

What Do Answers to Prayer Depend On?

by John Piper

Our prayers are answered because of the death of Jesus Christ and our obedience to God as His children.

Duration: 33:38

Scripture: 1 John 3:21

Topics: "Effective Prayer", "Righteous Living"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of obedience and righteousness in order to have our prayers answered by God. He refers to Isaiah 1:15-17, where God tells his wayward people that he will not listen to their prayers because their hands are full of blood. The preacher also mentions hymns that acknowledge the struggles of unanswered prayer and the need for patience. He announces a three-week plan to preach on the topic of prayer, including what answers to prayer depend on and the importance of praying for leaders. The sermon concludes by highlighting the need for confession of sins and walking in the light to have confident communion with God and see great answers to prayer.

Transcript

Unanswered prayer is a universal Christian experience. Every one of us has asked God for particular things that He has denied. We've asked for help to make a B on a test and we've gotten a C. We've asked for sleep and we've lain awake all night long.

We've asked that her attitude be changed and she stay just as sour as ever. We've asked that they not go ahead with the divorce and they did it anyway. We've asked that he be protected in Vietnam and he was killed.

We've asked that she get the job and they gave it to somebody else. We've asked that the place be packed and only a few showed up. We've asked that she be healed and she passed away.

Everybody knows what I'm talking about. It is so common that we've written it into our hymns. There's an old Swedish hymn you all know that says, Thanks for prayers that thou hast answered.

Thanks for what thou dost deny. And another familiar hymn says, Teach me to feel that thou art always nigh. Teach me the struggles of the soul to bear.

To check the rising doubt the rebel sigh. Teach me the patience of unanswered prayer. We sing about it.

It's an agonizing thing to cry out to God for the life of a loved one and watch that life ebb irrevocably away. So I've been thinking a lot about prayer this year so far and I have a plan. I have a three-week plan.

I'd like to preach today and January 25th on the topic, What do answers to prayer depend on? That's this Sunday and Sunday after next. And in between, I would like to preach on the text from 1 Timothy 2.2, Pray for kings and all those in high positions because that's the Sunday immediately prior to the inauguration day. So I have an idea of where we're going for at least three weeks.

And today and two weeks from today, it's the question, What do answers to prayer depend on? That question weighs really heavily on me when I think about unanswered prayer and the promises of God. Now, it's a huge question and can be broken down at least into two parts. One part would be, What has God done in order that our prayers might be answered? And the other part would be, What must we do in order that our prayers be answered? And this morning, I want to try to answer the first part and begin to answer the second part.

And then two weeks from today, go ahead and try to finish answering the second part. Although I have in the back of my mind the possibility that in trying to finish answering it, it may spread out into some more weeks. In fact, visiting the co-ed class, I was all stirred up this morning to some new insights about things that are required in order to have prayers answered.

And I appreciate that stimulation. But first, let's focus on the first part. What has God done in order that our prayers might be answered? If Jesus Christ had not come into the world to die for our sins, then the wrath of God would not have been removed from us.

That's a starting point. But, as Paul says, God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. In dying for us, He bore our sins and thus propitiated God.

A big, important, biblical, and theological word, which simply means He appeased God's anger. He satisfied the just demands of God. And the result of that is that for those who hold to Christ, God's anger is averted and in its place there is now mercy.

And God is no longer opposing the sinners who trust Christ. Rather, He is working for their good. In fact, Jeremiah says He is rejoicing over them to do them good with all His heart and with all His soul.

Therefore, not only the final joy of our salvation was purchased by the death of Christ. We usually think of that. He bought my salvation out there.

But also, every single blessing that we enjoy in this life, including all the answers to our prayers, was purchased for us at Calvary. If it were not for the death of Jesus, everything you experience and everything I experience would be a token of God's wrath. But, since Christ has come and borne or absorbed all the wrath of God against our sin, therefore, everything we experience, even a trouble, is a token of His love and His mercy.

