

Answered Prayer Through Faith

Perseverance in Prayer

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Comedian Mary Armstrong said,

"My mother always told me God hears every prayer. If I would pray really hard for something and nothing happened, she would say, 'Sometimes God's answer is no.' But what if God just does not answer right away? You could be 42, your needs will have changed, and all of a sudden you look out at your front yard one morning and there is a Shetland pony!"

Thankfully God does not answer prayers in that way, although maybe He does sometimes. In addition to this giving us a chuckle, it brings up an interesting question. What if God does not answer right away, as we know that He sometimes does not?

Although prayer may be a simple thing in one sense, it can also be very difficult. It is sometimes an excuse for not thinking, an excuse for avoiding a problem or a negative situation.

We have all known something of this. We may have been dealing with a problem and have prayed to God to deliver us, but in the meantime we have not put something right in our life, as we should have. We pray, but we make no changes ourselves.

Instead of facing the problem and doing what we should be doing, we have prayed. At a point like that, should we have prayed or faced the truth—faced the doctrine and applied it?

People pray to God for an answer to a problem, or difficult situation, then, they think because God did not say 'no' during their prayer, that means 'yes.' Most of the time it is because He has already given the answer in black and white in His inspired written Word—the Bible.

For example, young Christian adults pray to God, asking Him if a certain worldly person they are interested in is meant for them. God does not audibly say "No!" or probably does not say anything at all to them, and He does not necessarily put some obvious inspired thought in their head, so they wrongly assume that since God has not stopped them, that His answer is "Yes, marry that worldly person."

Is that right? Is that God's answer? Did He ever answer their question? Yes, He did!

Here is His answer! Here is the principle inspired by God, and given through the apostle Paul, to help us make a wise decision in this area.

II Corinthians 6:14-15 Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has

Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?

This passage is one of the most obviously stated, but one of the most ignored principles regarding Christian marriage in the entire Bible, other than the 10 Commandments of course.

We see that sometimes when we pray and ask God for an answer, it is right there in black and white in our own Bibles. Along with prayer we must have Bible study. We must be meditating and studying on God's Word to make sure that when we do pray we are praying according to His will. Ignoring God's instruction shows that people do not really believe that the Bible is the inspired written Word of God. And, if they do believe that God inspired the writers of the Bible to fill it with His truth, they ignore much of it, because they will not move beyond being able to handle spiritual milk.

What would happen if a baby never moved onto solid food, but only lived off physical milk? He would not continue to develop as he should, and he would eventually die of malnutrition. God inspired the writer of Hebrews to admonish the church to become more skilled in the truth, and in applying it correctly in their lives. This was another way of telling them that they needed to produce more spiritual fruit. He equates a babe with spiritual immaturity.

Hebrews 5:12-14 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

We are to become skilled in applying godly principles. When a crisis hits us, we are not just supposed to hit our knees in prayer and do nothing. We have to apply biblical principles already accessible to us, right here in the Bible on our laps.

If our attitude, in times of crisis, were just to be immediately one of prayer, then these New Testament epistles, with all their involved teaching, would never have been necessary. There are certain preliminary principles to apply; therefore we must know what we are doing when we pray. We must know that we are asking according to God's will. And His will is stated in Scripture.

This is not to say we should not hit our knees in prayer when a crisis hits, we definitely should. The point is that for prayer to be effective, it must be thoughtful, not vague or confused.

Sometimes, we are just not detailed enough. Let me illustrate this with something light hearted. I think many of you have heard this before.

A Christian in ancient Rome was being pursued by a lion. He ran through the city streets and into the woods, dodging back and forth among the trees. Finally it became obvious that it was hopeless—the

lion was going to catch him. So he turned suddenly, faced the beast and dropped to his knees. "Lord," he prayed desperately, "make this lion a Christian."

Instantly the lion dropped to its knees and prayed, "For this meal of which I am about to partake...."

