

## **TOPIC XIII**

### **PRAYER - ANSWERED AND UNANSWERED** **WHAT IS GOING ON?**

A very much loved one is suffering from a terrible injury or disease. The doctors are helpless to do more to help. We pray for their healing. Nothing happens. In desperation we seek some way, something to persuade God to help. We look for the right words, the proper attitude, scriptural teachings that might help us find more faith, or ascertain God's will, or supply us with some means, formula, truth, secret or anything to persuade God to step in and bring mercy. We plead, weep, cry out, beg, and apologize for anything in our lives that might be hindering our prayers. We reach out to others, the church, friends, to pray. We seek out anyone who might have an answer but when everything we can think of is exhausted, nothing happens.

Yet, we know instances and perhaps witnessed, or been a part of prayer for someone and have seen miraculous healings and deliverance. What are we to make of this? I have experienced both of these things and frankly, I am baffled. Of all the subjects about our faith, this one is the most baffling to me and, naturally, it is one of the most frequent questions I get. I have explored this subject extensively and offer thoughts that may or may not put your minds at ease. Nothing more I can do.

"Prayer" is a difficult topic to analyze in terms of what we hope will be positive answers and results from our prayers especially when our prayers are not answered. The "pat" answers we hear about why this happens are often unsatisfactory. Many books have been written on the subject of prayer. But the mystery abides.

There are some things I understand about prayer and many I do not. It is a spiritual process filled with mystery. Perhaps looking at this once again will help us be at peace about the prayers we make we hoping that God hears.

So if we are to seek to have God's attention and have our prayers answered, is there a special way to do this? I have found no clear answer to this, if even an answer actually exists. In fact, I have no idea, but doubt that anything mentioned in the first paragraph above has any bearing on this whatsoever. This will be discussed in some detail later. But for now, we can definitely say that this is totally up to God and His sovereign rule and it is true that we have little knowledge of the mind of God in these matters. His ways are higher than ours as are His thoughts. Our

commission is to trust Him regardless. We are told to pray. Simple as that. But, there are some things we can say about prayer. What is not important and what is important.

To begin with, what is not important.

A. A formula or "work" that can be employed to get God's attention. Though many sermons have been preached and books written on "effective prayer" and formulas suggested, I have no confidence that there is some formula God will honor above others. For example, the "Lord's Prayer" in Matthew chapter 6:8-13 that is repeated incessantly every week in so many churches and often throughout the week by parishioners. It directly follows a verse where Jesus says, "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."

So, what do we do? Repeat it over and over again. Why? Because we don't know what else to do so we do the very thing He told His disciples not to do. But note that God already "knows what you need before you ask Him." This answers our query about God knowing what the prayer will be before it is uttered.

Jesus' intent was not for this prayer to be repeated verbatim, I am sure. And, it was given by Jesus in a lesson that involved criticism of the styles of prayer often employed by both Gentiles and Jews. In addition, it was a probe that, under the Law, would cause great consternation for those in His hearing in my opinion. Not only that, but Christians are confused about some of it as well because few know the difference between the Old Covenant and the New or when the provisions of one ceased to have an effect and the provisions of the other were initiated. Note verses 14 and 15 for example. Is this true under the New Covenant?<sup>1</sup>

What may be some important thoughts.

B. Remember, Jesus was teaching under the Law, applying the Old Covenant not to just the external works, but to the heart. Therefore, what He says is good counsel, but not necessarily a part of the spiritual relationship we have through faith that is more germane to this subject for us who are believers. Later for that.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 3:12-13. These clearly state that we are to forgive as we have been forgiven not the other way around. This illustrates the total difference between the requirements of the law and the provisions under the New Covenant.

So, the so-called "Lord's prayer" points out several things, one of which is a humble and sincere relationship with God based in faith and not ritual. It also displays a respect and honor of the Creator and a desire to walk in godliness and in anticipation of His kingdom, present in the person of Jesus Himself.

In the same chapter, Jesus notes some things that may be germane to an effective prayer life. (Matthew 6:1-8)

1: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. 2: "So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 3: "But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4: so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you. 5: "When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 6: "But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you. 7: "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. 8: "So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."

So there are things to avoid as we come to pray. The motives of our heart may well be a key matter. We will look at this more in a moment.

