



Why doesn't God answer my prayers?

Jane Holloway

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How we reply to this complex question will very much depend on who is asking, and we need to be ready to admit that we don't have all the answers, while at the same time praying that God will draw close to the person and meet their needs. A number of issues are raised by this question:

1. Who is the God we are praying to?

Today many people are taking time to explore spirituality and prayer. Our Jesus is very different to the gods worshipped by other world religions. What we think about who God is will determine whether we pray, how we pray and what we pray for. Are we ultimately able to trust this God? How would you describe Jesus to someone who wants to know more about the God to whom you pray?

2. What is prayer?

Prayer is essentially a conversation between us and God. Prayer is listening, talking, watching and waiting in the company of our Father. To seek his priorities for our needs, and the needs of those around us and of our world, we come as God's child to our Father in heaven through Jesus (Ephesians 2:18) with the help of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3).

3. Living selfishly is a barrier to seeing prayers answered.

Sometimes our prayers will not be answered if there is wrongdoing in our hearts. Our holy God is not able to answer our prayers if we are

disobedient to what he may have asked us to do (1 John 3:21–22), if we have wrong motives in our asking (James 4:2–3) or if we haven't stopped to find out what is his will in a given situation.

4. Our view of time is different from God's view.

We have to learn to wait for God. Most of us find this hard. I believe God does answer prayer, but he does not always do so in the way that we want. He sees the bigger picture and he knows how it all fits together. I find the image of a tapestry helpful. When we look at the wrong side, it is hard to imagine that there is a picture in the making. Each thread is waiting its turn to be woven in. It is the same with our prayers. They each have their turn to be slotted in to make the picture complete.

5. God communicates with us in different ways.

We need to be aware of how God speaks to us. It could be through reading Scripture, talking with other people, books, the media or day-to-day circumstances. We need to recognise His prompt, nudge and voice in our daily lives (John 10:27). Often he does speak, but we are too preoccupied or blinkered to hear or understand.

6. Answers to prayer vary.

God may answer very quickly, in a way that makes the answer very obvious. On other occasions it is not such an obvious 'yes', and we get a sense that we need to continue to wait for clear guidance (Matthew 7:7–8). Sometimes an answer comes, but in a completely different way to what we are expecting. Then there are the times when it appears that we get nothing but a brick wall. And as we carry on with life, it is often only by looking back on a situation that we discover it was actually a 'no'. I remember Billy Graham's wife Ruth recounting the story of how she prayed and prayed for the man she thought she wanted to marry, and is today so grateful to God that he did not answer her prayer. For at that time she had not yet met Billy and realises what a disaster the other marriage might have been.

What we want to hear

Sometimes the answer appears to be a straight 'no'. Fiona Castle, speaking after the death of her husband Roy, said, 'I would never underestimate the value of prayer. I really believe that although perhaps prayer was not answered the way we would have liked to see it answered, I honestly believe that through the prayers of the faithful people who prayed for Roy, he was strong, he was faithful to the end. I believe that through prayer we were given opportunities to share our faith.'

We need to remember that God always has our best interests at heart even if the answer is not what we want to hear; that we will never understand the complete will of God in every situation.

And sometimes there is no answer at all. In his book, *Prayer: Does it Make any Difference?*, Philip Yancey cites many times in the Bible when prayer was unanswered, such as King David praying for his son to live; Moses, Job, Jonah and Elijah all praying that they would die; Jesus' disciples praying for deliverance; Paul praying for the removal of his 'thorn in the flesh'. God did not answer their requests, and we learn a lot from watching how they coped and how God always brought good out of those often desperate situations.

The important thing is that we want to encourage anyone wrestling with this big question not to give up but to keep on talking both to God and their friends as they find a way through. 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart, do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will direct your paths' (Proverbs 3:5).

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§ For more information about the World Prayer Centre, visit www.worldprayer.org.uk