

“LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY: (#4) UNDERSTANDING GOD’S ANSWERS”

(Psalm 17:1-2 & 6; 22:1-5 & 8)
© 2010 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

[PROP NEEDED: “Miracle on 34th Street” Video Clip]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 3-14-10]

–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read Text: Psalm 17:1-2 & 6; 22:1-5 & 8 and Pray.
2. [WATCH VIDEO CLIP from “Miracle on 34th Street”(1:32:05-1:33:08, Time: 1:03)]

A–Do any of you ever feel that way about prayer?

B–There’s a lot of people who do – we pray for something really hard. But it doesn’t happen, and so we think either that prayer doesn’t work, or that God doesn’t exist at all!

C–And this mind set is even fueled by some kinds of Christian televangelism, where “success” and maturity in our spiritual lives are measured by whether or not we get what we ask for when we pray – and if we don’t, then “*You just don’t have enough faith!*”¹

3. But, is that *really* the way it works? How *should* we respond when God doesn’t give us what we pray for? What does it mean? And what do we do with it?

A–This is exactly what I want us to focus on today as we conclude our sermon series “Lord, Teach Us to Pray” (Refer to Bulletin Sermon Notes)

B–And my hope is that as we study our scriptures today, we’ll come to a better understanding of exactly how it is that God’s answers prayer, and how we can respond appropriately.

–II–

4. Let’s start by remembering that three weeks I began this series by saying flat out that biblical prayer is primarily about *relationships*, not *results*.

A–Sidney Greenberg says that... “*Prayer is not [about] getting, but becoming,*”² and author Croft Pentz says something similar when he writes that “*Prayer is not a way of getting what WE want, but a way of becoming what GOD wants us to be.*”³

B–And when we think of prayer in *these* ways, I believe it changes what we look for *when* we pray.

1–For example, if I start thinking about the purpose of my prayer life as helping me to build and deepen my relationship with God, then “*getting what I want*” is no longer the *driving force* for my prayers, but merely a *consequence* of them.⁴

2–In other words, the “results” of prayer flow out of/from our relationship with God, *rather than* being the *purpose* of that relationship – they’re merely a “fringe benefit” of prayers, rather than the *reason* we pray. ⁵

5. So, with that in mind, let’s turn to today’s two scriptures to help us understand what God’s three answers actually are, what they mean, and how we can respond to them. Many of you have heard these three before, but let me just briefly remind us of them:

–III–

6. God’s first answer to prayer can be “**YES**” – after all, the scriptures tell us that God delights in answering our prayers affirmatively whenever possible. ⁶

A–[9:30am ONLY]: Vs. 6 of today’s first scripture (Psalm 17) affirms this- listen to it...

“I call to you, God because I’m sure of an answer. So... answer! Bend your ear! Listen sharp!”

[11am ONLY]: In Verse 6 of today’s first scripture (Psalm 17) the writer expresses this by praying... *“I call upon you, for you WILL answer me, O God.”*

B–Now, we all like to get “yes” answers, but we’ve got realize that God’s “yes” is dependant on several things: – first, on us asking things that are not only consistent with His will and character, but which would bring Him glory if He said “yes.” ⁷

1–For example, God’s not going to honor a request that harm come to someone else, or that He would “get that person” for what they did to you, and He’s also not going to honor a request that would allow you to have an affair with that person who’s been flirting with you (Oh, *you* might pursue it on your own, but it’s not because God says “yes” to it) – these aren’t in keeping with God’s character.

C–Another thing to realize is that sometimes we fail to see God’s “yes”-es in front of us:

1–[STORY OF MAN WHO WANTED TO BE RESCUED HIS WAY]

Many of you already know the story of the man who was trapped by the rising waters of a flood, and when the water was up to his knees, a rowboat came by: *“Hop in, we’ll save you!”* He replied *“No thanks, the Lord will provide.”*

A short while later a motor boat came by, and even though the waters were at his waist, he again said, *“No thanks, the Lord will provide.”* So a helicopter arrived overhead and offered him a ladder. But even though the water was up to his chin, he said, *“Thanks anyway, but the Lord will provide.”*

Well, the man drowned, and soon found himself banging on the gates of heaven, mad as a hornet, complaining to St. Peter, *“I was in trouble and I prayed and trusted God. So WHY did He let me drown?”*

St. Peter just shook his head, and said: *“Look fella, we sent you two boats and a helicopter. What more do you want?”*

2–You see, sometimes we put a “box” around our prayer expectations, and if the answer doesn’t look that box, then we think God *hasn’t* answered at all.