On the other hand, Jesus tells a parable about a man who implores a friend to give him some bread for a visitor who has arrived and he has none to give him. Luke 11:5-13 tells the story,

5: 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; 6: for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; 7: 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*.' 18: "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. 9: "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you

will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 10: "For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened. 11: "Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? 12: "Or *if* he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? 13: "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will *your* heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?"

And again in Luke 11:1-8,

1: Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, 2: saying, "In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. 3: "There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, 'Give me legal protection from my opponent.' 4: "For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, 'Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, 5: yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.'" 6: And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge said; 7: now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? 8: "I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"

So what does that say to us? Is persistence important? The weight of the burden on our hearts for this request?

This brings to mind one instance when Donna and I were first married and I was working in a grocery store. I had made a friend named David Bardwell and we had met his wife Gail as well. I became heavily burdened for his salvation and after some weeks of sharing the Lord with him at work on our breaks, inviting him to church and praying for him, he seemed uninterested. He was on LSD often, and indulged in Marijuana, hanging out with that sort of people.

One evening I came home and got out of my car and stood at the entrance of the garage and just pounded the stucco and wept crying out to God to bring Dave and his wife to Himself. It was just a short time and he came to church with me. I asked him if we could come over and talk to him about this and we did and after a short time, he and his wife came to faith in Christ. The last I had heard he and his wife were active in McArthur's Grace Community Church I believe.

I am not sure whether my depth of feeling and passion were involved, but I have always thought they might have been. There have been only a number of times I have been that way in my prayers and most the Lord has answered. Other times not.

C. More on formulas and style of our prayers.

I heard a pastor present the model of Nehemiah's prayer in chapter 1 of his book. It is a very impressive and heartfelt prayer. But not one simply to be copied or repeated in my opinion. There are many prayers that God answered that are recorded in the scripture that are not even similar to this one. We will look at some of these and see what we can gain. Meanwhile, here is Nehemiah's.

Nehemiah 1:4-11, "When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. 5: I said, "I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, 6: let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned. 7: "We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses. 8: "Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; 9: but *if* you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.' 10: "They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand. 11: "O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man."

The pastor who taught that this was the proper type of prayer structure to approach God with admitted that he, himself, did not do so. This was evidenced by his own prayers in the service.

The prayer of Hannah who barren and provoked by Peninnah another of her husband's wives who bore him children, I Samuel 1:9-13,

9": Then Hannah rose after eating and drinking in Shiloh. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat by the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. 10: She, greatly distressed, prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. 11: She made a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head." 12: Now it came about, as she continued praying before the LORD, that Eli was watching her mouth. 13: As for Hannah, she was speaking in her heart, only her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard. So Eli thought she was drunk."

Sometime later she became pregnant with Samuel.

II Kings 19:15-20, 15: "Hezekiah prayed before the LORD and said, "O LORD, the God of Israel, who are enthroned *above* the cherubim, You are the God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. 16: "Incline Your ear, O LORD, and hear; open Your eyes, O LORD, and see; and listen to the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to reproach the living God. 17: "Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have devastated the nations and their lands 18: and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. So they have destroyed them. 19: "Now, O LORD our God, I pray, deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, O LORD, are God." 20: Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah saying, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Because you have prayed to Me about Sennacherib king of Assyria, I have heard *you*.'

In the Old Testament, apart from Psalms, there are just 29 times where people's prayers are recorded. In most cases it is when there is a painful circumstance or impending danger at hand. Or, after a deliverance, a time of praise and thanksgiving. Whether some form of proper address is required and what that might be is not clear. Being in Christ changes the relationship with God from the impersonal to the personal.

D. Under the New Covenant

Paul wrote to the church at Rome,

"Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and *that* my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find *refreshing* rest in your company." (15:30-32)

Well he did come to Rome, but in chains sometime later. In another instance Paul had appealed to the Lord and was denied, but with some understanding. He revealed this to the church at Corinth in II Corinthians 12:7-10,

7: 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! 8: Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. 9: 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. 10: 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."

E. What may be important.

Relating to the above, I would suggest from some scriptural passages, is that it ought to be the Spirit of God that motivates our actions not our actions that we expect to motivate God's Spirit. If a "work" or "formula" is not involved, the prayer has to come from a deeper and more personal and spiritual source, The point being, that it is not physical works of the flesh that create spiritual results, but spiritual powers that create both physical and spiritual results. How we do this and it not be a work, will be examined.

