
Learning how to

talk to God

from the great prayers of the Bible

How Much Faith Does It Take for God to Answer Our Prayers?

Matthew 21:21-22

Lake Arrowhead Church, Waleska, Georgia
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FOR GOD TO ANSWER OUR PRAYERS?
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Does prayer really make a difference? A few years ago, a survey revealed that 87% of Americans believe God answers their prayers.¹ So most people believe prayer makes a difference. Yet prayer is a mysterious thing and raises a lot of questions.

- If God already knows what we need, then why do we need to pray?
- Why do we have to persuade or beg God to give us what we need?
- Can prayer do anything about real-life problems, painful problems? Can prayer bring healing, find someone a job, or fix a marriage?
- Is it selfish to ask God to protect your family? And what are we to think after we pray for protection and He still allows something bad to happen?
- Why is God often silent? What does unanswered prayer say about His promises to us?
- Does prayer really make a difference, or does life boil down to coincidence, luck, or fate?

This summer, we're in series on prayer, *learning how to talk to God from the great prayers of the Bible*. The majestic creator of the universe has invited us to talk to Him. Prayer is the wonderful gift of experiencing a relationship with God and having a conversation with Him. This invitation to pray proves how much God loves us and cares about us. It's permission to cry out to Him for help anytime about anything. And it really makes a difference, because He promises to listen, and He promises to respond.

This morning is about faith. *How much faith does it take for God to answer our prayers?*

Jesus made an incredible promise. In Matthew 21, He said, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt ... you can say to a mountain, 'Be thrown into the sea,' and it will happen. You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it" (Matthew 21:21-22, NLT).² That's an incredible promise!

And we believe Jesus, yet sometimes we wonder. Does prayer really make a difference? Can prayer move the mountain-sized problems in our lives? The answer is yes, because Jesus said so. "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt ... you can say to a mountain, 'Be thrown into the sea,' and it will happen. You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it" (Matthew 21:21-22, NLT).

"I TELL YOU THE TRUTH"

This promise raises a lot of questions. If I could, I would ask Jesus, *Is such an incredible promise really true?*

What did Jesus say in the first phrase of verse 21? ***"I tell you the truth."*** What Jesus says about prayer is true. He means what He promises. He's inviting us into a relationship with Him. He's giving us permission to ask. He said, "You can pray for anything." And He promises to answer. If the Bible contained only one promise regarding prayer, we might be tempted to think He didn't really mean it. But there are too many promises to ignore.

The Bible is filled with promises. Like Psalm 50:15, "Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver you" (ESV). Multiple times, Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7, ESV). "If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it" (John 14:14, ESV). "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you" (John 15:7, ESV).

And what are these promises worth? They are worth the character of the one who made them. And who made them? The Son of God. His character backs up His promises. He will and He must be faithful to His promises. The Bible asks, "Has (the Lord) He ever spoken and failed to act? Has He ever promised and not carried it through?" (Numbers 23:19, NLT). The Bible answers, "He who promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10:23, NAS).

When Jesus talked about throwing a mountain into the sea, He exaggerated to make a point. The point is that faith-filled prayer has no limitations. Prayer is crammed with possibilities. Jesus was saying, "Just tell Me what you need, and I'll take care of it."

Prayer is not a tug-of-war, where we pry blessings from God's hands. Prayer is not a negotiation, where we persuade God to give us what we want. Prayer is not nagging, where we wear Him down so He will give us what we need. God is our Father, we are His children, and He loves us. The Lord once said to Israel, "Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance" (Psalm 2:8, NAS). What was God saying? "Ask Me for the world, and I will give it to you."

Jesus once traveled the road to Jericho and a blind man yelled out at Him.³ Jesus asked him, "What do you want Me to do for you?" Without hesitation, the blind man said, "I want to see Lord!" And what did Jesus do? He didn't tell him to go to church. He didn't try to comfort him with religious platitudes. Jesus gave the man what he asked for – "Receive your sight; your faith has healed you" (Luke 18:42, NIV). Again, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth ... You can pray for anything, and if have faith, you will receive it."

One of the most prolific authors on prayer was E. M. Bounds, a pastor and chaplain during the Civil War. His writings are still published today. This what he wrote about God's promise.⁴

"The promise makes prayer irresistible.⁵ ... Each believer can claim the promise as his own.⁶ ... Either this is so or it's not. If not, then there is nothing in prayer. Then prayer is nothing but words, a verbal performance, an empty, useless exercise. But if it is true, then how vast are the possibilities.⁷ ... There is no proof so clear that God exists than prayer and its answer.⁸ ... The promises pledge (obligate) Almighty God to answer prayer.⁹ ... (When we pray) His word is at stake."

“Lord, is such an incredible promise really true?” Jesus said, “***I tell you the truth*** (I promise with all My heart), if you have faith and do not doubt ... it will happen. You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it” (Matthew 21:21-22, NLT).

