

God And Unanswered Prayers

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Does God Hate Amputees?

An interesting and provocative question was asked of me by somebody recently. Speaking of prayer in our modern age, this individual asked, “Why do you believe that God exists and answers your prayers when He obviously does not answer the prayers of somebody who has lost a limb in a car accident?” The argument is that all of the things we claim are answered prayers are actually coincidences that cannot be scientifically correlated to God’s intervention. In fact, it has been noted that prayer has almost no statistical effect on the outcome of any health- or money-related quandaries. “One of the most scientifically rigorous studies yet... found that the prayers of a distant congregation did not reduce the major complications or death rate in patients hospitalized for heart treatments... A review of 17 past studies of ‘distant healing,’ published in 2003 by a British researcher, found no significant effect for prayer or other healing methods” (“A Prayer For Health”, www.boston.com/news/globe). So the question remains: If we claim that God heals cancer, helps us find a job, and keeps our kids safe, then why does He totally and completely ignore the request of amputees to have their legs regenerated? Similarly, why do approximately 27,000 children die every day from essentially preventable diseases? The person asking these questions notes the following verses:

- *“If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer”* ([Matthew 21:21](#)).
- *“If you ask anything in my name, I will do it”* ([John 14:14](#)).
- *“Ask, and it will be given you”* ([Matthew 7:7](#)).
- *“Nothing will be impossible to you”* ([Matthew 17:20](#)).
- *“Believe that you have received it, and it will be yours”* ([Mark 11:24](#)).

One of the first things we have to establish in any discussion with a person asking these questions is the context of the verses he or she is using. When Jesus spoke such things to His disciples, He did not literally mean that everything they asked for would come true like a genie in a bottle. For example, the sons of Zebedee ask to bring fire down on Jesus’ detractors and this was not allowed ([Luke 9:54](#)). So because Jesus does not give people the ability to bring down heavenly flames – no matter how intently they may pray for it – does this somehow mean He does not exist? Jesus makes it clear that the disciples would suffer for the name of Christ ([Matthew 10](#)) with no promise of relief. The disciples did not have the power to cast out certain demons, no matter how hard they tried. Even some Jesus’ own prayers did not turn out as He desired. He prayed in the garden that the cup of the cross would pass, and it did not. He prayed for unity in [John 17:20-21](#), and this is not the case today. So obviously, Jesus cannot literally mean these statements, because in His own lifetime there were instances where the answer to certain requests was clearly “no”. So what does He mean, then? How can a loving God promise answered prayers and then not answer the simple prayer of an amputee?

Miracles Or Just Providence?

One of the most glaring problems with using some of the above verses to argue that Jesus promises fulfillment to all prayers is that those verses are not speaking to us directly. These were promises made in age of miracles, when signs and wonders were designed to accompany revelation and prove the scriptures.

- *“After [the Gospel] was first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will” (Hebrews 2:3-4).*
- *“And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by signs that followed” (Mark 16:20).*
- *“Therefore they spent a long time there speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands” (Acts 14:3).*
- *“The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles” (2 Corinthians 12:12).*

When the revelatory age ended, the divinely prescribed time for miracles also ended. So does God perform miracles today? Well, the answer is kind of “yes” and “no.” It is true that God can do anything. He is all-powerful, after all! The reason why we take confidence in Him is because of this incredible power. But does that mean miracles still occur today in the same way that they did during the First Century, when apostles were imbued with unnatural power by the Holy Spirit? The answer is in the negative, since all of the scriptures above clearly show that those miraculous powers were meant to accompany the preaching and revelation in the apostles’ ministry. As those apostles died off, that power disappeared with them. So if I’m praying to God that someone would come along and touch me on the forehead and miraculously heal me of my diseases, then I will be sadly disappointed (or maybe duped by a con artist).

God does indeed work wonders today, but through providence – the careful influence and direction of earthly things by the hand of God. He works through new medical discoveries, the able hands of first responders, the unforeseen windfall that helps get a medical bill paid for, the charity and kindness of our brethren, the powerful and well-designed functions of our bodies (our immune system, for example). There are countless divinely-appointed, if quite subtle, movements that result in incredible answers to prayers today. But would we necessarily call these “miracles”? Not in the strict sense of the term.

“Lord, if you had been here...”