First, our prayers need to be driven by His Spirit, not just by our will. For example, in Ephesians 6:18, Paul writes, "With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints..."

This follows the famous passage in which Paul instructs us to "Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil." We must remember it is God's armor protecting us and we must have faith

in it to do so in spite of all the attacks of the evil one. In 6:17 he says, "And take THE HELMET OF SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

Our trust must be in our salvation through faith in Christ, and the promises He has given us by His word which is the sword of the Spirit. It is in this context "praying in the Spirit" is noted. This is the only place where the phrase is used, though Paul discusses praying in the Spirit when discussing the use of "tongues" in the church. However, to "pray in the Spirit" does not necessarily involve some "tongue" unknown to the one who prays.<sup>2</sup>

To "pray in the Spirit" is to essentially pray in the truth of God's word as it relates to Him as our Lord as well as in love both for the Lord and those we ask prayer for. Jesus single commandment was that we love each other. John writes in his first epistle,

"This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us." And, (3:23)

"And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also." (4:21)

These reflect Jesus statement when He said,

"You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" (Matthew 5:43-46)

And,

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35) And,

"This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.

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<sup>2</sup> See my work online at: bibleclassroom.org entitled, "A Brief Word Study Regarding the Gifts of the Holy Spirit" for more on this topic.



(John 15:12) And,

"This I command you, that you love one another." (John 15:17)

So John says this about prayer,

"And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight. This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us." I John 3:22-24

F. Our motives and treatment of others.

True love is of the Spirit and is a spiritual development, not a fleshly one. So a motive of true love and concern for another may be part of the secret. James said, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend *it* on your pleasures." (4:3)<sup>3</sup>

In this vein, Peter mentions,

"You husbands in the same way, live with *your wives* in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered." I Peter 3:7

There is the emphasis all through the scripture about our attitude toward and treatment of others. We need not elaborate. In the same vein, however, we ourselves may be the agency through whom God answers the prayers of others. We hear of the need of someone and pray God brings them help when we ought to be His angels of mercy and help. Here are a few passages in that regard.

Luke 3:8-11,

8: "Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. 9: "Indeed the axe is

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<sup>3</sup> There are a number of references that tell us of reasons God refuses to hear our prayers including, Isaiah 1:15-16; Jeremiah 11:11, 14; Jeremiah 14:12; Micah 3:4; Zechariah 7:13.

already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." 10: And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" 11: And he would answer and say to them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise."

Matthew 25:32-40,

32: "All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; 33: and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. 34: "Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35: 'For I was hungry, and you gave Me *something* to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me *something* to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; 36: naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' 37: "Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You *something* to drink? 38: 'And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? 39: 'When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' 40: "The King will answer and say to them, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even the least of them*, you did it to Me."

James 2:14-16,

14: "What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? 15: If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16: and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that?"

G. And we read that "God hears" not just our words but the heart behind them. Paul writes in Romans 8:23-27,

23: "And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for *our* adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. 24: For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he *already* sees? 25: But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it. 26: In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we

do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for *us* with groanings too deep for words; 27: and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to *the will of God.*"

He follows this with the famous passage of Romans 8:28,

"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose."

He concludes the letter with these words,

"Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me...", (15:30)

So a genuine love and concern for those we bring to God in prayer seems to be in order and joins the nature of God's Spirit.

H. Praying in God's will and in Jesus' name.

I John 5:14-15, says,

"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."

This brings up the often stated, "We must pray according to God's will for Him to hear and answer our prayers." But this is the only place this idea is expressed. And to know God's will in every situation? Difficult, if not impossible. John does not make any statement, however, as to how we are to know God's will in specific matters in which we seek prayer help. So, before we come to an impasse, let's understand that how we might interpret this might be off the mark.

The context of John's statement is belief in the son of God and John spends time demonstrating that this is indeed the case and that those who believe in Him indeed have eternal life. My conclusion is then, that those who are believe in Christ as the son of God are in God's will and their prayers are heard and answered. However, the flow of the passage from 5:13 onward is choppy and inconsistent as if it is

patched together from fragments of John's epistle. The book ends abruptly without a conclusion. However, my conclusion fits with other passages about prayer by those who are of faith in Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God, and name His name as their Savior. For example,

We also have Jesus who said in John 14:13-14,

13: "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14: "If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do *it*".

