

PRAYER: DOES IT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE

November 23, 2025
Library Bible Study

1

Unanswered Prayer: Final Thoughts

- A new heaven and a new earth-Rev 21:1 The eternal state.
- Keeping a journal allows reflection.
- Both importunity and the attitude of “Thy will be done” are essential.
- No logical explanation of unanswered prayer will suffice!!!!!!

2

infertility; Daniel praying in a den of lions even as his three friends had prayed in the midst of fire. When God sent the prophet Isaiah, the most God-connected person of his day, to inform King Hezekiah of his imminent death, Hezekiah prayed for more time. Before Isaiah had left the palace grounds, God changed his mind, granting Hezekiah fifteen more years of life.

In a sort of negative proof of the power of prayer, three times God commanded Jeremiah to *stop* praying; God wanted no alteration in his plans to punish a rebellious nation. Prayer had, after all, softened God's resolve before. "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned," the prophet Jonah proclaimed to a heathen city, but "when God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened." Four times the Old Testament reports that God "relented" or "changed his mind" in response to a request, and each shift forestalled a promised punishment.

A Work in Process

How do we reconcile the changeless God described in the Bible with the responsive God also described in the Bible? The revivalist Charles Finney, who moved away from the strict Calvinism of his youth, grounded his belief in the power of prayer, ironically, in God's unchanging character: "If you ask why he ever answers prayer at all, the answer must be, Because he is unchangeable." To give an example, a God bound by unchanging qualities of love and mercy must forgive a sinner who prays repentantly. God changes course in response to the sinner's change in course, and does so because of those eternal qualities.

The contemporary theologian Clark Pinnock follows a similar line of logic. Since God's nature is love, he says, God must be impressionable and sympathetic: "Because God's love *never* changes, God's experience *must* change." Pinnock contrasts two models of God's sovereignty. We can picture God as an aloof monarch, removed from the details of the world. Or we can picture God as a caring parent with traits of love, generosity, and sensitivity—an infinite Being who personally interacts with and responds to creation. Accordingly, God considers prayers much as a wise parent might consider requests from a child.

Andrew Murray, himself a Calvinist, concluded that "God does indeed

Written Proof

GAIL

If I ever doubt that God hears and responds to our prayers, I pull out my prayer journal. These days my "altar" is a computer desk. I sit there each day with an open Bible and record my spiritual journal on the computer. I need that kind of focus to help me meditate.

I ask God what I should do that day, and one by one names pop into mind. By the end of the time, I usually have three or four hours of work ahead of me, because I believe God often relies on us to help answer the very requests we make of him.

Each day I print out my journal and refer back to it, reminding myself of what I learned. Then, once a year I condense and compile the entire thing. I divide my notes into categories: insights, poetry, family highlights, repentance, fun times, sorrows—and answers to prayer. The synthesis of last year's journal took up fifty-six pages in a footnote-sized type. Reading it over, I'm simply amazed at how God worked in response to my prayers. I see a softening in my niece's husband, an agnostic. I see transformation in the members of my small group, and spiritual awakenings in my neighbors. I see growth in my own marriage.

I used to think that if I worked hard to be good enough, God would answer my prayers in the way that I wanted. Now I've learned to bow low. I'm just a steward, a pawn, with no real concept of what's best for me. The hard times I've gone through—and there are many—have taught me that God can use anything for his purposes. Sometimes my husband and I have longed for a particular result, only to realize later that it would have been disastrous for us. I've learned humility in prayer. God is the boss, not me. Whatever makes me bow lower is good for me because it seems God takes great delight in raising us up.

I'm blessed to have a husband who prays with me. Why is it so many men have difficulty praying with their wives (and vice versa) when they may well participate in prayer groups with near strangers? Perhaps it's because we can spot any superficiality in our spouses' prayers. We can't pretend. That, too, is a way of keeping me humble.

***Trust—Prayer Requires and Creates
Restful Trust and Confident Hope***

Just as prayer must combine awe and intimacy, it must also combine submission and “importunity.” The final thought of every prayer must be for the help we need to accept thankfully from God’s hand whatever he sends in his wisdom. Even children whose instincts are to resist their wills being crossed usually know deep down that they don’t understand the world as their parents do. Our Father “alone knows what is best; granting our request might, in many cases, be our destruction.”²⁴⁶

On the other hand, we are invited to specifically, intensely, and repeatedly make our needs known in prayer with confidence they will be heard. Norwegian author Ole Hallesby, in his classic book on prayer, talks of prayer as “work” and “wrestling.”²⁴⁷ Though we must always end prayers with “nevertheless, thy will be done,” our prayers should nonetheless begin with great striving with God. Luther had the temerity to talk of importunate prayer as “conquering God.”²⁴⁸ Prayer is not a passive, calm, quiet practice.