This is the way Paul put it in Romans 8.32. He who did not spare his own son, but freely gave him up for us all, will he not then with him give us all things? Which means, isn't it the case, that the death of Jesus Christ secures, for those who trust Christ, every possible blessing that God can give. And therefore, all the answers to our prayers are owing to the death of Jesus. What has God done in order that our prayers might be answered? He has sent His dearly beloved and only Son into the world to absorb all of His wrath so that He might lead us out of the dark night of the soul into green pastures where there is grace and

mercy to help in time of need.

Jesus died for our sins that our prayers might be answered. That's why we pray in Jesus' name. Therefore, nothing that I say in the rest of this sermon should be construed to mean that anything we do is an earning or a meriting of answered prayer.

All we can merit and all we deserve is the punishment of hell for the scorn that we have heaped upon the glory of God by failing to trust His promises consistently and by failing to delight in His commands. Any blessing at all that comes our way, including all the answers to our prayers, is owing to mercy alone. And therefore, we must never speak of deserving or meriting answers to our prayer.

I think that the question I want to begin with now, shifting, is what must we do ourselves in order to have our prayers answered? Now, when I say we, I'm thinking of Christians. That is, people who trust Christ, trust Him that what He did purchased our redemption and what He said is the best possible advice in the world. That's what I think a Christian is.

Somebody who trusts Christ that what He did purchased our redemption and that what He says is the best possible guidance. That's who I have in mind when I say, what must we do in order to have our prayers answered? What about unbelievers? At least we know there is one prayer that God will answer for the unbeliever, namely, the earnest plea to Christ for salvation in His name. God will not turn away the one who calls upon the Lord.

Whether God answers any other prayers of people who reject Christ is, to my mind, irrelevant. It is irrelevant whether a person who chooses to throw away eternal life and insists on going to hell gets a few token earthly blessings along the way. That strikes me as an irrelevant question.

The only thing that such pleasures can do for a person who persistently rejects Christ is make his guilt and his punishment worse because he refuses to repent when they come. And therefore, it's no great boon, is it, if God should now and then answer the prayer of an unbeliever. The issue that's been in the press recently about whether God answers the prayers of Jews who reject Christ is, in my mind, a very obscured issue.

The question obscures the big question, namely, are Jews who reject Christ saved? And the clear answer of the New Testament is that they are not saved. They are under the curse of God, Romans 9, 3, Galatians 1, 9. And at the judgment day, they will join all unbelievers on common ground and receive the sentence of eternal condemnation if they persistently reject Jesus Christ as their Messiah and their Savior. Here's what Jesus said to the Jews of his day who refused to believe.

The men of Nineveh will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it. For they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. And you still do not believe.

Here's the way John put it in his first letter, chapter 5, verses 10 to 12. He who does not believe God has made him a liar because he does not believe in the testimony that God has borne to his son. And this is the testimony that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his son.

He who has the son has life. And he who does not have the son has not life. Jew, Gentile, red, yellow, black, white, male, female.

If they reject the son, they have no eternal life. It's a helpful way, perhaps, to keep the Jewish question in perspective like this. If a Jew rejects his Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, he joins the Gentiles in their condemnation.

And if a Gentile accepts the Jewish Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, he joins the true Israel in their salvation. So my response to the issue in the press is this. Except for the prayer that they be saved through Jesus Christ, the prayers of unbelieving Jews and Gentiles may be answered or may not, but it's irrelevant.

It's no great consequence whether a person is given a little health, a little money, a little advantage on the way to hell. And you can see that, I think, very clearly. The issue is, is a person saved? And that issue hangs not on race or any creed except Jesus Christ.

In order for answered prayers to be a lasting blessing rather than a heaping up of more condemnation, the person praying has to be saved. That's why I'm talking only to Christians when I say, what must we do in order that our prayers be answered? And I start the answer like this, namely by focusing on the relationship that exists between the prayer and the God to whom he's praying. I take the words of Jesus from Matthew 7. Ask, and you will receive, or it will be given to you.

Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. Because everyone who asks, receives.

And he who seeks, finds. And to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Or what man of you, if he has a son who asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a scorpion or a serpent? If then you who are evil, Jesus didn't mince any words with his disciples, if then you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him? I conclude from that, that becoming a Christian means coming into a relationship of child to father.