3–But what we may need to do instead is to *broaden* our view of what God’s “yes”-es look like, and look for them in forms *other than* what we predefine. ⁸

7. Of course, sometimes God’s answer is “**NO**” – we don’t like it, but it’s *still* an answer.

A–Today’s second scripture reading from Psalm 22:1-2 gives us a sense of this, where the writer prays: [MSG] “*God, God... my God! Why did you dump me miles from nowhere? Doubled up with pain, I call to God all the day long. No answer. Nothing. I keep at it all night, tossing and turning.*”

[NRSV] “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me...? I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.*”

B–What we forget is that, even though we don’t think of it at the time, sometimes God’s “No’s” are as meaningful (or more so) than His “Yes’s.”

1–Think about this: what would happen if, as we were growing up, we *always* got we asked for? (...*We’d be spoiled and probably unprepared for real life!*)

2–So, our earthly parents teach us that sometimes the most loving answer to a child’s request is “No.” ⁹

3–Theresa of Avila once said, “*There are more tears shed over answered prayers [i.e., yes] than over unanswered prayers [i.e., no].*”

C–And we need to remember that sometimes God’s “No” is only a prelude to something even more wonderful in the future.

1–Robert McCheyne once wrote “[*In prayer,*] *God will either give you what you ask... or something far better.*” ¹⁰

2–[MY STORY OF GOD SAYING ‘NO’ TO MY COLLEGE RELATIONSHIP]

When I was in college, I was in a relationship with young lady that ended up not working out. But because I desperately wanted it to work, I remember asking God to restore it so we’d be together.

Through a variety of circumstances and difficult events, I remember hearing God clearly say “*No. This is not the relationship I have for you.*” Well, I was mad / upset with God for a while, but it was only about 2-3 months later that I met – and later married – the best friend I could ever have, Trish.

3–And I firmly believe that if God hadn’t said “No” to my initial prayer, I wouldn’t have been ready to receive His great gift for me through her.

8. Which brings me to a final answer that God sometimes gives: **“WAIT / NOT YET.”**

A—Now, in many ways this is the most *difficult* answer, because since it’s *not* the final answer, it requires us to trust God through a period of uncertainty.

1—Today’s second scripture (Psalm 22:3-5 & 8) gives us a sense of this when it challenges pray-ers to [MSG]“*Wait and] see how God will handle [your situation]*” [NRSV] “*Commit your cause to the Lord*” ...

2—...Because [MSG] “*[God was] there for our parents; they cried for help and [God] gave it*” [NRSV] “*Our ancestors trusted [in God], and [He] delivered them,*” and so God will be there for us in our own time, as well.

B—Think about it... if we got *instant* answers all the time when we prayed, we wouldn’t need faith to trust in God, would we?

1—You see, it’s in the hours, days & weeks of *waiting* that our faith is truly stretched, so that we come to trust God, *more* than if we got an immediate answer.

2—Psalm 27:14 – “*Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!*”

3—In other words, “waiting” for God matures our faith and strengthens our character by helping us be able to take *our* hands *off* a situation, so that *God’s* hands can control both the situation *and* the eventual solution¹¹ – wait on God!

–IV–

9. You see, I believe that if we listen attentively and expectantly in our prayer life, we’ll *always* hear God answer in one of these three ways: “Yes”; “No”; or “Wait.”

A—They are answers designed to help us understand God’s plan and purpose for our lives, and so we’d be wise to accept them (difficult as they sometimes are)...

B—...Because in the end, PRAYER is a conduit through which we can interact with the very *heart* of God.

C—And as we focus on understanding God’s *heart*, we come to better understand that His answers to our requests merely reflect *His* way loving us in the very best way possible.

10. [PRAYER: “*O God, the Psalmist writes that in you our parents and ancestors trusted, and you delivered them from whatever challenges they faced. To you they cried, and were saved. So today, (like them) we also commit ourselves and our needs to you, trusting that you will deliver us and keep us safe from ourselves and from others, that you will give us the needs of lives, and teach us to wait upon you when your answer is “no” or “wait.” Teach us to seek your heart, to seek your will, and to seek your face as we strive to be people committed to passionate, intentional, regular prayer with you. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.*”]

ENDNOTES:

1. This is the basis for many of the “Prosperity” and “Name it-Claim it” theologies advocated by many televangelists: the idea that if the scriptures promise it, we need to merely name it, and then claim it in prayer, and it will *automatically* be done. They’ll quote scriptures of Jesus saying things like (Matt. 21:22 -- “*Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive*” (Matthew 21:22), “*I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours*” (Mark 11:24), and “*If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it*” (John 14:14). All these seem to indicate that we can say/pray in faith and what we ask for will automatically be ours.