The man just did not include enough detail in his request. Anything like this is obviously ridiculous, but it does express the point. If we are not specific we may receive something other than we had intended. It is not that God cannot tell what we really want, but that He wants us to think deeply about what we are asking, and to work to make it according to His will.

What if God does not answer our prayer right away? What if we wait patiently, but God makes us wait? What then? What do we do?

Maybe with the passing of time, the trial becomes more involved or hard to take. So, we pray intently about it, and we may even fast about it, if it is serious enough. We believe we have faith that God will intervene, and we have done our part. But still it seems God has not intervened.

And so, we doubt our own faith, and wonder about the true level of our conversion. We question why we do not seem to have the faith that the faithful listed in Hebrews 11 had. But, did God always grant His faithful people immediate relief from their troubles? Anyone, who has read any part of their Bible, knows the answer to that. No! He does not always give immediate relief, even to the faithful.

According to the accounts in Scripture, God did often intervene immediately on behalf of His people. But, there were many times when He delayed delivering the faithful. He made them wait, while He tested their character, perseverance and faith.

King David wrote in Psalm 11:5, "The Lord tests the righteous..." Very succinctly put.

When God tests the righteous, it is to bring about a good result. Sometimes a test is designed to further His plan of salvation for humanity. Sometimes a test is for our own good, to develop righteous character in us, and to show God and us where we are spiritually strong and where we are spiritually weak.

Even the ancient righteous patriarchs and prophets went through anguish. James 5:10 explains this, "as an example of suffering and patience." We understand from this that they were not immediately delivered out of every trial that came their way.

They were faithful people, who would not have understood suffering and developed patience had they not experienced the kind of trials that are common to human beings. Also, we would not have those examples to follow and to emulate if they had not gone through them.

Even though Moses received many immediate and miraculous results following prayer, he also understood the experience of agony and testing. Some went on for days, and some for continued months, and some persisted for years. Through it all, Moses developed patience and perseverance unlike almost any other human being on earth.

David praised God in Psalm 138:3 saying, "In the day when I cried out, You answered me." So

obviously David received quick answers to some of his prayers.

But there were times when God made David wait. Sometimes his wait was for quite a long time. In Psalm 13:1 David asked: "How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever?" Obviously David went for a long time without an answer to his prayer. And, Psalm 35:17 records that he asked, "Lord, how long will You look on? Rescue me." Sounded like a plea after a long bout with some illness or problem.

David wrote about his prolonged suffering. He wrote about a debilitating plague, of a sickbed, of enemies gloating over his condition, and even of his own friends turning against him, as well as his relatives keeping their distance. David seemed to have experienced a wide range of different trials and afflictions.

Psalms 41:1-9 Blessed is he who considers the poor; The Lord will deliver him in time of trouble. The Lord will preserve him and keep him alive, And he will be blessed on the earth; You will not deliver him to the will of his enemies. The Lord will strengthen him on his bed of illness; You will sustain him on his sickbed. I said, "Lord, be merciful to me; Heal my soul, for I have sinned against You." My enemies speak evil of me: "When will he die, and his name perish?" And if he comes to see me, he speaks lies; His heart gathers iniquity to itself; When he goes out, he tells it. All who hate me whisper together against me; Against me they devise my hurt. "An evil disease," they say, "clings to him. And now that he lies down, he will rise up no more." Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, Who ate my bread, Has lifted up his heel against me.

David prayed for healing, since death may have been near. Eventually, it was David's turn to rejoice, because God ultimately did heal him and bring him back from the edge of the grave, but only after David had waited. We see that in Psalm 6:

Psalms 6:2-10 Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am weak; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled; but You, O Lord—how long? Return, O Lord, deliver me! Oh, save me for Your mercies' sake! For in death there is no remembrance of You; In the grave who will give You thanks? I am weary with my groaning; All night I make my bed swim; I drench my couch with my tears. My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows old because of all my enemies. Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity; for the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping. The Lord has heard my supplication; the Lord will receive my prayer. Let all my enemies be ashamed and greatly troubled; let them turn back and be ashamed suddenly.

