

# When God Doesn't Answer Prayer

Lamentations 3:44

1) In the movie *Signs* starred Mel Gibson as an Anglican priest whose wife was hit and killed by an automobile. The priest was so angry at God for letting his wife die that he became an atheist and left the ministry.

a. If God really cares for us, why doesn't he prove it by responding affirmatively to our simplest requests? For those of us who believe in a holy, loving, just, prayer-answering God, that's a tough question to answer. Jeremiah complained to God,

***"You have covered yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can get through."*** (Lamentations 3:44)

b. I've felt that way before.

- I've prayed that God would spare the life of a baby carried by a mother who desperately wanted a child, and she miscarried anyway.
- I've prayed for God to spare the life of people who died anyway.
- I've prayed for God to keep a marriage together, and the couple still got a divorce.

You could probably add some of your own unanswered prayers to this list. Why didn't God answer our prayer? And what should our reaction be when God seems to be silent, and hidden behind the clouds?

2) The Bible draws a direct line between faith and answered prayer. Jesus often chastised people for having too little faith. But what exactly does that mean? When my request is denied, am I to assume that God is refusing to answer my prayer because I don't have enough faith? To help answer that question, let's consider two men of faith who didn't get all their prayers answered affirmatively.

3) God told Moses he would not be crossing over with the children of Israel into the Promised Land because of his recent indiscretion. But as Moses' life neared its end, he was hoping God would just let him go over and take a peek. Maybe God would temporarily suspend his sentence or at least let him out on parole for the weekend. Moses later told the Israelites,

***"I pleaded with the Lord: 'O Sovereign Lord, you have begun to show to your servant your greatness and your strong hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do the deeds and mighty works you do? Let me***

***go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan.”***  
(Deuteronomy 3:23-25)

a. You might remember why Moses was being denied this request. God had taken care of him and the Israelites for forty years as they wandered in the wilderness. Shortly before they were to enter the Promised Land, God led them to the Desert of Zin, where they ran out of water – again. And as their parents had done forty years earlier, the children of Israel complained and grumbled against their leaders. They organized an official protest and demanded an explanation from Moses and Aaron.

God told Moses to speak to the rock in front of him, and the rock would bring forth plenty of water for the Israelites to drink. But when Moses gathered the people together, forty years of frustration with this obstinate, faithless group boiled up within him. Instead of speaking to the rock as God had commanded, Moses yelled at the people:

***“Listen, you rebels! Do we have to get water out of this rock for you?”*** (Numbers 20:10b)

Moses vented his anger by flailing away at the rock with his staff. Water gushed out, and the people and the livestock had plenty to drink. But God had not said to strike the rock; he had said to speak to the rock, and God was not pleased with Moses’ disobedience.

b. I must confess that I understand Moses and I feel sympathy for him. His sister, Miriam, had just died. He was emotionally drained. The ongoing murmuring of these petty, ungrateful, doubting people just got under his skin. He had reached the limit of his tolerance. He was completely exasperated with them. I’ve been exasperated with a lot less. Still, Moses’ loss of temper brought a stern rebuke from God.

c. Actually, Moses had battle this particular character flaw all of his life.

- When he was forty years old, his anger had driven him to kill an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Hebrew slave.
- When he was eighty, he came down off Mount Sinai to find the children of Israel worshiping a golden calf. In a rage, he hurled down the brand-new stone tablets on which God had etched the Ten Commandments and smashed them on the rocks below.
- Now, at the end of his life, he again found himself in trouble because of his temper.

d. God, in his holiness, was offended by this rash action. Moses had not shown proper respect for God in front of God's people. Still, this is a pretty harsh judgment. You can understand why, a few weeks later, Moses begged God to reconsider. It seemed like a reasonable request. Moses had sacrificed forty years of his life for this cause, and he hadn't even wanted the job.

e. Now, finally, the Israelites were preparing to enter the land God had promised – the land described as “flowing with milk and honey” – and Moses simply asked, “Lord, can I please at least go over and see it?” If you were God, wouldn't you relent just a little? You'd say, “OK, Moses, you've been a faithful servant. I'll let you go over and scout it out. Just keep your temper in check!” But God didn't answer Moses' prayer affirmatively.

4) The Apostle Paul is our second example of a person of faith who didn't get his prayer answered. In his second letter to the church at Corinth, he wrote about a physical ailment he had:

***“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.”*** (II Corinthians 12:7-8)

a. No one knows exactly what Paul's thorn in the flesh was, but we can speculate. It must have been a daily, painful, irritating, nearly debilitating physical problem. Because of some of the passing references Paul makes in some of his other writings, scholars have speculated that perhaps Paul contracted a severe illness that affected his eyesight for the rest of his life.