This is also John's work and can be compared to the statement in his first epistle discussed above. I believe they are the same idea. Interestingly, it is only John that has Jesus saying that one who asks in His (Jesus') name will receive a positive response.

In all the other gospels, when Jesus instructs about how to pray He has little to say except that it should not be done in a public manner to show off one's piety.

I. In other places in the New Testament we have various appeals for prayer, but there is little comment about the format. Some examples:

Paul writes to Corinth,

"For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came *to us* in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a *peril of death*, and will deliver *us*, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through *the prayers of many*." (1:8-11)

In Ephesians 1:16 Paul says, "I do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention *of you* in my prayers;"

Philippians 1:19, for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ,

Colossians 4:12, "Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bond slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God."

I Thessalonians 1:2, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention *of you* in our prayers..."

I Timothy 2:1, "First of all, then, I urge that entreaties *and* prayers, petitions *and* thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men,..."

I Timothy 5:5, "Now she who is a widow indeed and who has been left alone, has fixed her hope on God and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day."

II Timothy 1:3, "I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did, as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day,..."

Philemon 1:4, "I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers,"

Philemon 1:22, "At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you."

Hebrews 5:7, (Speaking of Jesus) "In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety." "Piety" means "devotion" and literally translates to "good taking" or "taking hold well."

Revelation 5:8, "When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints."<sup>4</sup>

I Thessalonians 5:12-18 gives a beautiful summary of the expression of the life of a Christian.

12: "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, 13: and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their

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<sup>4</sup> 8:3-4 repeat that the prayers of the saints are as incense to the Lord.

work. Live in peace with one another. 14: We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 15: See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people. 16: Rejoice always; 17: pray without ceasing; 18: in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

Paul also admonishes the same theme in Romans 12:9-18,

9: *Let love be* without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. 10: *Be* devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; 11: not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; 12: rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, 13: contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. 14: Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15: Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. 16: Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. 17: Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. 18: If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men."

The, general admonitions to pray,

Colossians 4:2: "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with *an attitude of* thanksgiving;

I Peter 4:7-10, 7: "The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober *spirit* for the purpose of prayer. 8: Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. 9: Be hospitable to one another without complaint. 10: As each one has received a *special* gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."

The point being, that regardless of whether we pray as we should, or receive answers or not, we are told to love one another and told to pray. We are just to pray. In our own manner and style, but with a real concern for those we pray for.

Questions:

1. How does God answer prayer? It is nearly impossible for us to know this. He may answer directly as in a healing. He may use the service of others to do so. I feel often that we as Christians are often to be His agents in answering prayer. There are those who are poor and need help, sick and need a doctor, hungry and need food or help in so many ways. Clothes, comforting, encouragement, financial help, counseling, just being visited and so many other things. Too often our focus is not on the needs of others but centrally on ourselves.

Then, depending on the content of the prayer, He may postpone an answer knowing when it is best to answer the prayer for our benefit. When I mean postpone, I mean it could take years. I have experienced all of this personally.

2. If prayer is communicating with God why does he not communicate back? He has already communicated in His Word. There is little in the Bible about God communicating directly with people. When this has been done it has been to specific individuals for the purpose of fulfilling His redemptive plan. However, prayer is a spiritual communication with God, our spirit through the Holy Spirit to God who is a Spirit. The communication both ways is spiritual, and is to be discerned spiritually.

God does send His Holy Spirit on specific occasions to minister to, comfort, encourage and empower people. One can pray for this anointing as we have read.

3. When searching for answers and we take these questions to God how to know He is there and helping us? We can only leave it with Him by faith and trust Him with our prayer concerns.

4. I would like to understand the role for prayer in the life of a Christian. It seems to be a tool God uses to bring us closer to Him as opposed to the prayer of a Christian affecting the world. Prayer, like our entire Christian life - walking in newness of life, led by the Spirit, worshipping God in spirit and truth and so on is a spiritual affair, not a physical one.

