

## **"Does God Really Answer Prayer?"**

Today we're continuing what we started two weeks ago in giving ourselves permission to wonder out loud. To ask the questions that we might be afraid to ask about God, or Christianity, or faith in general. We're asking and trying to answer tough questions and we can do this with confidence knowing that God can stand up to our questions. God invites us to explore, and wonder and reason together. So keep the questions coming. One man sent this to me last week. He wrote: Here is a partial list of questions I have if I get the opportunity to ask God face to face: Why mosquitoes, fleas, ticks, & Chihuahuas? Why don't dogs go hoarse from constant barking? Why do men have nipples? Why did Randy Wheeler and I have to be bald? Why does Hawaii have an interstate highway?

Obviously I won't be answering all the questions you send me! But I'll do my best to hit the ones that come most often.

Today we're looking at a question that came from one of our youth. It's simple and direct: **"If God already knows everything about our life and how it will play out, then why do we bother to pray?"** Lots of you ask about prayer. Some of you ask it this way: "Does God really answer prayer?" "Does God really answer **my** prayers?!" It's a question that sometimes we don't even want to ask because we are afraid of what the answer might be.

The fact is that almost everybody prays. A Gallup poll found that 98% of all Americans say that they pray once in a while. And what makes that even more interesting is that only about 90% of Americans say they believe in God! 54% of Americans say that they pray every single day. That makes prayer one of the most common activities on our planet!

People pray. But I would guess that every one of us in this room has experienced the disappointment of not seeing God work in the way that we wanted. Every one of us in this room has had a time when we were praying hard for something and somehow God didn't do what we were expecting, and we wondered why. And maybe there was a nagging sense of doubt that God really isn't there after all. So today we want to deal with this question, **"Does God really answer prayer?"** So let's think about this together.

And I think we have to start with the question, **What is prayer?** There's a lot to be said about this, but I want to focus on three things. **Prayer is first and foremost developing a friendship with God.** God has opened the door for us as human beings to converse with him. In fact, that's why you were created. God chose to create human beings in his image, the Bible says. Human beings who are capable of loving, and feeling, and thinking, and transcending themselves. Human beings who are able to reach out to God, and understand God, and receive God's love. And we were created to have friendship with this God. That's why you were put here on earth! Not to achieve a certain status, or reach certain goals with your life. It wasn't even to procreate. You were put here on this planet because God is a God of love and he wanted a thinking, creating, loving being to be in relationship with, and that's you.

But can you imagine what it's like for God sometimes. Giving life to a child and planting a soul in that child with gifts and abilities. And watching that child take their first steps and hearing them speak their first words, and yet never hearing from them at all? Never really hearing from that child unless they were in trouble or wanted something?

But God loves for us to be in relationship with him. To talk to him, to listen for him, to walk with him, AND bring our requests to him. But prayer is first and foremost about building a friendship with God. And like any friendship it takes time together. Prayer is that time with God.

What is prayer? It's **Allowing God's will to infiltrate our will.** This means submitting your will to God. Sometimes we think prayer is just the opposite. We come to God and pray in order to get God to do what we want. We think, "If I pray long enough and hard enough. And if I say the right magic words, then God will do what I want." But when I do that, I'm trying to bend God's will to my will. Jesus prayed of himself, "...*not my will, but yours be done*" (Luke 22:42).

Prayer is allowing God's will to invade my life, and for my will to bend to God's. And that's what happens when we spend quality time and quantities of time talking and listening to God.

You know how this works. Who you spend time with influences who you become. That's why we're careful about kids' friends. It's true of them; it's true of us adults. We take on the values of the people we spend time with.

When you spend quality time with God in prayer, you start to become like him. And if you do this long enough, when you pray, you find yourself praying for the things that God wants to do, that God wants to give you, anyway!

What is prayer? It's **Listening to God**. Any real conversation is two-way. Have you ever been in a conversation with somebody who does all the talking and no listening! They talk so fast that it almost seems like they don't have to breathe. If you're able to jump in and get a word in edge-wise, you can tell that they're not listening to you. They're just waiting for you to pause or take a breath so they can jump back in and keep going!

I wonder if that's not how God feels sometimes when we pray. We're doing all the talking and no listening. But prayer is about listening. Yes, it's about us sharing with God, and us doing some talking, yes. But it's also about us getting quiet and allowing God to share with us.