“IF YOU HAVE FAITH”

Notice Jesus said, “***If you have faith*** and do not doubt ... you can say to a mountain, ‘Be thrown into the sea,’ and it will happen ... ***If you have faith***, you will receive it” (Matthew 21:21-22, NLT). So how much faith? ***How much faith does it take for God to answer our prayers?***

A Gentile woman, not a Jew, heard about Jesus. She was desperate for a miracle for her daughter and kept shouting at Him, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David!” This was a Gentile calling Him the “Son of David,” acknowledging Him as the Messiah. And Jesus said to her, “‘O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you desire.’ And her daughter was healed at once” (Matthew 15:28, NAS).

It sounds like the issue is quantity of faith. You only get a miracle if you have great faith. Jesus seems to confirm this when He commended the Gentile woman for having “great faith” and later scolded the disciples for having “little faith.” It sounds like the more faith you have, the more God does. So, is faith like money? The more money you have, the more you can buy. So, if you have \$1 worth of faith, you get a \$1 answer. If you have \$10 worth of faith, you get a \$10 answer. So if you have \$100 problem, you better have \$100 worth of faith. Is that how it works?

This is how Jesus answered that question. “If you had faith as small as a mustard seed, you could say to a mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it would move. Nothing will be impossible” (Matthew 17:20, NLT).¹⁰ The mustard seed is one of the smallest seeds, yet grows into a large tree. Meaning God can do great things even with a small amount of faith. I think mustard seed faith is simply praying, “Jesus, help!” If that’s all you can say, I believe He will hear you. When you say “Jesus,” you’re acknowledging His Lordship. And when you say, “Jesus, help,” you’re believing He can. That’s faith in its simplest form. It only takes a mustard seed of faith for God to move the mountain-sized problems in our lives.

“AND DO NOT DOUBT”

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, if you have faith ***and do not doubt*** ... it will happen.” ***But sometimes we doubt, so what can we do about it?***

Some people struggle with doubt more than others. Of course, spiritual maturity has a lot to do with it. So does personality and life experience. To be honest, doubt can be a very real part of our walk with God. But the Bible warns us, “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6, NIV). When it comes to prayer, James said, we “must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord” (James 1:5-7, NIV).

One reason we doubt is because we have questions, deep questions. We have scientific questions about creation and the origin of the universe. We have philosophical questions like, how

could a loving God allow so much suffering in the world? And we have theological questions. What about hell? Surely, a loving God would not send anyone to a place like hell.

Another reason we doubt is because of popular culture. There has been a major worldview shift in our country. The Judeo-Christian foundation upon which our country was founded and operated for over 200 years has cracked. And when you're in the minority, you wonder if what you believe is true.

We doubt when God does not act like we expect Him to act. When He does not meet our expectations or answer our prayers, we struggle with disappointment and doubt. We wonder if we can count on God.

And the reason we doubt God most often is when bad things happen. It's hard to have faith when life hurts. I've listened to so many people struggle with their faith when bad things happened.

- The faithful employee who asked me, "Where was God when I got laid off? All I want is a job to provide for my family. I thought He promised to take care of us."
- The abandoned wife who asked me through her tears, "Why did my husband leave me for another woman? Why did God let this happen?"
- The confused little boy who asked said to me, "Why did my daddy leave us?"
- The desperate couple who innocently asked, "Why can't we have children like everyone else?"
- The parent grieving the loss of a child, "The only thing I've ever prayed was for God to keep my children safe. Why did He let this happen?"
- The woman who remembered her father's abuse asked me, "I was just a little girl. Why didn't God protect me?"

It's hard to have faith when life hurts.

Mark 9 is the story of one man's struggle with faith and doubt, and his story breaks your heart.

¹⁷One of the men in the crowd spoke up and said, "Teacher, I brought my son so you could heal him. He is possessed by an evil spirit that won't let him talk. ¹⁸And whenever this spirit seizes him, it throws him violently to the ground. Then he foams at the mouth and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast out the evil spirit, but they couldn't do it."

²⁰So they brought the boy to Jesus. But when the evil spirit saw Jesus, it threw the child into a violent convulsion, and he fell to the ground, writhing and foaming at the mouth. ²¹"How long has this been happening?" Jesus asked the boy's father.

He replied, "Since he was a little boy. ²²The spirit often throws him into the fire or into water, trying to kill him. Have mercy on us and help us, if you can." ²³"What

do you mean, 'If I can'?" Jesus asked. "Anything is possible if a person believes."

²⁴The father instantly cried out, "***I do believe, help my unbelief!***"

²⁵When Jesus saw the crowd growing, he rebuked the evil spirit. "Listen, you spirit that makes this boy unable to hear and speak," he said. "I command you to come out of this child and never enter him again!" ²⁶Then the spirit screamed and threw the boy into another violent convulsion and left him. The boy appeared to be dead. A murmur ran through the crowd as people said, "He's dead."