And therefore, all of our talk to God is the talk of a child to his Father. I love you, Daddy. Thank you, Daddy.

You're a good Daddy. Daddy, I need help. That's the way Jesus talked, Abba, Father.

And that brings us to the next observation. If a child has bad attitudes and misbehaves, a good Daddy will not give him everything he asks for. Accordingly, the Bible teaches that in order for us to have answers to our prayers, we must obey our Father.

So, in the text that was read, John 15, verse 7, notice the big if. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, then ask whatever you will and it will be done for you. A child who disregards his Father's words, and Jesus' words are the words of the Father, a child who disregards the words of his Father is not fit to have his requests granted.

We would not approve of the behavior of a father who gave to a rebellious child everything that child asked for. We would not approve it. And not just because the child doesn't deserve it, but because it wouldn't be good for the child, and because it would be a dishonor to the Father's word which the child is disobeying.

It is not a good thing to confirm a child in his waywardness by giving him whatever he asks for. No, if my words abide in you, then ask what you will and it will be done for you. Now, there are lots of other places in

the Bible where this is taught, and I want to look at some of them with you.

John says in his first letter, 1 John chapter 3, verses 21 to 23, Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God, and we receive from Him whatever we ask because we keep His commandments and do what pleases Him. And this is His commandment, that we should believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and that we love one another just as He commanded us. If we are unloving, unkind, impatient, holding a grudge, boastful, jealous, resentful, we cannot count on God answering our prayers, can we? He is not likely to answer the prayers of His children who persist in such attitudes.

His will for us is that we love one another, and therefore He will not prosper our cause quickly if we are unloving people. Peter, first letter, chapter 3, verse 7, Husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker vessel, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, in order that your prayers not be hindered. And then, four verses later, turn away from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it, for the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

Now, surely that word to husbands applies in principle to both partners. If you are inconsiderate at home of each other, if you are not forgiving, if you are not kind to each other, if you do not respect each other at home, your prayers will be hindered. And not just in the making, that's true psychologically, it's simply hard to pray together when you can't talk to each other, but also in the answering, because the eyes of the Lord are open, are upon the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry, and surely by righteousness He means at least those people who do what's right in their family relations.

And isn't that what James taught in chapter 5 of his epistle? Confess your sins, he says in verse 16, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects. Why? Well, that's the way it is with a father and his child, isn't it? A child who keeps his father's word, who does what's right in his father's eyes, and who confesses his sin when he slips into misbehavior, that child's got clout with daddy.

You know it from your own experience. He so honors the father's wisdom and the father's goodness by his obedience that the father feels constrained by his own honor to answer the child's requests. Besides that, he knows that everything, every blessing that he gives to this child is an investment in righteousness and an investment in love.

Let's go to the Old Testament, Isaiah chapter 1, verses 15 to 17. Here's what God says to his wayward people. When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you.

Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean.

Remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good. Seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.

Is there anybody here this morning who conducts his business in a way that takes advantage of people, that deceives or exploits anybody? Is there anyone here whose investments or procedures oppress or gouge the fatherless, the widow, the poor, the disadvantaged in any way? If there is, here's the word of God for you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. Isaiah chapter 1, verse 15.

Christians, the answers to your prayers may depend on where your money is invested and how you do your business. Two hundred years earlier, God said to Solomon, if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and seek my face and pray and turn from their evil ways, I will hear from heaven and I will forgive their sin and heal their land. Second Chronicle 7, 14.

And the psalmist confirmed it in his own experience. Psalm 66, 17. I cried aloud to God and he was extolled with my tongue.

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened. He has given heed to the voice of my prayer.

Therefore, I find it taught in the New Testament and the Old Testament that if a child has bad attitudes or misbehaves, God will not give him everything he asks for. In order to have our prayers answered, we must be obedient children. Now, there are two possible misunderstandings of this which I want to ward off.

Both of them would result in a great diminishing of our joy of faith and a belittling of God's mercy. First of all, it would be a mistake to go away from here and say the Bible teaches that one must be sinlessly perfect in order to have our prayers answered. There is a big difference between an obedient child and a perfect child.