Here's how it works in my life. When I pray, not every time, but when I spend real time with God, I start by thanking God for the good stuff in my life. That's one way to commune with God. But at the same time there may be some issue that I'm concerned about, or I may be praying for you as I go over the prayer concerns for that week. After I've done that I try to quiet down and just listen. It's amazing what can happen when we get quiet in prayer. I don't think that I've ever heard the audible voice of God, but I've heard the still, small voice many times. And sometimes when I've been praying I'll have a thought that comes into my mind, "Aaron, call this person." That happened this last week. Two names kept coming to mind so I called both of them this week. I can't tell you how many times that's happened when I've called someone and they say, "I can't believe that you're calling. I really needed to talk to somebody right now." That's how God often speaks to us when we pray. But we've got to be still and listen.

What is prayer? It's **Asking God to provide**. We bring our wants, our needs, our hopes, our concerns, our dreams. We're told in scripture, **Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6, NIV)**. My kids come to me with requests for things they want all the time and I love to say "yes." I can't always do that, for their own good, but them asking is simply a natural part of our relationship. I can provide things that they want and need and when it's best for them, I give them those things. Us asking things from God is a natural and good part of our relationship, in its proper context.

But that leads to a bigger question: **If God knows what's going to happen before I pray, why pray?** This is a mind bender, but I believe that the future is not yet written even though God knows what it will be. God allows us to write that future with him through our prayers because in them we choose to partner with God in how the future unfolds. There are different outcomes when we pray than when we don't.

And that leads to the question: **How does God answer our prayers?** When we do ask for something, when it comes time to make our requests known to God, how does he go about answering our prayers? I think there's a lot of confusion about this. A lot of us, when we pray, assume that **if** God is going to answer our prayers that it has to be in some really dramatic supernatural way. But the reality is that God works through natural processes as much as possible. God created the natural laws and God works through human beings. For instance, when we pray for healing, God works through doctors and nurses and medicines and technologies. When we pray for our children who are sick, when we pray for a friend or a spouse who is in need, we are also praying that God would use any means at his disposal.

Some people say, "You mean, when you pray and the doctor heals that person, you're going to give God the credit like God actually did something there? That wasn't God! That was the doctor! That was the medicine!" But think about this: If you're in your house and you flip a light switch and the lights come on, is it just because you flipped that switch, or was there something more behind the flipping of that switch? There's a power plant somewhere, and without the power plant sending current to that light switch that you flipped on, there would be no light in your home. It's the same way with prayer. Prayer unleashes the power of God through a variety of ways.

And when we pray we shouldn't care if that healing comes through the medicine. We don't care if that healing comes through our body's own natural processes of healing or whether it was by the touch of the Holy Spirit. God can use any of these three means to bring healing. Please don't just think that unless there is some supernatural answer that God wasn't at work.

Second, many of us assume that God's answer always has to be "yes" to what we ask for. We see the passage of scripture where Jesus says, "Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened for you." But we ask and we don't receive. We seek and yet we don't find. We knock but the door doesn't seem to be opened and we say, "Wait a minute! There's something wrong here!" Jesus goes on in that passage of scripture to tell us that God is like a heavenly father. And as a father he uses his discretion in knowing what the best way to answer our prayer. **God always hears your prayers, every single one of your prayers.** And God answers every prayer, but not always in the way that you want.

But we've got to look at when God says "no" to our prayers. There are some circumstances when God says "no" and we need to know about these. **God says "no" when you pray for him to overrule someone's free will.** God gave each of us a free will. He allows us to make our own decisions. This can be really hard for us especially when we know that a prayer is right and good. You may be praying for a very good thing, "Please change the heart of this person so they come back to their family. God please make them turn their back on the drugs, or on the alcohol that's enslaved them. God please make them!" Listen, God will whisper in their ear, God will tug at their hearts, sometimes God will put a person in their path, but God will not change a person's heart, unless they are willing to let him. Your free will is sacred to God. And thank God for that. But remember it when you pray.

**God will say "no" when you ask for things you can do for yourself.** God does not do for us, those things we can do for ourselves--at least not normally. Sometimes we want God to do things that we're supposed to do on our own. "Oh God, please give me an A on this test." God would say to you, "Is there something wrong with your brain? Is there some problem? Why am I supposed to give you an A on this test? You have to work for that." God says, "I made you so that you can do these certain things, so do them." You see, we cooperate with God. God doesn't just instantly take care of things we can do on our own.

**God often says "no" when you ask for something with impure motives.** Selfishness is one of the worst of the impure motives. Scripture says, "**When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures**" (James 4:3, NIV). So let's get honest with ourselves. There are a lot of times that we ask for things, but we really need think about why we're asking for it.

