

# Does God Really Answer Prayer?

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## Introduction

Is everything that happens to each one of us determined by the positions of the heavenly bodies (Astrology)? Is everything that occurs to us predetermined, foreordained by God (Determinism, Calvinism)? Is everything that we experience the result of blind, unfeeling, unreasoning fate (Chancism, Fatalism)? Are we and our world the creation of a god who has wound the whole thing up like a great clock and then retired from any activity or interest in us until the machine has run down (Deism)? Do God and Satan share power over the direction and future of our world (Dualism)? Or do we have a living, loving, and all-powerful God who remains vitally interested in us and Who is still active in the affairs of His children and responsive to their pleas? The Bible unhesitatingly, repeatedly, yea, incessantly answers, "Yes! We have such a God!"

To speak of the responsiveness of God to our pleas and needs is to speak of prayer, the means by which God enables us to address Him. Prayer is at once one of the most significant and frequent subjects of Scripture. It is not merely a thread in the fabric of Holy Writ, but it is a major pattern of that fabric. How does God handle, deal with, and respond to our prayers when they make their way to His throne? This question suggests the subject of providence. Indeed, one cannot study the subject of prayer and how or whether God answers without studying the subject of providence.

## Definition of Terms

*Prayer* in our common versions (KJV and ASV) is translated from four different Greek words. The most frequently occurring of these simply means an address to God expressing requests and/or thanksgivings. Less frequently used words include the ideas of supplication and intercession. Simply put, prayer is the means by which God's children address Him to ask for things both needed and desired, both for oneself and for others, and to offer thanksgivings and praise.

Providence is the means by which God responds to our petitions and supplications. Our English word, *providence*, comes from the Latin word, *providentia*, meaning foresight, to foresee. There is an equivalent Greek word *pronoia* but, ironically, it is not used in reference to God in the Bible. Notwithstanding this fact, the concept of Divine Providence is most certainly

there. Divine Providence refers to the foresight of God by which He determines the needs of man and supplies the same for the accomplishment of His will and glory. While God's Providence benefits all men generally (general Providence, e.g., Mat. 5:45), He exercises more specific benevolence toward His own faithful people (special Providence, e.g., Deu. 4:40; 5:33; Mat. 6:33; 28:20; Rom. 8:28; Eph. 3:20; Phi. 4:19). Again, it is through His Providence that God responds to our prayers.

In ages past, God sometimes suspended the laws of His physical universe in order to bless the righteous, punish the wicked, or in some other way accomplish His own perfect will. We may call this God's **Supernatural Providence**. The Bible abounds with records of God's supernatural acts which were the result of His foreseeing the needs of an individual, a family, a nation, or even all mankind, and then supplying that need. When God worked miracles, signs, and wonders, rational men (even unbelievers) could immediately see and testify that God had exercised His mighty power (John 3:2; Acts 4:16; et al.). God does not so work among men today, nor has He since the close of the apostolic age.<sup>1</sup>

While the miraculous element of God's work in times past made His intervention immediately identifiable, God's Providential workings through His natural laws (i.e., **Natural Providence**) cannot be positively and dogmatically identified. Such workings of God are "behind the scenes" and employ normal processes, natural laws, and common circumstances. We may strongly **believe** that certain events or circumstances occur in our lives due to God's Providence, but there is no objective or conclusive proof upon which to make dogmatic statements about such matters.

Mordecai's well-known question to Esther illustrates this fact: "And **who knoweth whether** thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Est. 4:14, emph. DM). Apparently, Mordecai **believed** that it was providential that Esther was the Queen of Persia at that time (and was thus able to prevent the destruction of her people), but there was no way he could **absolutely prove** it.

Likewise, we may become convinced that a given development of events in our own lives or in the lives of others was the result of the Providence of God. However, in thus assigning things there is always the element of *perhaps*, as Paul said concerning the departure of Onesimus from Philemon (Phi. 15). If there is a Scriptural sort of agnosticism, this is it—we cannot know for sure about exactly where, why, when, and concerning whom God's

Providence is (or was) employed. However, this in no wise detracts from the fact that the Bible teaches that God's Providence is working for us as we serve Him (Rom. 8:28).

Prayer and Providence are complementary. As God's faithful children pray, God's Providence operates. Prayer is man's duty and privilege of addressing his Creator. Providence is God's response to our needs and petitions.

