



Introduction:

Matthew 21:22 says, "And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith" (ESV). **Mark 11:24** says, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (ESV). These verses give many Christians a great deal of trouble. Not understanding them within their biblical context, many folks have prayed with as much faith as they can muster and yet did not receive what they asked. They wonder, "Why didn't God answer my prayers?" At this point, some people get discouraged about themselves as Christians. Others decide God must not be out there. In fact, in the June 10, 2007 edition of **The Tennessean**, Colby Landis, 18, of Nashville said he didn't believe in God or heaven. One of his big reasons was, "I used to pray about a lot of things that I needed help with. It seemed like whatever I prayed about got worse, it made me a little bit iffy." Let's face it. We have all been there. We asked and didn't get what we asked. Why does that happen?

Discussion:

I. Preliminary understanding.

- A. Before answering our question, we need to grasp some fundamental principles about God and answers to our prayer.
- B. Who is God? **Genesis 1:1** says, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (ESV). God is the creator. He is the sovereign ruler. He is the Supreme Being. He is more powerful than we can possibly imagine. Who are we to think God is obligated to answer our prayers? Consider Job. He spent the first 37 chapters of his story demanding God explain Himself. In **Job 38-41**, God essentially answered, "I'm God and you're not. You have no right to demand anything from me." We act as though some cosmic travesty has occurred if God were to ignore us. The reality is it is more amazing that God ever listens to our prayers.
- C. Further, we are asking the wrong question. Consider **Psalms 139:8**. Is there any place from which God cannot hear our prayers? Of course not. Consider also **Philippians 4:6-7** and **I Peter 5:6-7**. Is there any aspect of our lives about which God does not care? Of course not. God hears our prayers and God cares about us. Why then would we ask about unanswered prayers? Think about your children. How many times do they ask for things? How many times do they get what they ask for? (If it is every time, then we need to have another sermon on parenting.) If they don't get what they ask for, is it because you didn't answer them? It is because you said, "No." We must not think that if God is actually going to answer our prayers that He is always going to give us anything and everything we ever wanted. Sometimes God says, "No," just like every loving parent.
- D. We need to be rightly shocked about prayer. Allow me to share an illustration. Have you ever put your money into a coke machine and the machine kept it without giving you a coke. What did you do? You complained to someone that the machine was broken. However, what do we do if the machine gives us a drink and spits our money back out? We walk off and say it is our lucky day. Isn't that interesting because both machines are broken. But we don't ever say anything about the one that gives us our money back. This is the same kind of interesting mindset we have when it comes to being told no by God. God created the world and us. He has provided us with life and bodies. He sent His Son to die for us. He has given us His word. He has forgiven us of our sins. Does God owe us anything else? Did He even owe us this? Yet, if He says, "No," we complain that prayer is broken. Think about this for just a moment. Which is really more surprising, that the sovereign God of the Universe answers our requests "No" sometimes or that He answers them "Yes" sometimes? Before we get too upset about the Nos, let's be properly surprised and grateful for the Yeses.

II. What seems like No is not always No

- A. We have already learned that what we often call unanswered prayers are not unanswered at all. Sometimes God simply says, "No." However, there are sometimes when the answer may seem like No when, in fact, it is something else.
- B. Consider three such cases.
 1. In **Exodus 2:23**, the Israelites had prayed for rescue from Egypt. This led to the most spectacular display of God's power ever in the ten plagues. However, once the Israelites were actually allowed to leave, they came to the edge of the Red Sea and saw Pharaoh's army behind them. In **Exodus 14:11**, they thought God was saying no to their prayers for rescue. They thought they were all going to die. But God had not

said no. He had said yes. However, they had a picture of what yes would look like and it wasn't being caught between Pharaoh's army and the deep Red Sea. They didn't realize God was still displaying His power. Sometimes God's answer is not no, it is just yes in a way that is different from what we expected.

2. In **Revelation 6:10-11**, the martyrs cried out for God's vengeance on those who had executed them for the faith. God didn't do anything about it at the time of their prayer. Instead, He told them to wait. Sometimes God is not saying no, He is merely telling us, "Not now. Wait until I think the time is right."
3. In **Luke 11:5-8**, Jesus told the parable of the persistent neighbor who kept bothering his friend who was already in bed and finally received what he asked for. Jesus used this parable to explain that God will provide what we need. However, interestingly, at first, it appears that the answer is no. This is perhaps the most surprising of God's responses. There are indeed times when God responds, "I don't know; how badly do you want it?" And then He waits to see how badly we want something through prayer. Don't stop praying just because you didn't get what you asked at first. Keep up the prayer until you are absolutely certain God has said, "No."

