

# **GOD'S RESPONSES TO OUR PRAYERS**

**By Dub McClish**

## **Introduction**

Perhaps there is no promise more clearly or consistently stated in Scripture than that God is attentive to the supplications of His faithful children: "The eyes of Jehovah are toward the righteous, And his ears are open unto their cry" (Psa. 34:15). The ungodly and rebellious should expect no positive response from Him Whom they curse in the good times and to Whom they flee only in times of trouble. Yet, so often even the Lord's own people express doubts that God consistently fulfills His promise to respond to their supplications. When one says, "I prayed for \_\_\_\_\_ to come to pass, but God did not answer my prayer," he usually means that God did not give him what He asked for immediately.

This expression of doubt may be explained in part by the fact that some do not distinguish between God's "hearing" and "answering." Since our Heavenly Father is omniscient, He most certainly "hears" every prayer in the sense of His being conscious of each one (including those uttered by ones not His children and by His unfaithful children). However, one is mistaken to reason that, since God "hears," He must or will respond just as each petitioner (including His faithful ones) expects or asks Him to. No human being has any means of compelling God to do or not do anything at all.

All we can do is approach Him as pitiable beggars with our pleas, requests, and petitions, which we are encouraged to do: "In nothing be anxious; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God"

(Phi. 4:6). To think that God is somehow **obligated** to or **will** respond just **as** and **when** one preconceives, reflects ignorance at best and foolishness at worst. Those with such expectations seek to impose upon God their own limitations—their inability to know and weigh all of the factors that might be involved if He granted exactly what they asked when they asked it. We need to be aware that God responds to prayer in various ways, totally dependent upon His unfathomable wisdom and omniscience.

### ***A Prompt “Yes”***

Having said all of the above, God does sometimes respond quickly to fulfill the petitions of His children. Unable to conceive, Hannah prayed earnestly that she might be able to bear a son, and God apparently answered with a prompt “yes” by giving her Samuel, plus other children as well (1 Sam. 1:10–11; 19–20; 2:21). Hannah said: “For this child I prayed; and Jehovah hath given me my petition which I asked of him” (1:27).

James recounted the response of God to the prayers of Elijah:

Elijah was a man of like passions with us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain; and it rained not on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again; and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit (5:17-18).

Numerous other accounts demonstrate that God, according to His grace and wisdom, sometimes responds rapidly in a positive way to the pleas of His faithful people (e.g., Hezekiah [2 Kin. 20:1–7, 11]; Daniel [Dan. 2:23]; Ezra [Ezra 8:21–23]; Zacharias [Luke 1:13]; et al.). In ages past He has responded to some petitions miraculously and to others through non-miraculous providence. While the miraculous age ended with the completion of His revelation, God is still mindful of His faithful ones and works in “the

background” to answer our pleas providentially and sometimes quickly. We should pray in full confidence that His ears are open to our pleas.

### ***An Absolute “No”***

God **must** sometimes (perhaps often) respond by saying “no” when men pray. Such is the case concerning the unrighteous: “He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, Even his prayer is an abomination” (Pro. 28:9). Such is also the case concerning God’s faithful servants whose pleas are not in harmony with His revealed will or His immutable purpose (1 John 5:14).

Surely, Paul was a righteous man and was earnest in His thrice-repeated prayer for the removal of his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:8). The Lord did not remove the “thorn,” however, apparently leaving it to remind him of his weaknesses lest he be “exalted overmuch” (vv. 7, 9). It was for Paul’s spiritual welfare that God answered “no” to his prayer.

God likewise refused to grant the thrice-offered petition of His sinless Son in Gethsemane, asking that He be spared the awful ordeal of Calvary (Mat. 26:39–44). He offered these “prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears,” and His Father most certainly “heard” Him (Heb. 5:7). However, it was necessary for the Father to answer “no” to our Lord’s prayers on this occasion because the redemption of all mankind would have been impossible had He answered otherwise. We should always therefore follow our Lord’s example of selflessness in those agonizing prayers: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me: **nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt**” (Mat. 26:39, *emph. DM*).

Our Savior, as Deity Himself, surely knew there was no other way. However, His humanity prompted the plea that He might avoid the suffering and pain involved in His approaching trials and crucifixion. Those of us who are mere human beings cannot see the things God can see. He alone knows exactly what is best for us and for all others that might be affected by the specific fulfillment of our prayer. He alone knows all of the present and future factors that would be involved in giving us what we ask. If we receive a “no” answer to our prayers, ultimate trust in God should cause us humbly and submissively to thank Him.