### **Yes, God Answers Prayer – Such Is Rooted in His Nature**

- Our God is a gracious God: "And it shall come to pass, when he crieth unto me, that I will hear; for I am gracious" (Exo. 22:27).
- Our God is a person of goodness: "Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance" (Rom. 2:4)?
- Our God is a generous God: "He that spared not his own son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32).
- Our God is a God Who cares: "Casting all your care upon him, because he careth for you" (1 Pet. 5:7).
- Our God is a helping God: "So that with good courage we say, The Lord is my helper; I will not fear: What shall man do unto me?" (Heb. 13:6).
- Our God is a loving God: "But God commendeth his own love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

God the Father is compared by our Lord to a benevolent earthly father, only much more benevolent:

Or what man is there of you, who if his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone; or if he shall ask for a fish, will give him a serpent: If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give good things to them that ask him (Mat. 7:9-11)?

It is in the very nature of God to hear and answer our prayers.

### **Yes, God Answers Prayer – Such Is Rooted in His Promises**

God said to Solomon as he dedicated the temple: "If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (2 Chr. 7:14).

God said to Israel through Isaiah,

Behold, Jehovah's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you so that he **will** not hear" (Isa. 59:1-2 emph. DM).

The unmistakable implication is twofold: (1) Jehovah did hear their prayers when they served Him faithfully, and (2) He would hear them again when they repented of their apostasy.

Although the healed blind man of John 9 was not inspired, his words reflect accurately the teaching of his Old Testament, as well as that of our New Testament: “We know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and do his will, him he heareth” (v. 31). The man knew that the questioning Pharisees knew the Law and that they would not argue with his axiom. Thus, he said, “We know...;” it was a truth that could not be successfully denied or contradicted. More than this, the Lord did not correct the man, thus placing His stamp of Divine endorsement upon his statement. While we often emphasize the first part of the verse, I now call our attention to the second part of it – the promise that God **does** hear the prayer of the righteous.

James wrote much about prayer and several of his statements contain the promise that God will hear and answer our prayers:

But if any of you lacketh wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.... ye have not, because ye ask not.... The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working (1:5; 4:2; 5:16).

Our Lord promised in His Sermon on the Mount that God will hear and answer our prayers: “Pray to thy Father who is in secret, and thy Father who seeth in secret shall recompense thee” (Mat. 6:6). He implied the same promise when he taught the disciples how to pray (vv. 9–13). He firmly stated the promise of God in Matthew 7:7–8, 11, which we have already cited.

Surely, among the “precious and exceeding great promises” of which Peter wrote (2 Pet. 1:4), the promise that our God will hear us and answer our prayers is among the dearest to us.

### **Yes, God Answers Prayer – Based Upon Our Compliance with His Conditions**

As earlier noted, God has a General Providence by which He showers certain physical blessing upon men universally without condition. The Lord referred to this when He said of the Father, “for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust” Mat 5:45). However, every **spiritual** blessing that one may seek of God in His Special Providence is conditional. In the very nature of the case this has to be so. The only alternative position is Universalism, because in the “ideal” will of God He “...would have all men to be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4), and His grace “hath appeared, bringing salvation to all men” (Tit. 2:11). To enter the kingdom, one must satisfy

God's condition of being born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5). To receive the crown of life we must be faithful even to point of dying for the Lord if necessary (Rev. 2:10). Christ is the author of salvation to all them that obey Him and to none others (Heb. 5:9). The wonderful blessing of fellowship with both God and His children is ours only "... if we walk in the light, as he is in the light" (1 John 1:6-9). With Paul we must say, "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phi. 2:12). There are no spiritual blessings of which I am aware that do not have conditions attached to their reception. (This being the case, the statement on this subject from our apostate brother, Rubel Shelly, is one of gargantuan error and heresy: "It is a scandalous and outrageous lie to teach that salvation arises from human activity. We do not contribute one whit to our salvation.")<sup>2</sup>

The answer to prayer is a spiritual blessing to which God has attached very clear conditions, some of which I have mentioned (but have not emphasized) in passages already cited. Please note that no one of these conditions is independent of the others, but they must all be present for our prayers to be heard of God. We will now turn our attention to those conditions:

### ***Reverent Address***

While we are to count God our friend (Jam. 2:23; 4:4), we must ever remember that this does not give us license to use vulgar and overly familiar terms in addressing Him. It is abhorrent to God-fearing people to hear the name of God trivialized at any time, but particularly when one is addressing Him in prayer. Some have thought they were merely breaking with tradition when they dared address the God of the Universe as "the man upstairs," "dear Daddy," or, in the "hippie" vernacular, "dear Daddy-o." However, Scripture reveals that the use of all such disrespectful terms breaks with revelation. The precept of Jesus teaches us to address God as "our Father" whose name is "hallowed" (Mat. 6:9). *Hallowed* refers to something that has been set apart, as opposed to that which is common. By example the Lord teaches us in His immortal prayer of John 17 to address God as "Father" (vv. 1, 5, 21, 24), "Holy Father" (v. 11), and "Righteous Father" (v. 25). The apostles did not miss this reverent emphasis; in their prayers they addressed God as "Lord" (Acts 1:24; 4:24, 29). May we never be guilty of addressing God in a vain, common, or disrespectful manner.

### ***In Faith***

Prayer is vain, yea hypocritical, without faith as its root. Without faith its only purpose is mere ritual and/or to impress men. Those who thus pray receive the reward they seek, namely, the applause of some men, but not God (Mat. 6:5). Contrariwise, the Lord taught: "And

all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (21:22). While the words of Hebrews 11:6 extend beyond prayer, they surely include it: "And without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he a rewarder of them that seek after him." Similarly, James wrote, "But let him ask in faith, nothing doubting; for he that doubteth is like the surge of the sea driven by the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord" (1:6-7). Sincere, availing prayer is an exercise of faith. Atheists and agnostics do not pray; even if they should, they waste their breath. Let us pray with great faith and confidence that our God will hear and answer us.

### *In Humility*

Pride, arrogance, and egotism are forbidden in God's people in all circumstances, but they are particularly out of place in prayer. Rather, our complete subjection to His will should permeate our prayers. Recognition of our lowly state and of our submission to God's will should ever characterize us as we pray. The Lord so taught in the "model prayer," "Thy will be done" (Mat. 6:10). Three times in His great agony before His trials and crucifixion He prayed, "not as I will, but as thou wilt" (26:39-44). James stated the case for humility succinctly, including prayer: "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble" (4:6). It seems that in some prayers brethren are trying to storm the gates of Heaven with their demands, telling God what to do and how and when to do it. While we are encouraged to make our needs and desires known, it must always be in the framework of "not my will, but thine be done."

Humility produces a spirit of dependence upon God. Just as prayer is an expression of faith **in** God, it is also an expression of dependence **upon** God. The Psalms are actually prayers for the most part and many of them are beautiful expressions of man's utter God-dependence. Consider the following: "O Jehovah is my God, in thee do I take refuge: Save me from all them that pursue me, and deliver me" (7:1). "I love thee, O Jehovah, my strength. Jehovah is my rock, and my fortress, and deliverer; My God, my rock, in whom I will take refuge" (18:1-2). "Jehovah is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? Jehovah is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid" (27:1)?

In the model prayer we see this dependency expressed: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Mat. 6:11): When the saints in Jerusalem prayed after the council had threatened and released Peter and John, they said, "O Lord, thou that didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that in them is" (Acts 4:24). Our prayers, like theirs, should explicitly refer to this

sense of dependency we feel, for such is a fruit of genuine humility. A self-sufficient attitude toward God is a form of practical atheism.

### *Through Christ*

I am unworthy to approach God directly or to make my appeal before His throne. I am sinful and He cannot abide sin in His presence. However, there is One through Whom I can approach God. He is the Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God and our only High Priest. Paul wrote of this:

For we have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help us in time of need (Heb. 4:14-15).

Paul further declared: "For there is one God, one mediator also between God and men, himself man, Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). Although the familiar words of Christ in John 14:6 apply to more than prayer, they certainly embrace this subject: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me." This is why He later said in this same discourse to the apostles, "And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask anything in my name, that will I do...." (vv. 13-4; cf. 15:16; 16:23-24).