You know the Lord's Prayer. At the heart of the Lord's Prayer is this petition that Jesus taught us to pray. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Now, I assume that since immediately prior to that petition was the petition, give us this day our daily bread, that Jesus means for this prayer to be prayed each day. Which means that he expects us to need to pray, forgive us our sins each day. I don't think Jesus had any illusion that his disciples would in this life outgrow the need to pray for forgiveness for sins.

And that's a great reassurance to me who sins daily in my own attitude. And here's the inference that I draw from that. Since he taught us to pray, forgive us our sins, it would be a contradiction to say that in order to have our prayers answered, we must be without sin.

That's plain, I think. And therefore, it does not follow from Jesus' teachings that we must be perfect without sin in order to have our prayers answered. No, the righteous person whose prayer avails much, as James says it does in chapter 5, is not the sinless person, but the repentant person.

He's not the person who falls into sin, but the person who stays there and is content with his sin. The person whose prayers are not answered is not the person who fights against temptation and now and then loses the battle, but the person who is quite content with his spiritual mediocrity and makes no effort to improve or to overcome his lethargy and carnality. Therefore, never say, I must be perfect in order to have my prayers answered.

That's the first misunderstanding I want to avoid. The second misunderstanding, namely, that might arise from the fact that we must be obedient children in order to have our prayers answered, would be that disobedience merits or deserves the answer to prayer. That one would follow very naturally, some might think.

If you've got to obey in order to get your prayer answered, then what he's teaching is that you've got to merit or deserve answers to prayer. But that would go against everything I said at the beginning to the

effect that the death of Jesus purchased for us the answers to our prayers that we might receive them through mercy freely. Now, the way I picture this, namely the importance of obedience in relationship to God's mercy, is something like this.

None of us is a child of God by nature. On the contrary, Paul says we are all children of wrath by nature, which means that we have freely, by mercy, through grace, been adopted into the family of God. And we have our standing as children not owing to anything meritorious in ourselves, but only owing to the grace of God.

Therefore, all good behavior in this family must spring from this dependence upon mercy. All true obedience to Christ, the only obedience that pleases him, is the obedience that springs out of our confidence in the power and the wisdom and the love of God. The only reason to disobey God is that we don't trust his advice, isn't it? The only reason my sons disobey me is because on the spur of the moment or either planned out, they don't think what I've said is best for them.

Don't play there. Well, it looks like it's more fun to play there. Therefore, I will play there.

Tacitly, Daddy's wrong. That's why we obey. We do not trust God.

Therefore, since all disobedience flows from not trusting the Father's counsel, it follows that all genuine obedience flows from trusting God. And there's a huge difference between trusting God for mercy and meriting answers to prayer. Merit looks at itself and thinks about its own value that it can offer to God.

Mercy looks away from the self to God and thinks about how much value there is in his mercy to me in my lack of merit. So God answers the prayers of the obedient because he delights so much in their faith, out of which all of their obedience springs. He sees faith wherever he finds it as a token or a sign or an outworking of what he values above all faith.

But faith is not meritorious because it looks away to mercy rather than looking at its own value. So never say when you get an answer to prayer, I have merited or I have deserved this answer to prayer. If we avoid these two errors, perfectionism on the one hand and legalism on the other hand, then the teaching stands.

According to John 9 31, we know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. John 9 31. It seems to me that the application of this teaching is plain.

It hardly needs any emphasis, but I'll state it in a sentence. When Jesus commands us to ask, to seek, to knock, he is not merely commanding that we pray, but that we live like children of a merciful father ought to live. Let my words abide within you.

Cherish no iniquity in your heart. Love your fellow believers. Do good to all.

Forsake oppression. Confess your sins. If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we will have confident communion with him and see great answers to prayer.

But what is this confidence? How confident must you be that your prayer will be answered? That's the question for January 25 and I hope you all will come back and go with me a step further because we've only begun to answer the question what is necessary in order to have our prayers answered. In a word,

God does not answer quickly and many times does not answer at all the prayers of his children who have bad attitudes and persist in misbehavior.

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