We see there that David went through an awful lot. All of the things that we go through, all of the trials and afflictions and diseases are very common to man and were common to many of

the patriarchs and prophets. They understood, but they also had a great trust and faith in God, that He heard their prayers even though He did not answer right away. They understood that He heard, but it had to be according to His will when He reacted.

II Kings 4-6 tells of how Elisha often received amazingly quick results when he presented needs to God. But, when he became sick, God did not heal him immediately. In fact, God let him die of his sickness.

Elisha is still waiting in his grave, after all this time, to be delivered from his sickness. He will not receive this deliverance until the resurrection of the dead in Christ. But, during Elisha's lifetime, God healed something far more important in preparing him for His Kingdom, and that was Elisha's mind. With his terminal illness he no doubt developed greater humility, compassion, and mercy, which prepared him for God's Kingdom.

In the first century of the church's existence, Stephen, who did great signs and wonders among the people, did not receive deliverance from being the first Christian martyr. Acts 7 tells us that he received no divine intervention that prevented him from being stoned to death. In faith, he endured a painful death at the hands of an enraged mob. But, Stephen knew that he would be resurrected.

Though there were many miracles as a result of faith among the early Christians, some of God's people had to cope with infections and disease that did not go away immediately. They had to wait and their faith was tried. This seems more common than not in Scripture.

The apostle Paul had great faith, but when he prayed for relief from his problem thorn in the flesh, God spoke to him directly, telling him specifically that he would have to wait, that he would not be healed of that.

II Corinthians 12:7-10 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The apostle Peter addressed faithful Christians of his time. They were grieved by various trials for a while. The substance of their faith was tested by fire. Peter gives them encouragement here.

I Peter 1:5-7 Who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more

precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,

Moses, David, Elisha, Stephen, and Paul are only a few examples of how those with faith had to endure, had to wait patiently for God's intervention.

Hebrews 11 contains a summary of the lives of many of those who have been faithful. In faith, many times they received immediate, miraculous answers to prayer, but often they did not. Starting with the first righteous man, Abel, who was murdered in cold blood, many people in faith suffered severe trials, tests, deprivations, and afflictions.

Hebrews 11:35-39 Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise,

They had to wait for God to intervene according to His will, and within His time frame, and for many of them that did not come during their lifetime—at least the intervention having to do with their physical body. There was definite intervention having to do with their minds and their spiritual development.

What we see is that while a lack of faith can certainly cause answers to prayer to be delayed, a delayed answer does not necessarily mean that a person has a lack of faith. If we have given our life to God, we should not let a delayed answer to our requests discourage us.

Remember: "The Lord tests the righteous." The faith that they have, He exercises, refines, perfects, and increases, and to it He adds patience. Jesus Christ will not accept us into His Kingdom unless we change, unless we overcome sin. There are spiritual lessons for us to learn, and character we must first develop. This is the reason that God sometimes allows us to be in situations where our trust in Him and His faithfulness and love toward us is severely tried.

We know that Jesus Christ could intervene every time on our behalf from whatever or whoever is afflicting us, since nothing is too difficult for Him. But, He does not always do it when, and how, we think He should. In fact if your experience is anything like mine it seems like no matter how I figure out God is going to work things out He always picks a better or different way, one that is better in the long term. I do not have a good track record of out-guessing God. I think thankfully so, in one way.

Sometimes, we have a hard time dealing with God's delays in intervening. It is against our human nature to wait, and waiting for God takes patience. It requires faith that God is in total

control of the situation. He may allow seemingly negative things to happen, but His delay is always for our ultimate good. God knows what He is doing, the best time to solve the problem, and to answer our prayer.

This is the kind of patient faith we must develop if we want to be part of His Kingdom. As rulers with Christ in the Kingdom of God we will have enormous responsibility governing the universe.

There will not be confusion or rebellion in the Kingdom of God. God is not going to allow a situation to arise, where an individual ruling in some far-off corner of the universe, billions of light-years from God's throne, decides he cannot wait any longer for God's way, or the way that God does things and chooses his own way. We cannot choose another way other than God's to live our lives and to be of benefit to others. Regarding the human mind God says:

Isaiah 55:8-9 For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.