5. Does James 5:16 imply that an event in the world will be different because of a righteous man's prayer or is it that a righteous man verbalizes what God wanted to do anyway? I am not sure either conclusion is what James had in mind. The context is healing. In the commentary on this passage in James, the "righteous man" is one who, like Elijah, had a tried relationship with God and trusted in

answering His prayers. There is also the context of the elders in the church, the anointing with oil and the confessing of one's sins against another.<sup>5</sup>

6. Does God respond to individual prayer as often as group prayer? Or is it “the more the merrier” that has a bigger impact? I often see prayer requests on Facebook or mass emails requesting that all recipients stop and pray for something urgent at a specific time. I’m guessing that requestor believes that, together, all of us shouting a prayer to God will increase the chance that the prayer will be answered. Therefore, are individual prayers “quieter”? Perhaps, with larger groups praying together, there’s hope that someone in the group will have more favor with God increasing your chance of having the prayer answered. Good question. There is ample evidence for both views. I don't believe it is the number of people asking that is the key, though many praying for a single thing can't hurt. We are to be united in mind and, Where two or three are gathered together...”

On the other hand, prayers by individuals are heard and answered in scripture as well.

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<sup>5</sup> See: "The Book of James" commentary on line at: [www.bibleclassroom.org](http://www.bibleclassroom.org) in the book studies section.



**APPENDIX - PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT DISCUSSION ON THIS SUBJECT**

The following is a recent discussion I had with a friend over this same subject. I am omitting his name for privacy purposes. The subject is....

**"...FAITH AS A MUSTARD SEED..."**

Dear \*\*\*\*\*,

I am submitting my thoughts to you with the understanding that I may not have done the passages justice, or supported your conclusions to your satisfaction. I can say that I did my best to offer suggestions on how to best grasp the intent of the texts that are related to the one you submitted to me - as follows,

Text: Matthew 17:20, "So Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you."

Context of this passage Matthew 17:14-21,

14: And when they had come to the multitude, a man came to Him, kneeling down to Him and saying, 15: "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and suffers severely; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. 16: So I brought him to Your disciples, but they could not cure him." 17: Then Jesus answered and said, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him here to Me." 18: And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour. 19: Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" 20: "So Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. 21: However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."

Companion or similar passages; Matthew 21:18-22,

18: "Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. 19: "And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away. 20: And when the disciples saw *it*, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither away so soon?" 21: So Jesus answered and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done. 22: And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."

[Mark 11:20-24 - (apparently a repeat of the same event.)

20: Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. 21: And Peter, remembering, said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away." 22: So Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God. 23: For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. 24: Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive *them*, and you will have *them*."] ]

Luke 17:3-6,

3: Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. 4: And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him." 5: And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith." 6: So the Lord said, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

And, \*\*\*\*\*, there is nothing along these lines in John. John has a totally different agenda. So let's take it from the top. In the first three events, we have Jesus using the faith/moving the mountain illustration. These three also have the condition of "prayer" attached. Luke does not and it entails the "mustard seed" but the pulling up of a Mulberry tree by the roots. Same idea, however.

Let me say this. On the first three illustrations, not one time has this (the moving of a mountain or a casting it into the sea) even been accomplished by anyone

including Jesus Himself - whether they used faith, command or prayer - regardless of how incredible the person may have been.

People have tried to explain that this has happened and used Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and even R.G. Le Tourneau - the inventor of the earthmover (scraper) as explanations of how faith or something fulfilled this statement. I believe they missed something.

In the Matthew 17 passage, the casting out of the demon is the matter that draws the disciple's question. If we, (for a moment only) set aside the whole mustard seed/mountain thing, we end up with, "However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting." And, later on Jesus' disciples and later the apostles and even believers today have seen demons cast out in the name of Jesus (employing His authority, not their own.) So, the "faith" of the disciples at the time the demon possessed boy was brought to them was askew. We can guess that it was due to a "yet to be grasped understanding" of who Jesus really was.

In the Matthew 17 a boy is delivered, in the Matthew 21 story, a fig tree is cursed to death. Jesus addresses their lack of faith once again. I am assuming that these responses left His disciples a little confused or stunned as do they today with us.

In dealing with this type of subject over and over with caring people for years, and doing an intensive study with our mid-week Bible study group, I can truthfully say this is one of two areas where I am totally mystified. Not with the "mustard seed" illustration so much (I'll get to that in a moment) but with the entire prayer/healing matter.

