

Be Assured that You Are Heard

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It may surprise you, but the Bible never says that God answers prayer. In all the books of the Bible, in the original languages anyway, you will never find one time which specifically says that God answers prayer.¹ What you will find are hundreds of times that God responds to people who pray. It may seem like I'm hairsplitting over a trivial bit of semantics. But please take a closer look. I think you'll agree that the distinction between God answering prayers and answering people can be an important one.

God doesn't answer prayer. God answers people.

Here are a few samples of how the Hebrew word, *anah*, usually translated "answer," is used to describe God responding to people who pray.

"Hear my prayer, O LORD, give ear to my supplications!
Answer me in Your faithfulness, in Your righteousness!" — Psalm 143:1

Prayers are piled on top of supplications. But the prayers, as such, are not answered. The psalmist himself is the one who is answered. But God responds personally, not programatically. The response is not yes or no. God moves in the marvel of his faithfulness.

Listen to Elijah's famous prayer that brought down fire from heaven. It may be simpler than you remember: "Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that You, O LORD, are God..." — 1 Kings 18:37

There are many more times that the Bible says God answers people, having heard them call out to Him. The wonder is not that prayers get answered. What's amazing is that people are heard. Jonah's prayer is typical: "I called out of my distress to the LORD, and He answered me. I cried for help...You heard my voice." — Jonah 2:2

It may seem to be a minor point about words. But I don't think so. Underneath the language of "God answered prayer" could be a mechanical model. For example, in the recent comedy film called "Bruce Almighty" an everyday guy is given unlimited power from God and temporary responsibility to answer prayers. The scene is significant because it reveals some of our assumptions about how prayer works. The human-playing-God figure sits at a computer, where every prayer appears as a kind of email message. He keys in the answers to the prayers with lightning speed. His fingers fly in a blur. We are made to think that he handles millions of prayers per minute. We are left with the idea that God processes requests like emails or text messages.

1. There are a few times that English translations insert the word "prayer" when the original says that God was entreated. For example, the New American Standard translation for 1 Chronicles 5:20 says that God "answered their prayers because they trusted in Him." In fact, a literal translation of the Hebrew original says that God "was entreated by them" (referring to the people). The word for prayers is nowhere in the verse. Instead, God was moved by the people as they cried out, explicitly because they trusted Him. You'll find the same Hebrew expression in 2 Samuel 21:14, 24:25 and Genesis 25:21.

What's wrong with this picture? Prayer is reduced to a procedure designed to bring about results. One prominent leader was so extreme in this view that he announced, "We now have the spiritual technology to deal with almost any problem." Wow. If prayer can be considered "spiritual technology," no wonder we are bewildered when our prayer experiments don't seem to work.

You can't blame us for thinking that way. It's how we've been taught. Prayer is usually presented as a procurement process or a problem-solving method that mysteriously "works," but only part of the time. We have somehow thought that we could motivate people to pray by convincing them that prayer works. But by that same logic, if it doesn't work, we should stop praying. And for the most part, we have.

Losing Heart

Jesus knew that we would look for ways to make prayer work. He knew that after long days, weeks or months of praying without seeing the asked-for result, that dismay could easily harden into stoney disappointment. In short, He knew that we would lose heart. He knew that we would try to master the mechanism of prayer, and it would break us instead. So He told a story, that invites us into the reality of how God really does hear our praying. "He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1).

Luke calls it a parable, but I think it opens up a complete paradigm if you look at it with the rest of the Bible's teaching about God hearing prayer.

You recall the story (found in Luke 18:1-8). A woman goes to a judge. Day after day, time after time, but nothing happens. It would seem that she's not getting an answer. Or that the answer is no. But she refuses to give up. She keeps coming back and keeps making her case. Finally, the judge gives in.

Notice two things: First, that the woman was heard by the judge. The repeated pleas don't add any new information. She wasn't pleading her case badly. The judge was not deaf. What's wrong was that the judge was not good. He cannot be relied upon to act on what he heard with everyday decency, much less righteousness. Second, there was a delay. Nothing changes day after day after day.

Jesus' point is to compare the reliability of the unrighteous judge with the boundless righteousness of God. All the other variables in the story stay the same. Like the woman who kept coming, apparently getting no response, God's people, will "cry to Him day and night," often without getting an immediate answer. It may seem like God is not responding. But in fact, we have been heard. And He's not finished.

The parable doesn't explain why God's court doesn't "work" more quickly. Jesus offers no tips, keys or secrets about how to make things happen. The point is that no matter how long it takes to see God complete His work, there is never a moment when we are not being heard by the King and Judge of all the earth who can be utterly trusted to act on everything He hears with magnificent wisdom and inexhaustible love.