God's ways are true and just, and we must conform to Him in obedience and faith. The same holds true in our prayers.

Revelation 15:3 They [those who have victory over the Beast] sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying: "Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints!

To rule with Christ, we will have to develop, through the experiences of life, unshakable faith and trust that God's laws are always right, that He always knows best. That is the hardest thing for any human being to come to is that word 'always.'

It all comes down to whether or not we believe that God knows best. Initially, the patriarch Job had been greatly blessed by God. When God removed those blessings and allowed tragedy to hit him, it was for Job's ultimate good, and even for our ultimate good, as we read the example of Job.

From the written account, it is easy to see that Job did not immediately understand it all. It took a long time for Job to completely profit, spiritually, from the trials that came upon him. In the meantime, even as his mind groped for a reason for the trials, he spoke words that we should take the time to meditate on.

Job 13:15 Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him. Even so, I will defend my own ways before Him.

Job said, "Even if God were to let me die, I would still trust Him." Job's statement here means that he was determined to maintain his integrity and defend his character, even though his

sufferings might so increase that he lose his life. This gives an indication of Job's resolve to maintain his righteousness, even despite his sufferings.

He had set his purpose to confide in God. This was spoken in one of Job's better moments, and was his deliberate and established intention. He had already built the habit to believe this way. This deliberate purpose expresses what was really his prevailing character, though occasionally, when he became impatient, he voiced different emotions and feelings, as all of God's people do at times. The same holds true for all of us. Under duress we are much more likely to express frustration than when things in our lives seem much more under control.

The Hebrew word from which "trust" is translated here in Job 13:15 is *yaachal*. It means to wait, stay, or delay. It usually expresses the idea of waiting on someone with the expectation that he will help. Consequently, it means to hope.

The sense, here in this verse, is that Job's hope was in God. It implies that even at death by God's hand, he would still trust and hope in Him. He had resolved in his mind to wait patiently for God's intervention. We have to arrive at this point of complete submission, obedience, and faith if we want to survive and benefit with sterling character from the many trials that we experience in life.

Faith in God, requires complete trust. Waiting for His intervention requires patience. The answer to prayer may come right away; or, it may take days, or weeks, or even years. So, we must ask ourselves if our character is such that it will stand the tests. It may require personal sacrifice, but we still must stand the test.

Have we so committed our allegiance to God that we would die for Him, even though He is the One who allows our suffering and death at times? If God makes us wait for something now, it is because it is for our own good later.

Lamentations 3:26 "It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord."

"Wait quietly" is literally in the original, "be in silence," that is, we must not complain at all.

Job survived his trials because he was patient. If we can learn to be patient, God can teach us everything else we need to learn. It is not that patience is the only thing that we need, but we must have patience for God to be able to work effectively with us. If we do not have patience, He will definitely develop it in us. James explains how to gain from trials.

James 1:2-4 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

The testing of our faith produces patience, and that is what God does.

There is a British sitcom shown on PBS about a retirement community called "Waiting for God".

I saw a few minutes of it years ago, and probably will never watch it again, because it has a lot of immorality that was used for humor. From what I gathered, the sitcom was named for the attitude of the elderly people in this retirement community, who were going through their later years without spiritual purpose or goals. They were just hopelessly "waiting for God" to take their lives. It had quite a sad scenario, but, as I said, it was a very immoral show.

This is not the kind of "waiting for God" we are taking about.

Isaiah 64:4 For since the beginning of the world men have not heard nor perceived by the ear, nor has the eye seen any God besides You, who acts for the one who waits for Him.

The true God is totally different from all other gods, obviously. He does respond to our needs. But, He does it at the best time possible. Some Christians lose faith, because they fail to understand exactly what God has promised for this life.

God promises those who trust Him that He will deliver them out of every affliction.

Psalms 34:19 "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all."