Many of us can recall times when we earnestly prayed for something only to thank God later that he spared us the fulfillment. Hindsight often enables one to see things he was unable to see earlier. That which we thought we had to have at one point is sometimes later seen as that which might have brought severe temptation or hardship on others or ourselves.

### ***“Wait Awhile”***

We may sometimes think God has answered “no,” when actually he has only delayed the fulfillment of His response. Thus we sometimes experience a delayed “yes” to our prayers. The Israelites cried out to God for deliverance from their bondage in Egypt for many generations, and many of them must have supposed that God’s answer was “no.” However, His answer was “wait awhile.” It is not in our province to know why their deliverance had to be delayed, but He Who does all things well deemed it necessary.

When it was the right time—by God’s timetable—He told Moses: “And now, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: moreover I have seen the

oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them” (Exo. 3:9). He then sent Moses to deliver them (v. 10). Rather than saying “no” to their cries, God had been saying “wait awhile.”

In Revelation 6 John saw the souls of those who had been martyred for their faithfulness to God’s Word. He described their prayers as follows: “They cried with a great voice, saying, How long, O Master, the holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” (v. 10). They wanted God to avenge their deaths immediately. Instead, we read:

And there was given them to each one a white robe; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little time, until their fellow-servants also and their brethren, who should be killed even as they were, should have fulfilled their course (v. 11).

God did not refuse their plea, but in effect, He said that it was not yet time and that they should wait awhile.

If God does not give us what we ask for immediately, there is a reason, though in our limited perceptions we might not be able to perceive it. Perhaps we need to attain further maturity. Perhaps it is not the right place or circumstance. Perhaps some other events need to occur before our prayer is fulfilled (as in the case of the martyrs cited above). Maybe God is trying to teach us patience. Whether or not we ever know why we are required to wait, if the aim of our prayer is worthy, we should not grow weary in uttering it to the Giver of every good gift. Let us remember that we “ought always to pray, and not to faint” (Luke 18:1).

## ***“It All Depends”***

God must sometimes respond to our prayers with “maybe,” even when the prayer is from a righteous person and is according to His will. He has made us all creatures of free will. Among other things, this means that God will never force His will on any person. We see a classic example of this “conditional” response from God in Abraham’s six intercessory prayers for Sodom (Gen. 18:23–32). The fate of Sodom was completely dependent on the choices of the men of Sodom, so God repeatedly replied to the patriarch: “Yes, but It all depends.”

When we pray for rulers to the end “that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity” (1 Tim. 2:2), the outcome of such prayers rests not only with God, but with the choices made by our rulers. The Bible records many instances in which the outcome of prayers and/or prophecies is conditional (e.g., Gen. 24:1–61; Exo. 32:30–35; Deu. 11:26–28; 1 Kin. 9:1–9; et al.). Likewise, while God “would have all men to be saved” (v. 4), the result of one’s prayer that a certain sinner be saved involves not only God’s love for the lost, how earnest and frequent the prayer is, or how devout the one who prays it may be. If the sinner cannot be brought to repentance and obedience, it is impossible for God to answer that prayer because **God will not force anyone to be saved**. Thus God must answer such a prayer with “It all depends.”

The same is true concerning **every** prayer that involves the behavior of others (e.g., the prayer of parents that their children will remain faithful when they leave home, the prayer that abortion be abolished, the prayer that national and world leaders may rule wisely, et al.). When we earnestly pray for the repentance of the liberals who have made (and continue to make) shipwreck of the faith and who are bent on destroying the

church, God can only answer, “It all depends.” Will these folk repent? Will they once more submit to the authority of Christ through His Word? Will they begin teaching the Truth and refuting error, rather than vice versa? It is impossible for God to answer any prayer—by His self-imposed limitation—that requires Him to override man’s free will in order to do so.

### **Conclusion**

God’s Word discusses several conditions for acceptable prayer, all of which are important to consider and follow. Perhaps it will also help us to remember that, while God **hears** all of our prayers, He **responds** to the prayers of His faithful people in a variety of ways. This realization should encourage us to pray more—and more earnestly: “The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working” (Jam. 5:16b).

**[NOTE:** This MS was written and published as an “Editorial Perspective” in the February 2003 edition of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, of which I was Editor at the time.]