

Is the Promise Good?

How Prayer Works:

Matthew 7:7-11

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Some vehicles catapulted into the river, some turned over, and some plummeted sixty feet with roadway still below them when the bridge span collapsed into the Mississippi last Wednesday evening. Some badly injured people were pulled out of vehicles that were hardly scratched. Others, hardly scratched, emerged from battered vehicles. Some injured and uninjured came from the same vehicle. Some who avoided the scene were inexplicably delayed or left early on an impulse. Others, who changed their routine, arrived on the bridge exactly when it collapsed. Is this chance? Is all of this luck? Are people lucky? Are they blessed? Are they chosen for what they confront?

When I stand up to speak about prayer, I do so because I believe that God wants me to help you individually and us corporately confront the challenges we face, alter the course of human experience, and move toward the fulfillment of many of our dreams. Your personal concerns and dreams matter to God; and our corporate concerns and dreams matter to God. They matter because we matter to God.

As I speak, I think we're similar to Jesus' audience. Some of Jesus' listeners were devout. They prayed and received answers. They prayed and got visions. They got together with friends and shared how God answered some of their prayers. They believed that their individual prayers made a difference. They believed their group prayers made a difference.

They prayed individually and assembled with others to impact their family life, their community life and their national life. They looked for signs of God's hand and saw them. That is what led them to hang out with Jesus.

I take part in a national email prayer network. I get emails where people share requests, answers, impressions, words, visions and dreams they receive as they pray. They also assemble now and then to pray. For over a year, I've been receiving emails calling people to pray for I35. Whether they were concerned about terrorism, had a foreboding sense of tragedy, or just felt I35 is a strategic artery running from Mexico to Duluth, some Christian brothers and sisters have been praying for this roadway and even driving it in prayer. They've focused on this interstate highway as opposed to all others and see the collapse of this Minneapolis bridge as no random event. They look for signs of God's hand and see them.

Others in Jesus' audience, however, were disillusioned. So many times they prayed and came up empty. They'd pray for a situation and it'd get worse. They'd pray for a relative and he'd die. They'd pray to stave off crisis and it would come. They could see little, if anything, attributable to prayer. They could see the fruit of their hands, though often it was too meager. Did God really care about them and would he act on their behalf? They hoped so.

Some others may have wondered if prayer was harmful. Could the focus on prayer be an escape from responsibility? Could it be a lazy man's response to challenges that require hard work and personal investment? Is it a cheap way to offer comfort? James warned:

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? (James 2:15-16, NIV)

Could we substitute prayer for duty? Some in Jesus' hearing may have watched their neighbors pray for peace and then mistreat others. They may have feared prayer as a retreat from reality.

I don't know with which of Jesus' hearers you identify more. I don't know if you're plugged into a group that is energized over answers to prayer, if you feel discouraged and passed-over, or if you fear a harmful diversion. Jesus told his diverse audience:

Keep on asking, and you (all) will receive what you (all) ask for. Keep on seeking, and you (all) will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you (all). For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8, NLT)

I inserted the "all" because in English we can say, I for singular and we for plural, but there is no similar distinction between you singular and you plural. Jesus emphasized that all who keep asking, seeking and knocking will get an answer. He was not making a group promise for those who assemble. He was making an individual promise that is available to every person: "everyone who asks," "everyone who seeks," and "everyone who knocks".

Some might argue that Jesus spoke only to Jewish people who were part of the special covenant. That assumes that no one but Jews showed up, but we find many non-Jews in the gospel accounts. Jesus also taught many notorious sinners. Jesus' promise was not for an "in" group. It is for every man, woman and child on the planet regardless of status or beliefs.

Jesus' word-choice *keep on asking* intrigues me. The term *ask* suggests a relationship. *Ask* does not only suggest a relationship, it relies on it and in some cases, initiates one, such as asking for one's name. If we will keep asking over time as Jesus instructs, we will develop an informed relationship. I'm not speaking of a mindless formula where we repeat "I want it" dozens of times until someone gives into our request in disgust. When God grants us our requests, there are implications for others. Are there others, who with just reason, oppose our request or would be affected adversely? Keep asking. Is the timing right? Keep asking? Is there a need to test us? Keep asking? Did the time come and go for the answer? Keep asking.

How else will you know the reasons? Jesus calls us to keep asking so that we relate at a deep and honest level rather than work God over with some surefire formula.

As a father I have a child who drops requests if I say *no*. I have had many reasons for saying *no*, and many of them did not necessitate an eternal *no*. When the subject didn't come up again, I'd either forget about it or think it wasn't important. It was only later that I realized that this child does not receive many things that the others do when they continue to ask. Jesus tells you and me to keep asking... not because we can work over our Heavenly Father until he gives in, but we are to develop a heart-revealing, two-way relationship with God so that we become a part of the answers that God desires to give us. That is why Jesus said more.

Jesus calls us to *keep on seeking*. This call focuses on the request. If the request is important, we need to pursue it. We need to discuss all aspects of the request with God and become specific and informed about it. Jesus doesn't want you to think that God will hand you an easy, prosperous life on a platter. God wants you to develop as his child, pursuing things with him. Jesus also calls us to *keep on knocking* which helps us establish a dialogue about what we pursue. In knocking we pursue a relationship, not just the item. We are to knock until a dialogue begins. We are to know the mind of God so that we can pray and do his will on earth. We are not to be agnostics about the will of God. "Understand the will of God," says Ephesians 5:17.

We are children of a good Father who expects us to ask, seek and knock. He won't hurt you because of prayer. You won't extend someone's suffering by praying for their healing. You won't get bad things when you seek good from God. He's given us dominion over the earth, including bridges over the Mississippi. (Who put them up?) Ask, seek and knock. The promise is good for knowing the will of God, and in knowing it, better grasping the love of God for us. When we keep on asking, seeking and knocking, we begin to discover how prayer works!