²⁷But Jesus took him by the hand and helped him to his feet, and he stood up.

²⁸Afterward, when Jesus was alone in the house with his disciples, they asked him, "Why couldn't we cast out that evil spirit?" ²⁹Jesus replied, "This kind can be cast out only by prayer." (Mark 9:17-29, NLT).

This actually happened. A real father, a real son, a real demon, and a real miracle. I love this story, because in spite of the father's doubts, Jesus still healed his son. And if Jesus responded to this father who struggled with faith and doubt, then there's hope He will respond to us.

So what do we do? As Paul said, "We walk by faith and not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7, NAS). We keep walking with God. We keep talking to God. We keep trusting God. By faith. Believing God is good, believing He loves us, and believing He will always do what is best for us.

"IT WILL HAPPEN"

Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt ... ***it will happen***. You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it."

All of us are praying about something, probably some mountain-sized problem that is huge and overwhelming. You may be praying for the healing of a loved, but healing has yet to come. You may be praying for the healing of a relationship, but healing has yet to come. Many of us may be praying for mountain-sized problems, but help has yet to come.

All of us know what it's like to kneel by the bed and pray. And I'm not talking about "now I lay me down to sleep." I'm talking about agonizing prayer. If we're honest, every one of us knows what it's like to pray ourselves to sleep only to wake up the next morning and that mountain-sized problem is still there. So, what do we do?

We pray. Placing our problems and our needs in His holy hands. In fact, our entire lives are in His holy hands. David realized that when he prayed. "I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the Lord" (2 Samuel 24:14, NIV). What else can we do? When we're desperate, feeling distress and despair, what more can we do than fall into the hands of the Lord?! What a safe place to be.

God is good. He loves us. He knows what's best. So we keep on praying and we keep on trusting. Oswald Chambers is profoundly correct when he writes, "God answers prayer in the best way, not sometimes, but every time."¹¹

CONCLUSION

One thing that grows faith is to listen to the faith of others. Besides Jesus, David is my favorite character in the Bible. His prayers help my prayers. His faith helps my faith. May these prayers of David help your faith and help you as you pray.

- “In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation” (Psalm 5:3, NIV).
- “I am praying to you because I know you will answer” (Psalm 17:6, NLT).
- “Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice” (Psalm 55:17, NIV).
- “On the day I called, You answered me” (Psalm 138:3, NAS).
- “I love the Lord because he hears my voice and my prayer for mercy. Because he bends down to listen, I will pray as long as I have breath! (Psalm 116:1-2, NLT).

May the incredible promise of Jesus fill you with faith as you pray. “I tell you the truth (I promise with all my heart), if you have faith and do not doubt ... you can say to a mountain, ‘Be thrown into the sea,’ and it will happen. You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it” (Matthew 21:21-22, NLT).

NOTES

¹ Kenneth L. Woodward, “Is God Listening?” *Newsweek*, March 31, 1997, page 57. The cover was entitled “The Mystery of Prayer.”

² The context of Matthew 21:21-22 is Jesus cursing the fig tree. But what does a fig tree have to do with prayer, and what does a fig tree have to do with us? The fig tree was a symbol of blessing for the nation of Israel. A fruitless fig tree was a symbol of Israel’s spiritual barrenness. That was the problem Jesus confronted the week He entered Jerusalem. Jesus entered the city to shouts of “Hosanna!” But on Monday morning, He ran people out of the temple. With red face, eyes glaring, veins popping, and whip cracking, Jesus ran people out of the temple because His Father’s house was being desecrated. People were being quite religious, but they were going through the motions, thinking God was somehow pleased by their religiosity. And Jesus groaned, “This is not what My Father’s house was meant to be!” The next morning as Jesus and His disciples walked along the road, Jesus approached a fig tree for something to eat. But there was no fruit on the tree. So Jesus cursed the tree, and it withered. More than likely, He was angered because the leafy, yet fruitless fig tree reminded Him of what He had seen the day before – the fruitless religiosity in the temple. Again, what does this have to do with prayer and what does this have to do with us? Jesus longs for us to be fruitful. Abundance is supposed to be the norm. Within this context of confronting fruitless religion, it’s as if Jesus turned to His disciples to remind them, “What you see in the temple is not what I had in mind.” So, what does Jesus have in mind? What kind of faith experience should be the norm? One that experiences the reality of the promise in Matthew 21:21-22. “I tell you the truth, if you have faith and don’t doubt, you can do things like this and much more. You can even say to this mountain, ‘May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ and it will happen. You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it.”

³ See Luke 18:35-42.

⁴ E. M. Bounds, *The Possibilities of Prayer* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980 edition). Some quotes have been modified with updated language to be more readable.

⁵ *Ibid.*, page 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, page 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pages 40-41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, page 86.

⁹ *Ibid.*, page 96.

¹⁰ See the incredible promise in James 5:15. “The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up” (James 5:15, NIV).

¹¹ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1935), page 147.