

A Two-Sided Coin

Answer to Prayer: Waiting for a Sovereign Response... or in Concert with Human Action?

This brief study will explore a two-sided coin concerning prayer. Our premise is that all prayer requires faith and we must trust God for an answer when we pray. Here's the issue. Do we have a responsibility to do anything else but pray? One side of the coin is that prayer is sovereignly answered by God - without any action from us. The other side is that prayer may require us to act in concert with it. There are two Scriptures very often cited when discussing this issue. They can be supplemented and correlated either way by many others.

1 John 5:14-15

“Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, 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 the petitions that we have asked of Him.”

James 2:17-20

“Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. {18} But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. {19} You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! {20} But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?”

The question we're concerned with can be stated in these ways: Should I pray and ask for something; and then, just wait on God for Him to answer? Or... When I pray in faith and ask for something, will God want me to take some sort of action in regard to my request?

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The answer can be one or the other, or perhaps even a combination of both, over time. God, in His sovereign will, can (1) deny your request; (2) answer it without you doing a thing; or (3) require you to take some action. Let's unpack the subject of prayer a bit more by looking at two classic New Testament examples of God's response to prayer.

Prayer Answered by A Sovereign Act of God

Acts Chapter 16 tells us that when Paul and Silas were in Philippi, they were being pestered "for many days" by a spirit of divination in a slave girl who made her masters money by fortune telling. Paul finally turned to her and said to the evil spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." The Bible says the spirit came out that very hour. This ended her usefulness to her masters and they instigated a large commotion. It resulted in the two evangelists being arrested, put in stocks and chains in the city prison. Here's the biblical record of what followed:

Acts 16:25-28

"But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. {26} Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed. {27} And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. {28} But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here.""

Paul and Silas were chained and incapable of any actions, but God released them from their chains. It was unquestionably a sovereign act of God, responding to their prayers and worship.

Prayer that Required Action from the Supplicant

Luke 17:11-19

“Now it happened as He went to Jerusalem that He passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. {12} Then as He entered a certain village, there met Him ten men who were lepers, who stood afar off. {13} And they lifted up *their* voices and said, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” {14} So when He saw *them*, He said to them, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And so it was that as they went, they were cleansed. {15} And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, {16} and fell down on *his* face at His feet, giving Him thanks. And he was a Samaritan. {17} So Jesus answered and said, “Were there not ten cleansed? But where *are* the nine? {18} Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?” {19} And He said to him, “Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well.””

Prayer Accompanied by the Action of Fasting

Matthew 17 and Mark 9 record the same event, in which Jesus cast a demon out of a child. Following this, His disciples asked him a question that’s relevant to our study:

Matthew 17:19- 21

“Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” {20} So Jesus said to them, “Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. {21} However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.””

We can correctly conclude that Jesus said there would be occasions when an answered prayer required faith, spoken words

and the act of fasting. Praying in faith was not enough. The Lord said, in this instance, it had to be combined with the act of fasting.

Prayer Equipment

Equipment has a purpose that's fulfilled when action is taken to use it. There's a clear example of this in Ephesians, Chapter 6. In it, Paul provides us with a list of prayer equipment, with the understanding that prayer is spiritual warfare. Paul took the weapons and garments of a Roman soldier and related them to the prayer warrior's weapons of warfare.

Ephesians 6:11-18

“Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. {13} For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*. {13} Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. {14} Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, {15} and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; {16} above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. {17} And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; {18} praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints...”

Anointing oil was also used in connection with prayer.

James 5:14-15

“Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with

oil in the name of the Lord. {15} And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.”

Today, Where does the Holy Spirit Fit into Prayer?

The simple answer is that the Holy Spirit is the determining factor in a Christian’s prayer life. If you want to insure your prayers will be answered, align them with the will of God. Live life consistently under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 8:5-6, 14

“For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those *who live* according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. {6} For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace... {14} For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God.”

