

Why Pray When You Don't See Answers?

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The best reason to pray has nothing to do with getting "goodies" from God.

Sometime ago I heard the following short testimony about prayer: "Catherine needed to find a new home soon. Her landlord was moving into the residence she had rented for several years. In a sixty-day search for a new house, she was at day ten without an address.

While discussing her dilemma with a pastor and a few other Christians, someone said, "You know, we should call Mrs. Jerns. She knows how to move God's hand. She can really pray. If anyone can get something happening, she's the one."

Sort of like the A-team, I thought, but kept it to myself. Let's bring in the heavy guns and storm the gates of Glory!

Someone else said, "Why didn't we think of that sooner! I'm going right back to my office to call her. You're right, she prays effectively and Heaven hears."



To be sure, the woman in question is a praying person. But so am I. And to my knowledge, the others are too. Yet, it was assumed that one woman's prayers were more likely to get God's attention than all the rest combined.

It's a topic that comes up often in Bible studies and Sunday schools. How can I become a more effective prayer?

Often, we evaluate prayers according to our perception of the results. Mrs. Jerns is quite vocal in worship services about how God is answering her prayers for everything from an apple strudel recipe to money for the heat bill. And I noticed more than her testimonies. She had developed an attitude of thankfulness. While many of us go day after day without acknowledging God's presence in our lives, Mrs. Jerns believed, really believed, that the money to pay her heat bill came from God.

Wanting Answers

Yet, too often, we translate other Christians' words of thanks into something else. We think, *Hey, why are they getting so much?*

Do we believe that the more goodies one gets from God, the better his or her prayers must be? This thinking isn't uncommon, even if we rarely vocalize it. More often, we piously echo **George Meredith** and claim, "**Who rises from prayer a better man, his prayer is answered.**"

But do I really believe that becoming a better person is my goal? Or have I become obsessed with the bottom line—getting a positive response to my human expectation?

Personally, I've struggled to believe it. Getting answers, the answers I hope for, can be too important to me. One of the most difficult moments of the week for me has been when people in church share their "**joys and concerns.**" Amid prayer requests for aging parents and straying children, we hear that some folks are getting jobs, new cars, houses, scholarships.

Well, that's great, but I wish someone would tell me exactly how they do that. I'm happy for them, I rejoice with them. But a dark corner of my mind wonders why them . . . and not me.

With every beaming face, I've felt a little more discouraged. I have trouble admitting that many of my prayers still seem unanswered.

A God of Frivolity?

God tells us to ask for anything and He will do it, but He doesn't always seem to. I've asked for "**anything**" more than once. I don't mean new cars and speedboats either. I mean healing for a dying infant, wisdom for a friend during divorce, strength for someone battling drug addiction, guidance for my decisions.

I have acquaintances who were on staff at a national ministry about ten years ago, during the "**word of faith**" rage. They remember their spiritual leaders praying for yachts, cars, wardrobes, and vacation homes. In fact, these leaders, as an "**act of faith,**" had cut out and posted pictures of the stuff they wanted from God.

My friends went home and cut out pictures of food. They stuck the pictures to the front of empty kitchen shelves and claimed food for their children.

Eventually they asked for salary increases, but were told to trust God. Meanwhile, the spiritual leaders acquired new boats and thanked God, loudly.

I remember going to a church the day after a pastor's infant daughter's funeral. Someone stood up and said God had healed her daughter's sunburn. It seemed all wrong. God cared about one child's sunburn, but not the bulging, life-sapping mass of cancer cells in another child?

I went to my hotel room feeling that, somehow, God doesn't understand what's really important. Maybe, I thought, God is just the God of frivolity. Did He only hear prayers for heat bills and sunburns?

Recognizing Answers

In my search to make sense of such apparent contradictions I have found that the search itself can be an answer to my most important prayers.

Theologians and laypersons alike will tell you that God reveals Himself only partially to us. It is our inability to get a grip on the “whats” and “whys” of Deity that keeps us searching.

Maybe something in our fallen nature needs the challenge of following what we can't comprehend and can't fit into our hip pockets.

In the book *Making Real What I Already Believe*, Jon Fischer writes:

“Why do I feel as if I'm still reaching? . . . though God has hold of me, I do not, cannot, fully have a hold of Him. . . . It sounds unfair, but He chooses to have it this way. He wants my participation. . . . I am still reaching, grabbing for Him. . . . If I have a hold of something small enough for human hands to hold on to, chances are it isn't God, or very little of Him”.

But beyond the process of spiritual growth that comes by searching, I think we use a faulty barometer to measure our prayers. Books, articles, and sermons on the subject are frequently reduced to “How to Get Stuff from God.”

While God is certainly interested in our lives, prayer is not a shopping list. Because of this mindset, I'm not convinced we are capable of recognizing answered prayer most of the time.

It's easy to believe we see God answering prayer when someone prays for an apartment and finds one. But on the more vital prayers, the life-and-death ones born of human suffering, the answers aren't as clear-cut.

How many of the disciples would have recognized a bloody, lifeless body suspended on a cross as the answer to Jesus' prayer, “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you”?

Often, as we watch a casket lowered into the cold ground, we don't see the answer to our prayer: “God, heal this one I love and need.”

We stand by silently as loved ones, subjects of our prayers, enter rehabilitation programs for substance abuse or struggle to make their marriages work. We fail to see God answering our prayers or moving toward the answer. We only see what is lost or missing; we hardly ever see the forward movement that always accompanies tragedy and change.

Prayer for the Sake of Prayer

"Prayer does not enable us to do a greater work for God. Prayer is a greater work for God," according to Thomas Chalmers.

Do we rise from prayer a better person? If by better we mean enriched materially, I don't think so. But if by better we mean a human person who through the act of prayer has moved nearer the image of what God had in mind when He created humans, then I think we do.

"Prayer is not an argument with God to persuade Him to move things our way, but an exercise by which we are enabled by His Spirit to move ourselves His way," writes Leonard Ravenhill. My own prayers have often moved me in God's direction.

This movement is reflected best in the life of Jesus. Repeatedly, Scripture reminds us that Jesus moved away from the demands of life toward prayer. In His last hours, while struggling with the very purpose of Deity in dusty sandals, it is His prayer we overhear, **"Father, if you will, please don't make me suffer by having me drink from this cup. But do what you want, and not what I want"** ([Luke 22:42](#), CEV). Prayer moved Jesus to the Cross.

Prayer is more than petitions and praise. Prayer is what human beings were made for—communion with God. We miss something vital to the substance of what prayer is when we overemphasize God's response to our petitions.

Slowly, prayer is changing me; yet part of me still questions God's method and reasoning behind answering prayer. I find myself daring to call some answers unimportant, or at least less important—like an old woman's heating bill.

Then I'm reminded that I haven't prayed about a heating bill since, well, it's been a long time. Maybe I'm too convinced of my self-sufficiency. If that's true, I'm missing the point.

Prayer is transforming some in the Body into persons who have a prayer reflex. Not because they are concerned about getting answers, but because they understand what humans need. Frogs need water. Roses need sunshine. People need the Lord.

For some, that dependency is real enough to include heat bills and sunburns. Whether or not Mrs. Jerns gets her answers, she is becoming a better person. She has a favorite quote that sums up her attitude, **"The man who kneels can stand up to anything."**

Prayer isn't about convincing God to give me stuff; it's about becoming, changing, and communing. I become an effective prayer when this reality settles into my prayer life.

Prayer itself contains the value of prayer. To recognize its power and worth, I will have to set aside my prayer barometers and scorecards. I will have to go to God with empty hands.