

Questions About Prayer

If God already knows everything, why should we pray at all?

Prayer is the means through which God has called us to have a relationship with Him. It is true God already knows everything. Prayer does not change God. It draws us closer to God, reminds us of our need for Him, helps us to abide and remain in Him, teaches us that He loves us and provides for us.

*“Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.” – **Philippians 4:6 (NLT)***

The Lord’s Prayer teaches us to ask for our “daily bread” as a reminder that we need to have a regular time with God to keep the relationship from growing cold and distant.

Is There Anything We Shouldn't Pray For?

Yes, some things are inappropriate because they do not reflect God’s character or will. The boundary is not the size of the request but its direction: prayer aligns us with God's purposes rather than recruiting God to ours.

1. Anything that is sinful or contrary to God's revealed will

We cannot ask God to bless what he has already forbidden. John ties confidence in prayer directly to God's will:

*"if we ask anything according to his will he hears us" - **1 John 5:14 (ESV)***

Praying for success in a dishonest scheme or an adulterous relationship asks God to act against his own nature (**James 1:13; Habakkuk 1:13**).

2. Requests driven by selfish motives

James diagnoses unanswered prayer this way:

*"You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" - **James 4:3 (ESV)***

The Greek *kakōs* ("wrongly, badly") targets the motive, not the request itself. Asking for a raise is fine; asking for one to feed envy or pride is not (**Proverbs 30:8–9**).

3. Harm or cursing toward others

Jesus reverses the natural instinct:

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" - Matthew 5:44 (ESV)

Paul adds, *"Bless those who persecute you; bless **and do not curse them**" - Romans 12:14 (ESV)*. When James and John wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village, Jesus rebuked them (**Luke 9:54–55**).

It may be appropriate at times to ask God to thwart evil plans, but we must always remember that our real enemy is not other people but principalities and powers (**2 Corinthians 10:3-4**)

Note: Some will point to the imprecatory psalms (e.g., Psalms 58, 109, 137) and say, "hey, what about this". Read them carefully, they **hand vengeance over to God rather than taking it into our own hands (Romans 12:19)**. They model honesty, and raw emotion about injustice, not permission to wish personal harm on a neighbor.

4. Prayers that put God to the test

When Satan urged Jesus to jump from the temple and claim God's protection, Jesus answered, *"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test" - Matthew 4:7 (ESV)*, quoting **Deuteronomy 6:16 (ESV)** – *"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah"*. Prayers that demand proof on our terms ("If you're real, do X by Friday") treat God as a subject in an experiment rather than a Lord to be trusted. This differs from honest requests for guidance, such as Gideon's fleece (**Judges 6:36–40**), which God graciously accommodated.

At Massah, the Israelites demanded proof of God's presence and questioned His faithfulness despite what He had already done. Gideon, by contrast, was seeking reassurance about a specific mission God had called him to undertake.

5. Prayer as a formula or performance

"When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words" - Matthew 6:7 (ESV)

Prayer is not magic. Length, volume, and exact wording do not compel God, and prayers offered to impress others have "received their reward" already (**Matthew 6:5**). God is not a vending machine that if you put X in you will get Y out.

6. A hard case: when God says "do not pray"

Three times God tells Jeremiah,

"do not pray for this people... for I will not hear you" - Jeremiah 7:16 (ESV) (see also 11:14; 14:11).

Judgment had been decreed on persistent, unrepentant rebellion. Similarly, John writes of ***"sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that" - 1 John 5:16 (ESV)***.

Interpreters differ on what this sin is, but most see it as settled, unrepentant rejection of Christ. We should not pray against what God has already said is settled.

These texts are exceptions to the regular pattern of prayer, not the norm. The general pattern of Scripture is intercession, even for the wicked (**Genesis 18:22–33; 1 Timothy 2:1–4**).

What Can We Pray For?

Most things. Paul says,

"in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" - Philippians 4:6 (ESV)

Lament, anger, and confusion are all welcome, as the Psalms show (**Psalms 13; 22; 88**). And when we do not know how to pray,

"the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" - Romans 8:26 (ESV).

Why Are Some Prayers Not Answered?

God answers prayer but not always with a yes – sometimes it is with a **“no”**, sometimes a **“slow”**, sometimes a **“grow”** and if everything fits His will and purposes he gives us a **“go”**. Scripture gives several reasons, and they do not all apply at once. Some concern the one praying; others concern God's wisdom, timing, and purposes that we cannot see.

1. We did not ask

"You do not have, because you do not ask" - James 4:2 (ESV)

Sometimes the simplest explanation is that we worried, schemed, or complained instead of praying.

2. Unconfessed sin

"If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" - **Psalm 66:18 (ESV)**

Isaiah says Israel's sins *"have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear"* - **Isaiah 59:2 (ESV)**. The issue is not a single failure but sin we hold onto and refuse to confess (**1 John 1:9**).

3. Broken relationships and unforgiveness

"Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone" - **Mark 11:25 (ESV)**

Peter warns *"Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered."* - **1 Peter 3:7 (ESV)**. How we treat people affects how we approach God (**Matthew 5:23–24**).

4. Wrong motives

"You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." - **James 4:3 (ESV)**

God is a loving Father, not an accomplice to selfishness (**Matthew 7:9–11**). Don't expect God to answer your prayer to win the lottery just so you can spend the money selfishly.

5. Doubt and Double-mindedness

James urges us to *"ask in faith, with no doubting"* - **James 1:6–7 (ESV)**, and Jesus links faith as a cause of answered prayer.

