answered in the resurrection. In a similar way we might pray for a fellow believer to be healed of cancer only to be eventually attending a funeral. Did God not hear our prayer for healing? But what will be our perspective on this at the general resurrection when

¹ Craig Kenner, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 1:230.

² George Muller, as quoted in Roger Steer, *George Muller: Delighted in God* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2008), 224, emphasis in Steer.

the Lord raises His children from the dead and gives them forever glorified bodies free from all sickness and death? In these cases unanswered prayer may not be unanswered at all.³

³ This article has in a general way and in some specific instances been influenced by Bob Russell, "Seven Reasons Why Prayer May Not Be Answered" <http://www.bobrussell.org/> accessed February 11, 2014.