Prayers are thoughts communicated to God, verbally or not. To be “spiritually minded” means your prayers include, are in agreement with, and are directed by the Holy Spirit. This opens the door to God taking you down one of the choices previously listed (answering it without you doing a thing; or requiring you to take some action). You may also look at Romans 8:26-27 for Paul’s additional thoughts on this.

You may or may not have reached a definitive answer to the question of whether we should pray and expect God to do it all or whether He wants us to take some action. (Remember, a great amount of Scripture can be quoted to espouse either answer.)

“Our prayers can and do profoundly shape reality.”

In John, Jesus speaks to His disciples at the Last Supper about the connection between us doing “greater works” and prayer.

John 14:12-14 (TPT - The Passion Translation)

“I tell you this timeless truth: The person who follows Me in faith, believing in Me, will do the same mighty miracles that I do – even greater miracles than these because I go to be with my Father! {13} For I will do whatever you ask me to do when you ask me in my name. And that is how the Son will show what the Father is really like and bring glory to him. {14} Ask me anything in my name and I will do it for you.”

Kenneth Boa says this about our subject (Notice the two scriptural conditions he proposes to us.):

“If God controls all things, why pray? The answer, of course, is that God commands us to pray, and we are responsible to be obedient to this command. We are also responsible to meet [His] conditions for answered prayer...”¹

Let’s look at the two sets of Scriptures, below. First, let’s understand that they occur in the same contextual narrative. The Last Supper has now ended, Judas has gone out to betray the Lord, and then Jesus says these things (among others) concerning prayer. Notice that He delivers a seeming paradox – We are to “abide in Him” or “dwell” with Him but also, we may ask (pray) without anything being required.

John 15:7-8

“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. {8} By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.”

John 16:23-24

“And in that day you will ask Me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. {24} Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.”

¹ <https://bible.org/article/divine-sovereignty-vs-human-responsibility>

Kenneth Boa continues, saying,

“Though God is sovereign, the prayers of His children contribute significantly to the outworking of His program. This does not mean that we are pushing buttons or forcing God to answer, for He does not grant all requests. Prayer should instead remind a believer of his complete dependence upon God for all things. When great things happen, God is the One who should be glorified, not the person who prayed. So at the same time that God is in control of all things, our prayers can and do profoundly shape reality... God has a plan for every life, but the details of this plan are carried out by the free choices of each person involved.”²

You may still take a particular side in this, but it seems the line is clouded in ways that caution us about taking either side at the expense of the other. Remember, Paul often tells us of the primary importance of the two great commandments, which require the primacy of love. This means keeping the main thing the main thing, which is Christ and Him crucified. We are commanded in so many ways to refrain from intolerance toward others’ Bible-believing Christian doctrines, if we cannot disprove them with Scripture.

Conclusion

Our life’s “walk worthy of the Lord” is to be filled with biblical truth, as best as we can determine it. Any way you cut it, it’s a walk with God and not a journey to take alone. Colossians 1:9-14 (on the following page) puts it all in perspective, clearly establishing that “being fruitful in every good work” will be “fully pleasing to the Lord.” Should we expect God to accept our passiveness? Should we expect to have our will control God’s will? We must be careful never to pray in a way that says, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. *My* kingdom come, *my* will be done...” Even when He does grant our wishes, we ought to be looking for ways to

² <https://bible.org/article/divine-sovereignty-vs-human-responsibility> - - My underline for emphasis

demonstrate our faith to match our prayers, moving us toward our destinies with fruitfulness and even zeal! It really is a two-sided coin!

Colossians 1:9-12

“For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; {10} that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing *Him*, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; {11} strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; {12} giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. {13} He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed *us* into the kingdom of the Son of His love, {14} in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.”³

May the Lord continue to honor these words, first uttered by the Apostle Paul so many years ago, and now my prayer for you.

Dr. Bob Abramson

³ My underline for emphasis