But God does not promise when He will do so. Sometimes, He does it right away. Sometimes He does not. Whether God intervenes immediately, or makes us wait, He has specifically promised that we will not be tested with more than we can take and that all things eventually work out for good. We have that as His promise.

I Corinthians 10:13 No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

Exactly how and when is up to God to decide. After all, the principal goal of our faith is not that we be totally free of every physical material problem and difficulty in this life. The main goal is salvation and eternal life, and for us to have the proper character to receive that.

God says that we should make all our requests known to Him. Although He does not promise that He will intervene in them all immediately, He does promise us peace of mind. He promises us help from His Holy Spirit. He promises us joy, peace, and hope. He promises us "strength with all might according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy" as Paul writes in Colossians 1:11.

This does not mean that when we pray we should not expect God to answer immediately. We should never assume we have to wait for a long time, but we should understand that it may be God's will that we do.

We should commit the matter to God in faith that He will intervene, and we must do our part.

We should be sure we are obeying God's law and doing all that we can in gathering research and advice on what we may need to do to remedy the problem. That is in no way saying that we should lessen the value of prayer. Prayer is ultimately very important.

We can ask Him to answer soon, and we should expect Him to answer soon, as He often does. But, in case He does not answer right away for some reason, we should not get depressed. We must continue asking, believing, and patiently waiting until He does answer.

Psalms 27:14 Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; Wait, I say, on the Lord!

The writers of the Old and New Testament have emphasized waiting quite often—waiting on God to intervene on our behalf.

The Parable of the Persistent Widow in Luke 18: 1-8 teaches the necessity of patient, persistent, and persevering prayer, and is much like the Parable of the Persistent Friend in Luke 11: 5-13. Both parables are preceded by the mention of prayer.

Although delivered under different situations, they both show the absolute and immeasurable contrast between God and human beings, and the evidence that God yields to the saint's pleading and urging. Both parables show a person granting a request because of their selfish motives. (The next Bible study in the Forerunner will be the Parable of the Persistent Widow.) I want to go over aspects of this parable, and although there will be some similarities, it will be somewhat different to what the Bible study itself covers.

In the Parable of the Persistent Friend, the persevering prayer was for necessities, but in the Parable of the Persistent Widow, the persevering prayer is for protection. Both parables conclude that God will not fail us as friends and acquaintances often do.

The Parable of the Persistent Widow is especially linked with the last days, the final great crisis, and painful circumstances that the faithful remnant must face. A major resource, for those who remain true to God at this time of great apostasy, is prayer.

Vengeance is God's alone, and He will punish all who persecute His elect. He will judge our oppressors, but as we wait for deliverance, persevering prayer is our supply of patience.

This parable is preceded by an exhortation from Christ, showing our duty of praying, our dedication to praying, and our resistance against the discontinuation of praying. It ends by indicating that prayer is a matter of faith.

Luke 18:1-8 Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, saying: "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. "Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary.' "And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man, 'yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.'" Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. "And

shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? "I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"

What causes people to neglect praying or stop praying altogether?

Luke 18:1 "Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart,"

To "not lose heart" or "faint" means to grow weary, to give in to evil, and even to turn coward. The common human tendency of growing weary in prayer is an easy trap to fall into, but still must be resisted. We know that it is our Christian duty, as the elect of God, to pray and to pray fervently.

There are several major causes of losing heart in praying: defilement, doubt, danger, distractions, and delay. What do I mean by those?

The defilement that sin causes kills interest in spiritual exercises such as prayer. Sin does not promote effective and sincere prayer. In fact, it will stop it dead.

Psalms 66:18 - "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear."

Praying with doubt is faithless, making the prayer useless. Doubting the inspiration of Scripture, and the power of God, hinders prayer, according to Paul in I Timothy 2: 8. Just as prayer and faith go hand in hand, so do unbelief and lack of prayer.

At times, prayer must be done at dangerous times. This danger weeds out the cowards from the courageous. Daniel faced real danger in praying, but kept on praying, even