But all of this is speculation anyway. Whatever the thorn was, Paul was convinced that it limited his effectiveness, and it must have been a daily irritation to him. It bothered him so much that he prayed repeatedly that God would heal him.

b. That seems like a reasonable request to us. Paul's life was tough enough as it was. He didn't need additional problems. If anyone ever deserved a “thorn” removed, it was Paul. If you were God, wouldn't you grant his request and give him some relief?

But God said “no.” God said to Paul,

***“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*** (II Corinthians 12:9)

c. The Bible mentions many others besides Moses and Paul whose prayers were not always answered in the affirmative.

- Abraham asked God to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, but they were still destroyed.
- Elijah prayed for God to take his life, but God didn't.
- David fasted and prayed for a week, asking God to spare the life of his infant son who was ill, but the baby still died.

5) What, then, did James mean when he said a person who asks must "believe and not doubt?" What did Jesus mean when he said all we needed was a little faith to move mountains.

a. Some people think that anytime we pray and don't get the answer we had hoped for, it's because we didn't have enough faith. If that's true, then Moses, Paul, Abraham, Elijah, and David – even Jesus – lacked faith. Even the Son of God didn't get every prayer answered the way he wanted. Jesus prayed,

***"My Father, if it is possible, take this cup of suffering from me! Yet not what I want, but what you want."***

(Matthew 26:39)

b. It is obvious, then, when James says we must "believe and not doubt," he doesn't mean we should be positive that our prayers will be answered just as we want. It would be arrogant of us to assume to know better than God how he should answer our prayers. Those who claim each of God's no answers is a lack of faith are ignoring the possibility that what we want could be to our own detriment. God's wisdom is higher than our wisdom.

6) What kind of faith does God really want? Hebrews 11:6 tells us:

***"Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."***

(Hebrews 11:6)

a. Faith, then, means sincerely believing in two things:

1. First, we must believe in God's presence. We must "believe that he exists." Faith means coming to God believing that he is real, that he is hearing your prayers, and that he has the power to do something about them.
2. Second, we must believe in God's goodness. We must believe "that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

b. When Jesus went to Nazareth, the Bible says he couldn't do many miracles because of the people's lack of faith. What happened there?

- Did people come for healing and get turned away by Jesus because of their lack of faith? No. Jesus never turned away anyone who came to him for healing.
- Jesus wasn't excusing his inability to perform miracles by claiming the people must not have had faith. In fact, it seems that Jesus sometimes did miracles when no one believed – like raising Lazarus from the dead.

c. Why, then, could he not do many miracles in Nazareth? It was because the people had so little faith in Jesus that they didn't even come to ask! They were so sure that Jesus wasn't anything special that they didn't even entertain the possibility that he could heal them.

d. The Hebrew writer said we must **"believe. . .that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."** A person praying with faith believes that God is good – that he has a righteous character and our best interests in mind.

7) A Gentile woman once came to Jesus, desperate to get some help for her ailing daughter. Instead of healing the daughter right away, Jesus tested the mother by disparaging her race and acting as though he weren't going to heal her daughter. Jesus said,

**"It's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."** (Matthew 15:26)

a. It would have been tempting for a Gentile to take offense at this comment and stomp off in a huff. But the woman was desperate, and she decided to trust in the goodness of this man and respond humbly:

**"'Yes, Lord' she said, 'but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.'"** (Matthew 15:27)

b. Jesus was pleased with the woman's response. He told her,

**"'Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.' And her daughter was healed from that very hour."**

(Matthew 15:28)

What did Jesus mean by "great faith"? What exactly was he testing? Her faith in his ability to heal? No – she had already proven that she believed he could heal, or she wouldn't have come. He was testing her faith in his good character. Did she truly believe he was good? Would her faith in him and in his character weaken if it appeared he wasn't going to heal her daughter as she had hoped?

Jesus said she had “great faith” not because she believed more than others did in Jesus’ healing power, but because she trusted in Jesus’ goodness more than most would have under such a test.

8) God isn’t concerned with your faith in his ability to heal. If you have faith enough to ask at all – providing you aren’t just mouthing the words – you have enough faith. When you come to him with a request, you’re demonstrating that you believe he can honor that request.

But God is also concerned with your faith in his character. How will you respond if he says no?

- Will you still have faith?
- Will you still trust in his goodness even if you don’t get your way?
- Do you really have faith in him not only to heal but to do what is right in all circumstances?