In this way of thinking, as we as our culture in general, the trustworthiness of something is measured by how well someone delivers on their promises. Hence, the existence of “success” and “blessings” in our lives become the measure of whether or not we are truly spiritual or Godly, and thus “success” in spiritual life is measured by whether or not we get what we ask for when we pray.

2. Sidney Greenberg, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992). Entry 8928.

3. Croft M. Pentz, The Complete Book of Zingers (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1990).

4. You may remember from week #1 in this series that I quoted Christian prayer author Tom Albin in saying that... “*The purpose of prayer is not to solve my problems, to get my needs met; these are the products of prayer. The purpose and the power of prayer is in the relationship [with God], not in getting results*” (Tom Albin, Growing Christians Series: Teach Me to Pray, Graded Press, 1985, p. 18). What’s more is that even when answers to specific petitions can often flow out of our relationship, more often what flows is merely a better understanding (on our part) of God’s purpose and plan for our life, which may or may not include specific answers to what we’ve prayed for, but may instead contain responses that are in our better interests.

5. In our culture today, many of us, in fact, mix up the *results* and *relationship* of prayer – we make our *relationship* with God dependent upon the *results* of our prayers, rather than allowing the *results* to follow from a deep *relationship* with God.

6. See Luke 12:32 – “*Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*”

7. For example, in John 15:7 says, “*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, [then] ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*” Also, James:2-3 says, “*You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.*” In other words, the key to receiving the answer of “Yes” is to learn -- as we mature in faith -- how to pray in *God’s* will, rather than in our *own*. If you think about it, even our physical growth is like this: as we grow older, we usually learn better how to ask for things from our parents which are appropriate for our age. Consequently, the older we get, usually the higher the percentage of petitions that are granted. A child asking for a car is not going to get it because it’s not appropriate age-wise yet, but an 18-19 year old young adult *might* ask and receive – because they have not “asked wrongly” but asked “rightly” (i.e., in ways that are consistent with God’s glory).

8. Occasionally we pray for something and actually get what we prayed for because our prayers *weren’t specific enough!* Martha Kaptain tells a true story along these lines: “*My granddaughter overheard conversations about an occasional heart problem--loud beating--I experienced when I would try to sleep. One evening her father heard her concerned prayer: ‘And Lord Jesus, please make Grandma’s heart stop so she can get some rest’*” [Martha C. Kaptan, Calwell, Idaho. Christian Reader, “Lite Fare”].

9. Claudia Minden Weisz once wrote a poem entitled “*And God Said No*”:
“I asked God to take away my pride, and God said no.

He said it was not for him to take away, but for me to give up.
 I asked God to make my handicapped child whole, and God said, 'No,
 Her spirit is already whole. Her body is only temporary.'
 I asked God to grant me patience, and God said no.
 He said that patience is the byproduct of tribulation. It isn't granted; it's earned.
 I asked God to give me happiness; God said no. He said he gives blessings; happiness is up to me.
 I asked God to spare me pain. And God said "No."
 He said 'suffering draws you apart from worldly cares and brings you closer to Me'
 I asked God to make my spirit grow. And God said "No."
 He said I must grow on my own. But he would prune me to make me fruitful.
 I asked God for all things that I might enjoy life. And God said "No."
 He said 'I will give you life, that you may enjoy all things.'
 I asked God to help me love others as much as he loves me,
 And God said, 'Ahhh, finally! Now you have the idea.'"

[--Claudia Minden Weisz, cited by Vic Pentz, "A Twinge of Nostalgia," Preaching Today, Tape No. 88]

10. Robert M. McCheyne, cited in Christian Reader, Vol. 32, no. 4.

11. Read Isaiah 40:31 – “*Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*” As one poet has put it:

*“God answers prayer; sometimes, when hearts are weak,
 He gives the very gifts believers seek.
 But often faith must learn a deeper rest,
 And trust God's silence when He does not speak;
 For he whose name is Love will send the best.
 Stars may burn out nor mountains will endure,
 But God is true; His promises are sure... to those who seek”*

[M. G. Plantz, cited in James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988), p. 417].