Consider, as a prime example, the story of the death of Lazarus in John 11:1-46. In summation, a man beloved by Jesus passes away from an illness. In His absence, Jesus seems surprisingly cavalier about the situation before returning to Bethany and finding Lazarus’ two sisters in mourning. Because of His compassion, He brings Lazarus back to life miraculously. Consider some points from the story:

- “When Jesus heard that he sick, He delayed two days longer in the place where He was” (11:6). Notice the delay on Jesus’ part, and how we sometimes take God’s silence on a subject to be His indifference (or nonexistence). Just because He does not answer a prayer on our schedule does not mean He stops existing or stops loving.
- “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:32). This question could very easily be converted to: “Lord, if you exist, then you would have given me new legs after my accident.” The very fact that we are not God should stop us instantly from judging Him when He does something in His own way in His own time (Isaiah 55:8-9). We are so quick to decide God does not exist in the face of His supposed absence.
- John 11:45-46 give us a good insight as well. The question is often asked of Christians, “If God really does exist, then He should show Himself and do some great miracle. We would all believe then.” Really?

Why do people suffer?

Why do good people suffer? The answer is more simple than we sometimes think, friends. God created mankind with free will (Deuteronomy 30:15), and the selfish exercise of that free will always results in harming somebody else. Selfishness is the root of every sin, and it does nothing but destroy what God tries to put together. The question of suffering always goes back to sin. We suffer because of our own sins (Romans 1:24, 28-31, 1 Peter 4:15). We suffer because of other people who sin (Romans 5:12, “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, so death spread to all men, because all sinned”). But there is no complaining for any of us because we have all sinned and brought about punishments, pain, suffering, and humiliation (Romans 3:23).

People who balk about God and suffering often forget about the suffering and pain they have brought into the world. We get so caught up in all of the injustices happening to us, and blame God for the pain, but fail to realize that people are the source of injustice. We have hurt others – obviously not God’s doing – just as much as others have hurt us. Instead of complaining to God, we ought to look at the root of our suffering:

- The kind of people with whom we associate may be causing us pain;
- Our addictions will cause physical and emotional suffering;
- Unresolved problems in the family will lead to heartache;
- Our own selfish desires;
- Our inability to manage money properly, or hold a steady job;
- The lack of respect we showed to parents or elders growing up;
- Our poor use of time;
- We neglect our Bible study;
- We forget to pray about everything that causes anxiety (Philippians 4:7).

The question should not be “why” do good people suffer, but rather “how” will good people respond to suffering. The simple fact is that we will always suffer, for the rest of our time in this

world. Sometimes things are just coincidence (wrong place, wrong time [Ecclesiastes 9:11-12]). Not to mention the fact that God is impartial and will not keep some from experiencing pain (1 Corinthians 10:13, Ecclesiastes 7:13-14). Those who deny the existence of God because of the existence of suffering forget that atheism does not solve the problem. If God is not real, then how does that affect wars, starvation, injustice, crooked politicians, or hurricanes? But if God is real, then the suffering only serves as a way to grow stronger (1 Peter 4:12). Suffering hones us and allows us to find maturity through tribulation – and that leads to deep contentment in the face of suffering.

The Matter Of Free Will

Furthermore, we have to wonder why it is that some people are praying for whatever unnatural request is on their mind. Free will has to be factored in somewhere, does it not? When pondering the question “Why do good people suffer if God is so loving?” most people place the blame on God, arguing that His love should prevent good people from experiencing pain in this world. But here are some observations:

- First, it is not God’s fault that good people suffer. Never think for a moment that God wants Christian families to lose children in birth, or see their homes burning down, or to lose jobs. Good people suffer because of sinners. People are murdered because of murderers, families are torn apart by adulterers, and diseases happen because of sin entering the world (Romans 5:12).
- Second, why would a truly loving God intervene at every catastrophe? It is very clearly stated that He brings the rain and sunshine on both the evil and the righteous (Matthew 5:45). It would be unfair for God to bless only good people, since our definition of “good” is based only on human standards. We are all evil in the sight of the Lord, for all have sinned and fall short of His glory (Romans 3:23). So how do we determine who sees catastrophe in this world and who does not?
- Third, the fact that good people suffer, only makes them long for heaven more (Romans 8:18, Philippians 3:7-8). It makes them appreciate the blessings of God when they do fall, and leads them to keep their souls fixated on the goal of eternal life, not worldly comfort (Philippians 3:13-14). Without any suffering in this world, we would have no motivation to leave or put effort into our heavenly pursuit.

By focusing too heavily on how free will hurts ourselves, we lose sight of how much it has hurt God. Consider the cost that He paid for all the sins that we choose to commit! Because of free will, God has had to put up with unrighteousness almost since day one. He is ignored by people, blasphemed, ridiculed, and scorned. “*They did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer*” (Romans 1:28). “*All the day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and obstinate people*” (Romans 10:21). Even though He came in the flesh to bear the guilt of the sins of His own creation, Jesus Christ was not received by His own (John 1:11).