A balance between these two required attitudes—restful trust and confident hope—is absolutely crucial. Under “requisites for prayer” in his systematic theology, Charles Hodge lists “importunity” and “submission” back-to-back. If we overstress submission, we become too passive. We will never pray with the remarkable force and arguments that we see in Abraham pressing God to save Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:16–33), or Moses pleading with God for mercy for Israel and himself (Ex 33:12–22), or Habakkuk and Job questioning God’s actions in history. However, if we overstress “importunity,” if we engage in petitionary prayer without a foundation of settled acceptance of God’s wisdom and sovereignty, we will become too angry when our

prayers are not answered. In either case—we will stop praying patient, long-suffering, persistent yet nonhysterical prayers for our needs and concerns.

Hallesby likens prayer to mining as he knew it in Norway in the early twentieth century. Demolition to create mine shafts took two basic kinds of actions. There are long periods of time, he writes, “when the deep holes are being bored with great effort into the hard rock.” To bore the holes deeply enough into the most strategic spots for removing the main body of rock was work that took patience, steadiness, and a great deal of skill. Once the holes were finished, however, the “shot” was inserted and connected to a fuse. “To light the fuse and fire the shot is not only easy but also very interesting. . . . One sees ‘results.’ . . . Shots resound, and pieces fly in every direction.” He concludes that while the more painstaking work takes both skill and patient strength of character, “anyone can light a fuse.”²⁴⁹ This helpful illustration warns us against doing only “fuse-lighting” prayers, the kind that we soon drop if we do not get immediate results. If we believe *both* in the power of prayer *and* in the wisdom of God, we will have a patient prayer life of “hole-boring.” Mature believers know that handling the tedium is part of what makes for effective prayers.

We must avoid extremes—of either not asking God for things or of thinking we can bend God’s will to ours. We must combine tenacious importunity, a “striving with God,” with deep acceptance of God’s wise will, whatever it is.

***Surrender—Prayer Requires and Creates
Surrender of the Whole Life in Love to God***

Psalm 66:18 says, “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.” At first sight, this seems to mean that I can merit

intellect. "It was a hindrance to my faith," she said, "as it enabled me from about age seven to see the hypocrisies in Christians and the church, to ask the unanswerable questions." She continued, "Fortunately, I now know God answers prayers in His own time and manner," for it was her intellect that eventually drew her back to faith.

Country singer Garth Brooks had a hit song in which he recalls his impassioned prayers for God to melt the heart of a high school sweetheart—later apparent to him as a terrible choice:

Just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean he don't care.
Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.

No Fixed Formula

Even after spelling out some of what we do wrong in our prayers, however—*especially* after spelling that out—I must repeat that prayer does not work according to a fixed formula: get your life in order, say the right words, and the desired result will come. If that were true, Job would have avoided much suffering, Paul would have shed his thorn in the flesh, and Jesus would never have gone to Golgotha. Between the two questions "Does God answer prayer?" and "Will God grant my specific prayer for this sick child or this particular injustice?" lies a great pool of mystery.

Charles Edward White, a college professor in the state of Michigan, spent several terms as a visiting professor at the University of Jos in Nigeria. While there he visited a missionary graveyard in a quiet garden beside a chapel on Nigeria's Central Plateau. Most of the graves, he noticed, were small: two- and three-foot mounds to accommodate child-sized coffins. Thirty-three of the fifty-six graves, in fact, held the bodies of small children. The tombstones went back as far as 1928, and old-timers in the mission could tell him the stories of only the most recent deaths.

Two of the infants lived just one day. Others lived a few years, falling victim to the tropical diseases common in that part of the world. Melvin Louis Goossen was twelve when he and his brother fell off a suspension bridge over a rain-swollen creek. Their missionary father, Arthur Goossen, dived in the creek to save one son. But when he dived after Melvin, both father and son drowned.

Professor White listened to these and other accounts of missionaries who had come to Nigeria in full awareness of the dangers, and of their children

sorrow of households that no longer heard the happy cries of a three-year-old, that lost a first-grader just as she was learning to read.

The graveyard at Miango tells us something about God and about his grace. It testifies that God is not a jolly grandfather who satisfies our every desire. Certainly those parents wanted their children to live. They pled with God, but he denied their request.

The graves also show us that God is not a calculating merchant who withholds his goods until we produce enough good works or faith to buy his help. If anyone had earned credit with God, it would have been these missionaries. They left all to spread the gospel in a hostile environment. But God does not hand out merit pay.

Not only do we learn about God's nature from the Miango graveyard, but we also discover truths about his grace. God's grace may be free, but it is not cheap. Neither purchasing our salvation nor letting us know of the gift was inexpensive.

Beginning with Abel, many of the witnesses to divine grace sealed their words with their blood. Jesus asked the Jews which of the prophets was not persecuted? When he first sent out his disciples, he promised them betrayal and death. Then, at the end of his ministry, he promised his followers that as they carried his word, they would face trouble and hatred.

"The only way we can understand the graveyard at Miango," White concluded, "is to remember that God also buried his Son on the mission field."

For a missionary couple who stand beside a mound of earth in a garden in Nigeria, no logical explanation of unanswered prayer will suffice. They must place their faith in a God who has yet to fulfill the promise that good will overcome evil, that God's good purposes will, in the end, prevail. To cling to that belief may represent the ultimate rationalization—or the ultimate act of faith.