III. Why God says No.

- A. Having laid the proper foundations for understanding the No answer, let's examine some of the reasons for which God says, "No." I do not presume that this list is exhaustive.
 1. According to **James 1:6-7**, if we do not pray with faith, we must not expect anything from God. Let us not think of faith in a vacuum. This is not merely about how much we believe something. According to **Romans 10:17** faith comes by hearing God's word. Praying in faith then is not merely about how much we believe it but about how anchored our prayer is in God's word. Praying in faith means believing God wants us to pray, based on His word. It means believing God can do anything we ask, based on His word. It means believing He will do what He has said, based on His word. And it means believing that He will always do what is best for us in the big picture, based upon His word. However, let's think about this for a moment. Do we offer prayers we do not remotely believe God will grant? How about, "Dear Lord, heal the sick the world over"? Do any of us remotely believe God will do that for any reason? Of course not. Let's not offer prayers we know we have no faith in. In those areas where we are unsure what God's will is. We can pray our will, but then express in prayer that we recognize our own finiteness and lack of wisdom and in the end we want God's will more than our own. We can always have faith in that prayer.
 2. **James 4:3** says some people ask and they don't receive because they are asking selfishly, thinking only of their own personal pleasures. Allow me an example. One of our most common prayers is for health, either for ourselves or our loved ones. What is our reason for that prayer? Consider Paul in **Philippians 1:19-26**, who knew that prayers would turn out for his deliverance. Why? Was it because there was so much he wanted to experience? Was it because he didn't want to miss out on so many things life has to offer? No, it was because if his life were extended he would be able to serve God and help the brethren. Let me encourage you to think about when you pray for health and long life. Why are you praying for that? For what reason should God consider granting your request.
 3. **Matthew 26:42** demonstrates sometimes our desires do not fit God's will. We must be willing to submit to His will. After all, we learned from the model prayer in **Matthew 6:10** that one of our overarching desires should be for God's will to be done on earth, not our own.
 4. **Romans 10:1** demonstrates a reason God says, "No." Paul prayed for the salvation of his Jewish countrymen. No doubt, God said, "Yes," in some cases, but in many, He said, "No," because other people were involved in this prayer. The answer to it was not just dependent upon Paul but also on how others responded. Another sense in which other people are involved in the answer comes when you are praying for sunshine when you are having your picnic and the farmer is praying for rain because his crops are dying. To whom will God say, "Yes," and to whom will He say, "No."
 5. Sometimes God says, "No," because He is not obligated to change the natural order of things. **Hebrews 9:27** says it is appointed for men to die. God is not going to change that. No matter how much we pray, everyone is going to die sometime. I once heard of a woman who turned her back on God because she had prayed and prayed and prayed that her father live, but he died. When asked how old her father was, she said, "86." Brethren, what do we expect? Everybody dies; we can't expect God to grant our request for eternal life. That is just not how our world works.
 6. **Galatians 6:7** says we reap what we sow. Sometimes God says, "No," because we are sowing the opposite of our requests. If we eat indiscriminately and never exercise, we cannot expect God to grant us health.

We can pray all day long that God will help us overcome alcohol, but if we keep frequenting the bars, we can't expect Him to grant our request.

7. **II Corinthians 12:2-10** demonstrates another reason God says, "No." We are sometimes foolish and do not know what is best for us. Like parents who refuse to give candy to their children every time they ask and who force their kids to eat vegetables no matter how much they complain, God sees the big picture and we do not. Often times He tells us no for our own good. We must have faith in His goodness and love.

IV. Responding to No.

- A. I have essentially presented a picture that says when God says no to His children, it is for our own good. However, at times we will not be able to see that. Sometimes things look so bad we are in despair and cannot fathom why God is not doing anything about it. In those moments, we are tempted to turn our backs on God. I ask you to consider one psalm before you do that. Look at Heman's psalm—**Psalm 88**.
- B. Many of the psalms start bad but end good. Not this one. Heman's life was miserable. He had prayed, but God seemed to be doing nothing. Yet, Heman continued to submit to God. Why?
 1. According to **vs. 1**, Heman submitted to God because salvation came from God. Think about this. Even if God is just being a big cosmic jerk and ignoring you, what good does it do you to turn your back on Him? That is tantamount to saying, "Well, if you won't grant my requests, I'll show you. Not only will I have a miserable life, I will just turn my back on You and go to hell. That'll show You." That doesn't make much sense, does it?
 2. **Vss. 9-13** demonstrate that Heman had a proper perspective on life. While his life may not have been what he wanted, he was more concerned about God's glory and praise. He could continue to submit to God because he was more concerned about God than himself. He was a worshipper and no matter how his life went, he was going to worship God.
- C. Perhaps the greatest example we have of submitting to God when things aren't going our way is Job. **Job 13:15** provides the standard by which we need to live. "Though he slay me, I will hope in him" (ESV). Too often we have an "if only" mindset in prayer. "If only You will do such and such, then I will serve You." We need to be like Job and have an "even though" mindset.

Conclusion:

No matter what happens in your prayer life and no matter how God is responding, keep praying. God loves us and cares for us. He wants us to pray. We need to pray. Never let God's Nos come between you. Instead, trust Him to see the big picture and always do what is best for His children.