

Accepting Adversity and Tragedy

Lesson 12 Prayer Accepting God's Answer

Introduction

The previous lesson was designed to encourage us to pray in times of adversity and trials. After all, James 5:6 and I Peter 5:6-7 tell us to do so. But sometimes, prayer fails to provide us with the comfort we seek. We recognize that our job is at risk, and we pray urgently that we might keep it, yet we are still laid off. We pray that a loved one will recover from an illness, but we watch them continue to suffer. In situations like this, we often wonder why our prayers do not accomplish what we seek. We look for reasons why God has not acted as we desired, and numerous questions come to mind:

- Does God not care enough?
- Was God unable to help us?
- Did we ask in the wrong way or for the wrong thing?
- Did God reject us because of our sin?

We will look at the answers to each of these questions before examining the example of Paul and his thorn in the flesh.

Does God Not Care Enough?

We have looked at numerous passages that speak to the concern of God (Hebrews 13:5-6, Romans 8:31-32), but consider the actions of God toward His own son:

1. Read Mark 14:32-39, Luke 22:44.
 - a. What was Jesus' specific request of the Father?
 - b. Describe the intensity of His prayer and request?
 - c. Did Jesus receive that for which He asked?
2. Read Hebrews 5:7-9
 - a. Though Jesus still suffered on the cross, did God care for Him? Did He hear His prayer?
 - b. What purpose was served by God not answering Jesus' prayer exactly as He requested (vs. 9)?

Remember also that Christ Jesus is God the Son. When we wonder if God cares, we are also questioning the concern of God the Son. Christ suffered as we do (Hebrews 2:18, 4:15); He even knows what it is like to pray and not be given exactly what He asked for. Imagine how hard it was for the Father not to remove the cup of suffering as the Son had asked, but remember that He did it for us; and yet now we question whether God cares for us! We can be assured that God cares.

Was God Unable to Help Us?

Remember the words of Paul describing God in Ephesians 3:20, "*Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us*". This passage addresses the very power that God has to do what we ask for in prayer. In fact, it comes at the end of a prayer that Paul made for the Ephesians (Ephesians 3:14-19).

What we sometimes mean by this question is that we wonder how God can respond to our prayers when we know that the age of miracles has ceased. We question whether God can or will do much for us if it is not in the form of a miracle. We should not doubt the providential powers of God. He has answered prayers without miraculous intervention throughout the periods of the Bible and He can do so today.

Paul spoke to the Corinthians of such care provided by God. Read II Corinthians 1:3-11; it is a wonderful passage about God helping those that suffer, and in turn those that are helped providing comfort to others.

1. Read again II Corinthians 1:8-11. In whom did Paul trust (vs. 9)?
2. He says God delivered him. Is there any indication that this was done by a miracle? He most likely refers to the incident at Ephesus in Acts 19:21-41, where he was saved without a miracle.
3. To what other help does Paul refer in vs. 11?

Did We Ask in the Wrong Way or for the Wrong Thing?

To a large extent we have answered this question in lesson 11. Look back to the instructions at the end of the lesson as to how we should pray. We could add to the list the fact that we should be reverent and humble (Isaiah 6:5, Luke 18:9-14), but if we have prayed in the manner described then we can be confident that God is not displeased with the manner of our prayer.

As to the content of our prayer, the real question should be our motivation in prayer. As long as we are not going to God with a sinful motive, it is unlikely that we are praying for the wrong thing. This is especially true when we are praying in a time of suffering and distress for ourselves or for those we love. God is not displeased by our desire for relief (remember the Paradox of Pain), and will not be displeased by a sincere and earnest plea from those who love Him.

Did God Reject Us Because of Our Sin?

This question arises frequently as we think of the vast difference between us (sinful men and women) and the Holy God of Heaven. We also recognize that the prayer of a righteous man is said to avail much (James 5:17). But I think this is the wrong question to focus on. When we ask this question, one of two things is true: either we are aware of sin in our life and wonder whether that sin has caused God to reject us, or we are unaware of any specific sin, but have a nagging feeling that we are not good enough for God to hear. In both cases, we should focus on something else first before worrying about our prayer.

1. If we know we are guilty of a sin, we should take care of that sin first. Rather than trying to decide the effect of the sin on the mind of God, we should strive to be forgiven by repenting and confessing this sin to God.
2. If we have this nagging feeling that we are not good enough for God to answer our prayer, it is time for us to review the passages that encourage us to have boldness in coming to God in prayer (Hebrews 4:16, I John 5:14-15). God loves us, and despite our many flaws, He is willing to forgive and wants us to seek Him out in prayer. It is important that we have confidence in this fact.

The Example of Paul

But, we might ask, if God has not failed to respond because of one of these reasons; why has He not done as we have prayed? Since God is not at fault through a lack of concern or ability, and assuming we have prayed as we should; we are left with only one possibility: God has chosen to do that which is in our best interest. We may not understand how this is true, but it must be.

In the life of Paul, we have a good example of dealing with God's response. Read II Corinthians 12:5-10.

1. For what did Paul ask? Was he persistent? Did he intensely desire that God grant his request?
2. Paul was somewhat more fortunate than us in that he receive a direct answer from God, but he get what he asked for?
3. What did God tell him? How did Paul respond?

In the end, like much of what we have studied throughout this class, it comes down to accepting that God is good and that He always does that which can result in our benefit if only we are willing to accept God's answer.