

How to Make Sure Your Prayers Are Answered

BY DAVID POSEY

Wouldn't it be great if you knew, *absolutely*, that God would answer your prayers? "But," you say, "that's impossible! How could we possibly know, ahead of time, that God will answer our prayers?"

Glad you asked. But before we get to the answer, let's look at the terms. A prayer, as we typically use the word, is simply communicating with God. Prayers generally include salutation, praise and thanksgiving, none of which are "answered." An answer requires a question or, in the case of prayer, a request.

God has guaranteed a "yes" answer to at least two requests: forgiveness of sins, when acknowledged (I John 1:9) and wisdom (James 1:5). This assumes the person making the request is faithful, of course. If you ask for forgiveness and wisdom, you can be sure God's answer will be "yes."

But what about the many prayers we offer to God during those circumstances for which there is no guarantee of a "good" outcome, at least from our perspective? The most obvious example are prayers offered during a personal health crisis, either our own or faced by someone we love. Is it possible to know for sure that God will answer those prayers?

Let's look at that term "answer" for just a moment. The word itself simply means that a response was received. When the phone rings, you "answer" it. But when the term is applied to prayer, it takes on a different meaning. When someone says, "God answered my prayer," they always mean, "I got what I asked for." At least, that's the way I've heard brethren use the term in my many years in churches.

The statement itself is problematic. How do you *know* God answered your prayer? Perhaps he just allowed nature to take its course and the outcome happened to work out in your favor. What if someone asked God for a mansion and got it? Did God necessarily "answer" that prayer? Ascribing actions to God without a revelation from God is presumptuous, isn't it? "Faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17) — no revelation, no faith.

So, what *is* revealed, when it comes to this idea of "answered prayer"? This is what we know: we know that God hears us, if we pray "according to His will." John says, I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him. *I John 5:13-15*

What does John say? “If we ask anything according to His will he *hears* us...” God hears the petitions of every Christian, *if* he or she prays according to God’s will. What is “according to his will”? I don’t see any evidence that he is talking about assuming a certain posture (e.g., “bow your head”) or that there is some format we have to use (e.g., make sure to say “injesusnameamen” at the end of the prayer).

The obvious meaning is akin to telling my son that he can drive the family car if he does it “according to my will.” What am I saying to him? I would be telling him to drive in a way that would please me and honor my authority over the use of the car. In other words, my son would be subsuming his will under my will when he drives the car.

We do the same when we pray “according to His will.” At the moment we make a request in our prayer to God, we are also telling God, “your will be done,” whether we actually use those words or not. Our model is Jesus in the garden:

And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” *Matthew 26:39*

So, with the exception of forgiveness and wisdom, when we make a request of God, we are placing ourselves under the authority and will of God and not assuming or presuming that He will answer it a certain way, or at all. It should be enough that God has promised to hear our prayers and that God’s will is done.

That doesn’t mean that everything that happens in life is “God’s will.” If you pray for your sick child and your child dies, was it “God’s will” that the child died? I don’t believe it. While God works in our life in ways we can’t explain, it seems clear that he also permits life to go on without his intervention. That is to say, that despite our fervent pleas, our loved ones die, because that’s what happens in this “broken” world.

So let’s come back to the title of this article; how can I pray in such a way that I will always get an answer? Again, if you pray “according to His will” you can be assured that God has heard you and that your prayer will be dealt with as God wills (and God may or may not will to intervene and fix your problem). So, every prayer has an answer: “Yes,” “No,” “Wait” or “*que sera, sera*” (“what will be will be”).

But is there a way to make sure your prayers always get a “yes” answer in those situations where the road ahead is not clear? I believe there is, at least most of the time (and I’m using the term “answer” the way most use it).

Recently I had a medical test and the results of the first test led the doctor to highly recommend a second, more serious, test to “rule out” a life-threatening medical issue.

On my way to get the second test, I prayed (1) that I survive the test without complications (they read off the risks of the test and, of course, the possibility of death is a risk, albeit a tiny one); (2) that the test would be negative (the best possible outcome of the test); (3) that if the test was positive, that they caught it early enough to easily cure the problem; (4) that if it was more advanced that I would have the fortitude to deal with the outcome; (5) that if the test revealed disease that was as serious as it could be,

that I would have strength to face that reality and (6) if death was imminent, that I would be ready for it.

The result was #1 and #2. I have no idea whether God intervened or played any role whatsoever in this small event in my life. But, I thanked him that things worked out as they did and that I can continue to work and teach and enjoy life.

The point I'm making is simple. In talking to God, I covered all the bases — at least the six bases I could think of. No matter what might have happened, my prayer would have been "answered." If I stopped my prayer at numbers 1, 2 or 3, but then number 4 was the result, I might have concluded that my prayer was not answered or that the answer was "no." Yet, John tells us that we can be confident that God hears our prayers and that we have the requests we make of Him.

Having said all this, I've made a personal decision to avoid using the term "answered" when referring to the results of prayer because I believe that assumes something that I do not know. I prefer to thank God for the result and leave it at that. For one thing, if God does intervene, then, regardless of the result, we know that it is his will that has been done. But I've never heard someone say, after the death of a loved one that they prayed fervently for, that "God answered my prayer." So, perhaps it's best we dispense with that verbiage and just be thankful that our Father hears us.

Meanwhile, if you're praying for results, and the situation is dire and the outcome in doubt, talk to God about all the possibilities and ask him to help you. Then, you can be assured that you got an "answer," no matter what happens.

Then, be sure to thank God for anything that happens in your life that brings you closer to him.