\*\*\*\*\*, I have been a party to, and a witness of God's answering prayer, and seen actually miracles, time after time, many times. And the opposite as well. Prayer and nada.

I can tell you that there is no formula, means, method, words, or the attempt to discover "God's Will" (if not already known - which it is in many Biblical cases) that motivates God to respond to our requests of Him, regardless of how sincere, with faith and trust and all the rest of the things people say is the determining factor in getting prayers answered. That is the bottom line in decades of study and pages and pages of notes on this subject. We can discuss this someday if you wish.

Now, to address the mustard seed. As you may be aware, I have spent a great deal of time in the study of ancient Hebrew/Jewish thought form, literary composition and language.

So, first suggestion for understanding this illustration is one of the frequent means of expressing an idea called "hyperbole." "Hyperbole" is exaggeration for effect as you know. The Biblical writers use this often to state something that is greater than can be measured. For example, at the end of John's gospel he writes, "And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen." (21:25)

Speaking of a "mustard seed, we find a hyperbole in Matthew 13:31-32. Also in Matthew 19:24, etc.

[Note: Nearly all Bible interpreters attempt to make the frequent use of hyperbole (which stresses a point so hearers or readers won't miss the point) into a literal truth, missing not only the point itself, but embarrassing themselves in their ridiculous attempt.]

So, one thought that came immediately to my mind was that Jesus was using hyperbole once again to stress a point, not to create a means to get God to do something if only we had enough faith. By the way, the idea that we, as believers need more faith to get God to do stuff is ridiculous. We do not have to look to ourselves and realize that our faith is insufficient (as we will always find it to be if that is our focus) but to recognize that we have a great God and our faith is in Him, not ourselves. We walk by faith in Him (proven by our bowing the knee to His Son as Lord and Savior) not by sight.

Anyway, I digress. The hyperbole, assuming Jesus is indeed using it here, is to point out the complete failure of His disciples to both know and believe who He is and know and believe the scriptures that underscore His entire ministry and purpose.

Second, we often forget that Jesus taught under the law (Galatians 4:4-5) and what he mostly taught was the proper application of the law, not to just the external observance and works, but to the heart. That is where God focuses His attention. Man looks on the outside.....

Remember, the New covenant had not yet been "ratified" so to apply Jesus' teachings to us under the New Covenant would not always be appropriate. For example, in Luke 5:12-14 we read, "And it happened when He was in a certain city, that behold, a man who was full of leprosy saw Jesus; and he fell on *his* face and implored Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." Then He put out *His* hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." Immediately the leprosy left him. And He charged him to tell no one, "But go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as a testimony to them, just as Moses commanded."

So, are we required to, "...go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as a testimony to them, just as Moses commanded?" No. Why not?

See my point? So to apply the "mustard seed" to us could be a misapplication of His intent couldn't it? Especially considering that the disciples and others to follow cast out demons, brought healing and so on. How? In the authority of Jesus' name. Little about faith and mustard seeds are mentioned anymore as these things took place.

The question remains, "Why does prayer and ministry implementing the authority of Jesus' name not always work in our time? That answer is above my pay grade, so we must rely on the wisdom of God.

About the only answer I can give to this is that in the early days of the church, the demonstration of the power and miracles we read about were necessary to establish the validity and truth of the gospel in the face of tremendous opposition and false religions and teachers. In addition, another thought I have is that the importance of the entire matter is a spiritual one and not a physical, temporal one. Answered prayer usually addresses physical and temporal matters (serious, yes) but the fact is that our faith must be of the heart, spirit and will, not of the flesh.

The answers and miracles of the temporal, physical and worldly have little lasting effect. The crossing of the Red Sea is one of hundreds of perfect examples of, "That was great God, but what have you done for me recently" attitude. Our prayers are most often, "Not thy will but mine be done." Adding another thought is that Jesus and Paul warned about false teachers doing miraculous signs and wonders that could deceive even His own people. If our faith is based on the production of temporal and physical miracles and wonders, we could be in trouble. I believe many could be.

