

“Then He said to them, ‘Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, “Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him;” and from inside he answers and says, “Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.” I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs.’” (Luke 11:5-8 NASB)

If persistence can cause the neighbor to get up and give his friend some bread, then perhaps earnest and persistent prayer may receive an answer from our Father.

“...You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:2-3 NASB)

Prayer matters — God wants us to *ask* Him for our deepest needs. It is however sometimes difficult for us to distinguish between our needs and our wants. Only God knows what eventual good or eternal purpose might come from terrible circumstances. He is well aware of what we *really* need and we must trust that if God did provide what we are praying for, it could turn out for our (or someone else’s) worst instead of for the best.

“Then Gideon said to him, ‘O my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, “Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?” But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian.’” (Judges 6:13 NASB)

“At the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Mark 15:34 NASB)

Gideon and even Christ Himself felt that there was a time when God just wasn’t there. As we read the entire story however, we become aware of the fact that there was a purpose for God’s “absence.”

“This is the confidence which we have before 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 which we have asked from Him.” (1 John 5:14-15 NASB)

Sometimes, we can only see what *we* want — and that isn’t always the *same* as God’s plan and *His* will for us. It is at *those* times that we need to ask Him for sufficient strength and a strong faith to endure and/or accept *whatever* circumstances that we prayed for — yet were not changed.

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Dennis and Sherri Owens — Cincinnati, Ohio
diligence@gorfsystems.com — <http://diligence.gorfsystems.com/>



DILIGENCE

“We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure.” — Hebrews 6:11

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When God Says “No”

As Christians, we work very hard at strengthening our faith. A large part of that faith rests on the knowledge that we have an avenue to God, called prayer. This allows us the opportunity to communicate in a unique way with our Creator. We are told throughout the Scriptures that God loves us and is interested in our well-being. We accept that and believe it to be true since He gave “His only begotten Son” to die on the cross — which not only provides us with eternal life but also provides us with that avenue of prayer to communicate with Him. Because of our belief and trust in this, we develop tremendous faith in prayer and God’s willingness to hear our prayers.

There are numerous Scriptures that assure Christians that there is *power* in prayer (Matt. 7:7-8; Mark 11:23; etc.). We even read of some circumstances being changed as a *result* of prayer (Acts 12:1-7; James 5:17-18; etc.). Jonah 3:8-10 and Luke 18:1-8 indicate that God can be “swayed” by requests from His people. But what about the times when we pray — and pray — and pray — yet it seems that God is just not responding — at least not in the way *we* think He should? It is those times that we might feel hurt, confused, disillusioned and *maybe* even rebellious and angry.

In the novel, *Of Human Bondage* by W. Somerset Maugham, there is the story of a young boy named Philip. Philip was born with a club foot and is very self-conscious about being crippled. One day Philip reads Matthew 21:21-22 in a Bible and hears a sermon that God can do anything if we will only pray and ask Him for it. After asking a knowledgeable adult if that was indeed true, and getting an affirmative answer — he looks down at his twisted foot before going to bed one night and asks God to straighten it for him by the next morning. He then falls asleep *fully expecting* to see his foot completely normal when he awakens the next day. But — when he pulls back the covers the next morning he finds that his foot is still twisted and he is still crippled. Philip is hurt and disillusioned. The experience is the beginning of his loss of faith in God.

None of us have experienced a scenario just like Philip’s but many of us *have* either known someone or perhaps have *ourselves* experienced an extremely unfortunate event that shook our faith when our prayers just didn’t seem to get answered. Maybe it was a broken relationship, or a serious illness, or some other traumatic event in our *own* life or the life of someone dear to us. Whatever it was, we just couldn’t quite understand *why* God *wouldn’t* have answered our prayer. The problem *could* have been solved — whatever it was — if God would have *just* intervened. But He didn’t!

continued on page 2

That's the very same way Philip looked at *his* problem. Why *didn't* he wake up with his foot no longer twisted? He just couldn't quite understand *why* God *wouldn't* have answered his prayer. His problem *could* have been solved if God would have intervened. Well, *that's* different, we say. Is it? Was Philip's problem less important to him than *our* problem was to us? It wasn't to Philip, was it?

Let's consider a few thoughts that might help us deal with situations like Philip's as well as our own problems. First of all, our concept of prayer has to be based on a *mature* foundation — not a belief that prayer is some sort of “magic potion” that is summoned up whenever *we* decide what course of action would best solve our problem and then tell God to “just do it.” Isn't *that* why we said Philip's problem was *different* from ours? *Philip* was asking for a miracle — *not* an answered prayer. None of us would pray to God to *grow* another leg if one had been lost in a tragic accident. Why? Because we *understand* the fact that medical science has not yet discovered a higher law (if in fact there *is* one) that would allow for such a regeneration. God just designed us that way and — at least for now — we *accept* it.

Secondly, we understand that there are certain limitations on God's power. For example, it is impossible for God to lie (Heb. 6:18). Also — God will not violate His own laws — i.e., as we mentioned above, none of us would *expect* to grow a new leg. God also will not violate man's free will. (If you would like to read more about the limitations of God's power, see *Diligence* Volume 4, Issue 4, April 15, 2005 at the web address listed at the bottom of page 4).

Let's go back now to the topic of this article — when God says “no.” Obviously, none of us can *know* the mind of God. All we can do is look to some Scriptural examples that might provide some insight that will help us engage in some *speculation* as to what *could be* some reasons God says “no” when our prayer may *seem* to be a “no-brainer” to *us*. All *we* need, is for God to answer it.

But first — we're not the *only* ones who think we have faced unanswered prayers.

- Habakkuk cried, “How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and You will not hear?” (Habakkuk. 1:2)
- Paul prayed three times that his “thorn in the flesh” would be removed — but it wasn't. (II Cor. 12:7-9)
- The psalmist cried: “O Lord ... Why do You hide Your face from me?” (Psalm 88:14)
- Christ Himself asked to “let this cup pass from Me” — but He accepted His Father's will. (Matt. 26:39)

So we're not alone. There *are* times that we simply *must* rely on our faith and our trust that “...God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God ...” (Rom. 8:28) — whether those things be good from *our* perspective or *bad* from our perspective. There is *nothing* that can happen to us that God can not *use* for good — no matter *what* it might be. But accepting that takes a *lot* of faith as well as a *lot* of trust in God. And it's usually easier to tell that to someone *else* than it is to put it into practice ourselves. *We* want to wake up and *see* our twisted foot straight — because we *know* God loves us. So let's go to

the Scriptures and look at some possibilities that might help strengthen us when God doesn't answer our prayers the way we want.

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (Matt 7:7-11 NASB)

A Father who loves His child will only give to that child things that are *good* for him. He would not give the child anything that could be harmful to him. What the child *thinks* he wants may in reality actually be a snake (or “scorpion” as Luke's Gospel uses) for him. The Father in His wisdom, may know things that the child may *not* know.

“Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, ‘Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick.’ But when Jesus heard this, He said, ‘This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it.’” (John 11:1-4 NASB)

Jesus had a higher goal in view when He delayed going to Lazarus' side while he was sick. Mary and Martha suffered grief because Jesus had another purpose in mind that would be served. When God doesn't answer *our* prayers perhaps He has either His *own* purpose — or — even a different purpose for us in mind.

“Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me — to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” (II Cor. 12:7-10 NASB)

God's response to Paul concerning Paul's request reveals a great spiritual principle to us. Paul said he would be *glad* to suffer so that he could demonstrate Christ's power. Unanswered prayer just *might* be to strengthen us — or — to give us a chance to demonstrate our faith to *others*.