Coming to Court: The Greater Paradigm

There are two biblical paradigms of prayer. On one hand, we can find what I call prayer as **enforcement**. In this model, prayer is the direct use of delegated spiritual power to accomplish God's will. In this model, those who pray are portrayed as carrying an intrinsic power to command or to even create by faith, to overwhelm dark evil powers,

or to pronounce healing. Those who pray are seen as agents exerting spiritual power on earth as derived from God in heaven. Intercessors are seen as adversaries of evil. The prayers are often confrontive, enemy-oriented declarations or denunciations.

On the other hand we can find prayer as **entreaty** for God to act directly by His power. Those who pray are seen as approaching God's throne in the courtroom of heaven. There is no mysticism needed. Anyone who cries out to God from anywhere on earth is heard by God in heaven. It's not just about petitionary prayer. In this model, every kind of prayer and worship carries weight in the deliberations of the courts of heaven and are described as moving the heart of God in accordance with His purpose. The prayers may seek God's direct action against satanic powers, but the petitions and praises are addressed to God Himself and are more focused on what He desires to accomplish on earth. Intercession is simply serving as an advocate representing other people in heaven's courts.

Both of these models have biblical support. But the vast preponderance of biblical material which describes, teaches, or calls for prayer works within the entreaty paradigm.

I don't think heaven's court and the throne of God are mere imagery. There is too much consistency throughout the Bible to seriously think otherwise. Every time God reveals Himself in full blazing glory in scripture, He reveals Himself seated on a throne, surrounded by angelic majesties, governing all things with astounding righteousness and never-dying love. God's throne is not ancient tribal masculine legend formulated to frighten primitive pre-moderns into submission. Somehow God really does preside over all things, leading and intervening something like a king from his court. We have wrongly regarded heaven as just so much eternal reward, merely some puffy clouds and mansions for our bliss. Heaven in the Hebrew mind is God's throneroom. The tabernacle and temple were but training replicas of the throneroom that stands eternal in the heavens. We now come to that very throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16, 8:1-5, 9:24).

What then is prayer in this paradigm? Prayer is approaching God Almighty as a king who is governing all things in real time. All the cities, peoples, and persons of the earth are open cases before Him. He monitors the story of every breathing person. He doesn't need prayer to accomplish His purposes, but prayer could be His favorite way to glorify Himself and even honor those who pray.

The courtroom model does not promise that any prayer instantly sways the mind of God's counsel. Many appeals are not upheld. Some motions are not sustained. But we can count on God to wisely weigh the lives and words of those who pray in light of His purpose as it unfolds throughout all the earth.

His people are His preferred witnesses, who by their testimony bring shame on evil powers, and move His heart like no angel ever has. We are not heard because of our many words, fervent words, or correct words. Ours prayers might seem silly to onlooking angels. But even the simplest prayer is significant because He helps us. The King we approach is our Father. At our side is heaven's favorite Son and Champion. He sends His Spirit to search out the depths of who we are, aligning our muddled desires with the surpassing majesty of His heart.

Because of His mercy, most of the important cases are taking many generations to unfold. But you can be assured of this: Every single word you have prayed with any kind of sincerity has been heard in heaven. Not a single syllable has been forgotten.

Prayer doesn't work. God is at work.

I suppose it's okay to say that prayer works. But I think it may be more accurate to say that God is at work. Prayer is His way of getting us to work with Him. He never intended us to think of prayer as a problem-solving, goodie-getting procedure. He has always been summoning people to work as His accomplices in His court. Should you answer His call, He'll probably assign you to serve as a court-appointed attorney for people who can't or won't cry out for themselves.

Keep praying and don't lose heart.

1. God is answering. Are you listening?

God is not interested in merely processing your requests or granting you wishes. He knows what you need way before you can think to ask. Instead, God is passionate about answering You. He may have been answering you instead of your prayers for some time. Are you listening?

2. Pray with long-haul hope.

Never assume that God has not responded because it seems to be taking a long time. The open cases in God's court are many. Most of the important proceedings are being worked out over many generations. How can we doubt that we are now seeing God's response to prayers offered centuries ago? How dare we cease to pray now for Him to finish all that He's begun? What we pray really matters. Because we are being heard, never cease to pray.

3. Be assured that you've been heard.

Never surmise that because you haven't seen God do exactly what you've asked Him, that He does not care or no longer does miracles. You may daydream how nice it would be to have God do whatever you ask, but think about it: You would not want to pray to a God you would not also want to worship. God's desires and wisdom are far greater than ours. Since He can be trusted, it is enough that we are heard. But since He is for us, let's pray for His purposes in matters great and small.

The oft-quoted verse about God doing exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we can ask or think is really talking about God fulfilling a macro-global, history-encompassing work of glory. It ends with this: "to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations" (Ephesians 3:20-21). The last phrase could just as easily be translated "throughout all generations" meaning that the answers to prayer that are beyond our life span have taken the entire expanse of history to come forth. At the last, we will not say, "Look at all the amazing answers to prayer we were able to make happen." We will say, "He has fulfilled everything He has promised."