Next, very frequently the physical illustrations in ancient Biblical writings are used to grasp a spiritual truth and create a spiritual motive or result in our lives. I am convinced, for example, the the entire Book of Revelation is intended to probe and stimulate the spiritual dimension and depth of people and is not a just some chronological timetable of earthly events to occur at the end of the age. A careful reading of the book will make this quite clear. All the content is just a means to "the end" I proposed - in my opinion. (My commentary of this book is online.) I believe this is true of far more Biblical content than is recognized. In the "faith as a mustard seed" illustration, this could well be the case.

Now, to address your thoughts and comment on them in italics.

From \*\*\*\*\*. "Basically my thought had to do with Jesus saying , "If you had the faith of a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain be removed and cast into the sea."(paraphrase).

*Me. Perhaps, as many do, applying the "you" to us as well might be a misapplication.*

\*\*\*\*\*"As I thought about what that could mean two major thoughts stood out."

1. A mustard seed is something tangible and real.

*Me. Yep.*

2. Within the mustard seed is everything necessary to produce the life of a mustard plant. All of the DNA, if you will, to sprout, grow, and reproduce. At first thought nothing more is needed. However, after further meditation, soil and water are necessary for the seed to grow. After talking with you, further thought is that no amount of effort can produce a mustard seed. It is only produced from its source, the original plant.

*Me. I have to assume that "source" or "the original plant" is God or of God in your statement. Perhaps like Jesus being the vine and the disciples (or Jews) the branches. Would that be accurate? If so, then we are indeed talking about a spiritual application of a physical illustration. You are right. We cannot grow the mustard or any other plant through our own efforts. Thus, all the efforts to trach what we must do to please and/or get God to do what we want are vain efforts. However, this does not mean that the mustard seed growth automatically is*

*intended to produce answered prayer or miracles by our efforts either. I think something else is going on.*

From \*\*\*\*\* "Faith is knowing not hoping, so if we know that we know the power of Christ in us we have everything, already, that is necessary to accomplish the miraculous if it is God's will."

*Me. Here is where I might disagree with you. Faith is more than knowing or hoping, though those are involved. As I see it, "faith" is a spiritual bonding with God through Jesus Christ transcending the earthly, temporal and worldly. It brings us into His kingdom permanently and the things that transpire here (or don't transpire here) are irrelevant. We walk by faith not by sight. Miracles are irrelevant. They are not the basis for faith or even a demonstration of it. If that were the case, then the false prophets and the "man of lawlessness" would be the ones to follow. Miracles may or may not occur and that is God's mysterious "ways." Again, above my pay grade. "Knowing" in Biblical, spiritual terms is an intimate relationship, not just factual information we believe in.*

*I have dealt with this topic a lot. My feeling is that we often miss the big picture because we are in this world, this environment and assume that the things God wants to do have to do with all the temporal, physical, worldly things we care about. Not that we shouldn't care. But the demonstration of God's care came at the cross and resurrection. Too often this is not enough for us and so we search for other "proofs" that He is real or that we are His. Maybe that is not the correct path we need to travel.*

*Another thought,*

*One is that Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God and pointed people not to a victorious Messianic conqueror over Rome, but to the higher reality of God's kingdom, entered through a spiritual door, not a physical one. Then I remembered that Jesus used the "mustard seed" as an illustration of the kingdom of God in Matthew 13:31-32 (and in parallels in Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19.) Perhaps we can glean something from that.*

*Then, as we were looking at Jesus' temptation by Satan, Satan presented all these temporal, earthly challenges to Jesus who was in great starvation and Jesus set them all aside as irrelevant, and then, every time dismissed Satan's earthly, temporal attempts to persuade Him and contrasted them with spiritual truths, obviously of much greater value in the long run (eternity). Satan left Him. But He*

*remained nearly starved to earth. Perhaps something to be learned from this also.*

*Bottom line, whether God answers our prayers or not, we remain steadfast in our faith, hope and trust. Nothing should dissuade us from this perseverance. It is the perseverance itself, even in the midst of pain, persecution, and heart breaking tragedy that demonstrates our faith is genuine and real, not answered prayer. We are blessed if he does answer our prayers and blessed if he does not.*

*John 20:29 tells us, "Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*

*As to perseverance and being steadfast no matter what, we have Romans 5:1-8, 8:18-25; James 5:10-11; I Peter 2:1-11; I Corinthians 15:57-58; II Corinthians 1:1-11; Colossians 1:23; Hebrews 3:14, I Peter 5:9; etc.*