We also learn from these passages that we are to address our prayers only to God the Father. Since this subject has been treated much more fully in another chapter in this book, we will only consider it briefly. More than once I have heard brethren address Jesus in their prayers. I believe brethren sometimes do this unconsciously. For example, at the Lord's table I have often heard the following prayer: "We thank thee for thy blood which was shed on the cross for our sins." Such a prayer either addresses Jesus in prayer or (if one maintains that he is still addressing the Father) places the Father on the cross, neither of which is in harmony with Scripture. I once heard a brother address all three members of the Godhead in the same prayer. While all three are God, it is the Father who is to be addressed in our prayers, through the mediation of Christ, for such the Holy Spirit teaches. It is not by human tradition or ritual that we include in our prayers the fact that we are offering them in the name of Christ. It is because we must do this to conform to God's Word.

### *In Harmony with His Will*

Our prayers are vain if they ask for something that violates or contradicts the revealed will of God. John wrote: "And this is the boldness which we have toward him, that, if we ask

anything according to his will, he heareth us" (1 John 5:14). When sectarian preachers tell alien sinners merely to pray the "sinner's prayer" ("God, be thou merciful to me a sinner" [Luke 18:13]) and promise that God will forgive them and save them, they are telling people to pray for something that contradicts the Word of God. Alien sinners were never told to pray for forgiveness. When Ananias found Saul in Damascus he was praying (Acts 9:11), but he said to Saul: "Arise and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name" (22:16). Prayer was not (and is not) the way God has instructed men to call upon Him for forgiveness of their alien sins, but baptism was (and is) (cf. Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; et al.).

This same principle applies to the prayers of saints. James wrote: "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may spend it in your pleasures" (4:3). We can be sure that our prayer will not be answered affirmatively by God if it asks for something that violates or attempts to short-cut His revealed will.

### ***From One Striving Faithfully to Serve God***

Let us now emphasize the first part of John 9:31: "We know that God heareth not sinners." As mentioned earlier, this reflects the teaching of both Old and New Testaments. Solomon wrote, "He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination" (Pro. 28:9). God addressed Judah through Isaiah as follows: "And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood" (1:15). John expressed the same principle: "And whatsoever we ask we receive of him, because we keep his commandments and do the things that are pleasing in his sight" (1 John 3:22). If we are ignoring the will of God in the way we live we are wasting our time in prayer. Such are those who pray at the morning assembly, "Give us faith and strength and bring us back at the next appointed hour," but who never study their Bibles and who regularly avoid Bible classes, many of the worship assemblies, Gospel meetings, and other such opportunities for growth.

### **Yes, God Answers Prayer – Some Miscellaneous Principles**

When we consider the subject of prayer and God's answer to prayer, we must bear in mind several additional principles that are bound up in the fact that He is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniwise. Consider the following:

#### ***God Respects Man's Free Will***

God made man a creature of choice and free will from the beginning. Surely, this is such

a well-known fact that it does not need extensive documentation. Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 1:17), but they were given the freedom of will to eat or not eat. In Joshua's farewell address he uttered the famous words, "Choose you this day whom ye will serve" (Jos. 24:15). After many of His disciples deserted the Lord because of His "hard sayings," He turned to the apostles and said, "Would ye also go away" (John 6:66-67)? They were creatures of free will and they could have chosen to desert Him, as indeed, Judas eventually did. God has never forced anyone to believe in Him or serve Him.

This means that, even though we may earnestly and frequently pray that a loved one will believe and obey the Gospel or will repent of error (clearly this is in harmony with God's will), God will not force His will or our will upon that person because of our prayer. This person for whom we are earnestly praying is still a creature of free will and is allowed by God to continue to reject His will if he so chooses. Paul was so concerned about the unbelief of his fellow-Jews that he was willing to be accursed by Christ if it would save them (Rom. 9:3). It was his "heart's desire and supplication to God" that they should be saved, but they still refused to submit themselves to God's righteousness (10:1-3). Not only was it Paul's will, but God's will, that the Jews be saved, but Paul's prayer could not be answered affirmatively because the Jews, with few exceptions, exercised their freewill in their unbelief.

### *God Does Not Answer According to Our Timetable*

Time is not the same in Heaven as it is on earth: "One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet. 3:8). We who live in the day of microwave ovens, instant coffee, and fast-food restaurants have very little patience. We want immediate response to our thoughts, plans, and desires. If we are not careful, we will carry this over to our expectations of prayer. We want to pray for this or that today and have it delivered on our doorstep the next morning. It is not a question of **whether** God could deliver our requests instantly, but He may not do so for many reasons of which we are not even aware. God operates on His timetable and cannot be bound by ours. Recognition of this principle might save us much frustration and questioning concerning our prayers.