"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received^[c] it, and it will be yours." - **Mark 11:24 (ESV)**

A caution: this does not mean every unanswered prayer reflects weak faith. Paul, a man of great faith, prayed three times for his "thorn" to be removed, and God said no (**2 Corinthians 12:7–9**).

6. The request is not according to God's will

Jesus himself prayed, *"let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will"* - **Matthew 26:39 (ESV)**. The Father did not remove the cross, because through it came salvation. Our confidence rests on asking *"according to his will"* - **1 John 5:14–15 (ESV)**, which means some sincere requests will receive a loving no.

7. Forgiveness will Keep Your Prayers From Being Answered

"And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." – **Mark 11:25 (ESV)**

8. God's timing is different from ours

Jesus told the parable of the persistent widow so that his disciples would *"always pray and not lose heart"* - **Luke 18:1–8 (ESV)**. Abraham waited about 25 years for Isaac (**Genesis 12:4; 21:5**). Peter reminds us that *"with the Lord one day is as a thousand years"* and that apparent slowness is really patience (**2 Peter 3:8–9**; see also **Habakkuk 2:3**).

9. Spiritual opposition

Daniel's prayer was heard *"from the first day,"* but the angelic answer was delayed 21 days by "the prince of the kingdom of Persia" (**Daniel 10:12–13**). Scripture hints that there is conflict in the unseen realm (**Ephesians 6:12**), though it never makes this a routine explanation.

Jesus told us to keep praying until the answer comes in these situations:

*"And he told them a parable to the effect that they **ought always to pray and not lose heart.**"* – **Luke 18:1 (ESV)**

"Pray without ceasing." – **1 Thessalonians 5:17 (ESV)**

10. Other people's free choices

We may pray for a prodigal to return or a spouse to change. God works in hearts, but Scripture also shows people resisting him (**Matthew 23:37; Acts 7:51**). Prayers involving others' wills may take a long time or be refused by the person, not by God.

God will not destroy the other person's free will to answer your prayer. For example, prayers like "God make her date and marry me" will not be answered unless the other person is agreeable.

11. God intends something better

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" - **2 Corinthians 12:9 (ESV)**

God's refusal to Paul produced dependence and strength that relief would not have.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" - **Isaiah 55:8–9 (ESV)** (see also **Romans 8:28**).

12. Mystery

Sometimes we are not told why. Job never learned the reason for his suffering, but he met God (**Job 38–42**).

"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us" - Deuteronomy 29:29 (ESV)

Mystery does not mean that God does not have a reason, just that we don't know what that reason is.

A Word of Caution

These reasons help us examine **ourselves**. They should never be used to diagnose **others**. Job's friends assumed his suffering proved his sin and were rebuked by God (**Job 42:7**). When the disciples asked whose sin caused a man's blindness, Jesus answered, "neither" (**John 9:1–3**). A grieving person whose prayer for healing was not granted needs comfort, not a list of possible failures.

What Evidence Is There That God Answers Prayer?

Personal Testimonies

87% of respondents who prayed reported that at least one of their prayers had been answered in the previous 12 months. - **2023 American Prayer Wrap**, a survey commissioned by the Radiant Foundation and conducted by City Square Associates.

73% Have Received What They Considered a Definite Answer to Prayer – **Gallup**, 1988

83% of Americans Who Pray Believe at Least Some Prayers Are Answered – **Lifeway Research**, August 2014

God's character and promises

The foundation is who God is. Jesus argues from the lesser to the greater:

"If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" - Matthew 7:11 (ESV)

He promises, "Ask, and it will be given to you" - **Matthew 7:7 (ESV)** (see also **John 14:13–14; 15:7**). A God who acted decisively in history by raising Jesus from the dead (**1 Corinthians 15:3–8**) is a God who hears and acts.

The biblical record of answered prayer

Scripture presents answered prayer as historical events, not abstractions:

- **Hannah** prayed for a child and received Samuel:
"For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition" - 1 Samuel 1:27 (ESV)
- **Elijah** prayed for fire on Mount Carmel and later for rain (**1 Kings 18:36–45**). James cites him as a model because he *"was a man with a nature like ours"* - **James 5:17–18 (ESV)**.
- **Hezekiah** prayed when told he would die, and God added 15 years to his life (**2 Kings 20:1–6**).
- **The early church** prayed for Peter in prison, and he was released, though the praying believers struggled to believe it when he knocked at the door (**Acts 12:5–16**).

These are just a few examples.

James summarizes: *"The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working"* - **James 5:16 (ESV)**.

The witness of church history

History offers well-documented cases of numerous believers receiving answers to prayer.

George Müller (1805–1898) cared for more than 10,000 orphans in Bristol, England, without soliciting funds, and kept detailed journals recording thousands of specific answers to prayer for food and money.

The Miracles of Lourdes – Over 70 recorded and documented miracles have occurred at this location.

Modern Miracles - In the present day, New Testament scholar **Craig Keener's** two-volume *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (2011) gathers hundreds of eyewitness accounts of healings following prayer from around the world, some with medical documentation.

The transformation of the one who prays

Often the first answer to prayer is a changed heart. Paul promises that when we pray, *"the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in*

*Christ Jesus" - **Philippians 4:6–7 (ESV)***. Jesus in Gethsemane did not receive the removal of the cup, but he rose from prayer resolved and steady (**Luke 22:42–43**).