It's fine to pray for yourself, your hopes, your dreams, even about silly things you want. But if your prayers are always **only** about you. If you don't really care about others, about the world, about people in need, you need to check your motives. How can God answer your prayers when he knows that you don't care about anybody but yourself.

I have to keep a check on myself because my prayers can end up saying, "Lord, keep me from any kind of trial, or tragedy, or pain, or anything that would make me really grow and become a man of God. Just give me a safe, convenient, happy, satisfying, problem-free life." When I take a take a step back and look at that, if God granted that prayer I'd be headed for spiritual ruin. God often says no when we pray from impure motives.

**Sometimes God says "no" to bring about a greater "yes."** This is exactly what happened with the apostle Paul, the man our church is named after. He wrote about what he called a thorn in his flesh, a temptation he faced, or a physical condition he had, or possibly a relationship that was difficult. This is what he wrote about this thorn in his flesh, "**Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, <sup>9</sup>but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.**" (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). God said no to Paul's request, because it would help him become the man God wanted him to become.

You see, we sometimes assume that we would be at our best and strongest if we had absolutely no suffering, or pain, or difficulty in our lives. But that is a false assumption. Sometimes God allows the suffering in our lives in order to make us our best and to create a strength in within us.

Have you ever noticed that those times in your life where your soul grows the deepest are the times of difficulty and adversity? It's **through** the struggles that your soul is deepened and you are enriched, and you become a person who really trusts in God in the midst of the valleys of life.

Even Jesus experienced a time when God said no. Right before he was betrayed, and beaten, and flogged, and crucified he went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. It was a heart-wrenching, gut-wrenching time of sheer anguish. Jesus knows what's about to happen. He throws himself down on the ground and he cries out, "**Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will**" (Mark 14:36, NIV).

He knows that nothing is impossible for God. "Please God, not crucifixion. Please let this cup pass me by." Does it surprise you that even Jesus wanted to avoid pain and that he wanted for there to be another way? But there wasn't, because sometimes suffering is redemptive. That means that sometimes God uses suffering to accomplish his purposes in our lives.

Now be clear about this: I don't believe God sends tragedy into our lives to teach us lessons. That stuff just happens. But God does not let pain, or tragedy in our lives go to waste. He finds a way, if we let him, to use that hard stuff to make good things come from it. This is where we have to trust God. He's not our heavenly vending machine, he's our heavenly father. And he's going to do what's best for us, even though we may not understand why at the time.

When Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane God doesn't respond by saying, "OK, I'll take that cup away." It says that God sent an angel to strengthen Jesus. God always sends us something or someone to strengthen us when we suffer, even when he has to say "no" to our prayers—especially when he has to say "no."

**So Why should we pray?** If God already knows what we need before we ask, then why should we pray? Because prayer isn't just about getting things or getting God to do things. Prayer connects us to God, and when I pray, prayer changes me. I experience peace in the storms of life because I pray. Because I experience a power to do what I couldn't do on my own when I pray. Because I experience wisdom beyond my limitations when I pray. Because I find courage to do what I would normally cower from when I pray. Because I receive joy in the midst of pain when I pray. Because I have an awareness of God's presence when I pray. And you can too.

I pray because I have seen the power of prayer at work many, many times. Hundreds of examples where I and someone else were praying for something and we saw direct answer to prayer. God answers prayers. God works in our lives and sometimes, many times, God says "yes" to our prayers!

Listen, honestly, most of the time when I pray, and I have time set aside to do that every morning. But most of the time it's not a deep, powerful, overwhelming experience of God. But here's the thing, because I show up, and I'm there, I'm opening myself to the God who made me I'm ready and available for the deep times. And every so often I am overwhelmed by an experience of God in prayer. You got to show up. You'll never have time for prayer, you have to make the time.

And when we do that, it opens our lives up to God and he comes in and changes us, transforms us, and our will lines up with his will. Prayer is a relationship, not a ritual.

And if you feel like you're inadequate or not a good pray-er, then listen to what Paul wrote, "**the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express**" (Romans 8:26, NIV). We do the best we can and the Holy Spirit takes it the rest of the way. Prayer is supernatural thing. It is way to find God and to let God find us.

If you would be a mature Christian, if you would be someone who really experiences what it means to be a Christian, you would be a person of prayer. And that is my heart's desire for you.

If you are not already praying every day, I hope that you will begin today. If you feel like you don't know how, then simply say that to God and let him guide you. Let some of your first prayers be asking God to teach you to pray. For today this is the good news of Jesus Christ who is ready and listening. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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