### *God Does Not Necessarily Answer as We Envision or Desire*

When we genuinely pray for greater strength and faithfulness, God may allow us to be tried, even for years, so that our faith may be proved and our steadfastness increased (Jam. 1:2). Many strong and faithful Gospel preachers who are in their mature years are such because, at

least to some degree, they have been through the fires of severe conflict, opposition, and even suffering from ungodly men and women both within and without the kingdom. They are able to stay staunchly on the firing line in the spiritual war of our time because they have survived many a skirmish in years past. They may have prayed for increased fidelity to God in their younger years without realizing or recognizing at the time that God was answering their prayers by means of their sore trials.

### ***God sometimes answers “No,” or Substitutes Something Else***

If God answered all of our prayers exactly how, when, and where we envisioned the answers, it would likely be disastrous. We do not always know what is best for us, but God does. We do not always know what is best for the kingdom, but God does. God, to be consistent with His own will, with the free will of mankind, and with what is best for us and for the kingdom, may have to say, “No” to our prayers or He may have to substitute something in place of that for which we prayed. Paul had a “thorn in the flesh” that was so grievous that he prayed three times for its removal. However, the Lord answered, “No,” and told him, “My grace is sufficient for thee” (2 Cor. 12:7-9). In his utter trust in God Paul accepted this and realized that this thorn would remind him that he was weak, which in turn would help make him strong (vv. 9-10).

### ***God Answers According to His Infinite Wisdom and Omniscience***

God told Samuel at the house of Jesse, “Jehovah seeth not as man seeth” (1 Sam. 16:7). Just as Samuel misjudged the sons of Jesse because he could only see with his limited physical vision, so it is with us about most things. We pray according to our own limited vision, wisdom, and knowledge. Thereby we sometimes ask for things that are inappropriate, things that would harm instead of helping us, others, or the Lord’s cause. It is a part of the Providence of God that He answers not according to our limited view of things, but according to His perfect knowledge and wisdom. This is another reason He may sometimes not give us that for which we ask.

## **Conclusion**

There is no more precious privilege the Christian has than prayer. It is amazing when you think about the God of Heaven, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, listening attentively and responding to the petitions of mere men! When we contemplate the fact that by our prayers God may be moved in a given direction or to set in motion a series of events, it is an astounding thought! Yet, the Word of God teaches no less than this. As we consider the

perfection of God in every respect on one hand and our own imperfections on the other, we ought to be motivated even more to pray, “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Mat. 26:39). In light of the wonder and power of prayer, is it any mystery why Paul urged, “Pray without ceasing” (1 The. 5:17)?

### Endnotes

1. While it is not in the purview of this MS to discuss at length the cessation of miracles, we offer the following summary of this proof from the New Testament: (1) Generally, miracles recorded in the New Testament were for the purpose of confirming the Truth of Jesus’ claim to Deity and the Truth of the message of His messengers (Mark 16:19–20; John 20:30–31; Heb. 2:34). (2) When the revelation of the Gospel was completed, the miraculous spiritual gifts would no longer be necessary and would cease (1 Cor. 13:8–10; Eph. 4:11–13). (3) All of the Truth was to be revealed to the apostles when Christ sent the Spirit upon them (John 17:13), thus the revelation was necessarily complete by the time the last apostle (John) died (cir. A.D. 100). (4) It is evident that the miraculous gifts were possessed by many saints in the first century, but that these gifts were imparted by and available **through the apostles only** is likewise evident (Acts 6:6, 8; 8:6, 14–19; 19:6; et al.). (5) Therefore, with the death of John at the close of the first century, the miraculous age came to an end as seen from a twofold perspective: (a) The need for them was past with the resurrection and exaltation of Christ and with the completion of the revelation, and (b) the apostles (the sole medium of transmission of the miraculous gifts after the Crucifixion) were no longer on earth. Thus, the source of transmission of the gifts ceased at the very time the need for them was fulfilled. Those who claim miraculous powers for themselves or for others today are themselves misinformed and are misinformers of others, sincere though they may be.
2. Rubel Shelly, *Love Lines*, bulletin of Woodmont Hill Church of Christ, Nashville, TN, Oct. 31, 1990.

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