

November 27, 2011
How To Receive An Answer From God
Prayer Can Change Your Life (Part 4)
Luke 1:5-25
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A young teenager was asked by her Sunday school teacher to write a letter to a missionary they sponsored. The teacher told the class, **"I don't want you to get disappointed if the missionary doesn't write a letter back to you because he's a very busy man and doesn't have time to write to everyone he gets letters from."** So the young lady wrote, **"Dear Mr. Missionary, We are praying for you, but we don't expect an answer."** Isn't that often the way it is when we pray to God. We pray, but we don't really expect an answer. We send up a lot of prayers but we don't really expect God to take the time to answer us. Why is that? I want to suggest to you that just maybe we don't get answers when we pray because we aren't praying with the right attitudes. Let's look at four attitudes that are really important to have when praying. These attitudes will increase the effectiveness of your prayers and help you to receive an answer from God.

FIRST, YOU MUST BE WILLING TO LET GOD ANSWER IN HIS OWN TIME. God often delays the answer to our prayers. Why is that? Today's scripture passage from Luke, chapter 1, verses 5 through 20 will help us understand why God often delays the answer to our prayers. **(Read the passage)**

In this passage we find Zechariah being visited by an angel who tells him, your prayers have been answered - your wife Elizabeth is pregnant and it's a boy! Now how do I know that Zechariah had been praying for a baby boy? Because every Jewish couple prayed for a son and they held out hope that their son would be the promised Messiah. Early on in their marriage Elizabeth and Zechariah must have prayed that prayer a thousand times if not more. So why didn't Zechariah believe it when the angel said, **"Your prayer has been answered?"** I think if I had an angel come to me, I'd believe! Why didn't Zechariah believe? Why was he such a skeptic? The truth of the matter is Zechariah had long given up on expecting an answer to his prayer for a son. He was an old man and his wife was past the age of bearing children.

In verse 13 the angel says, **"Zechariah, your prayer has been heard."** The word **"heard"** here literally means **"It's already happened. It's a done deal."** God had heard Zechariah's prayer a long time ago and he granted it a long time ago, but sometimes God delays the actual giving of the answer. There's no delay in God's hearing and granting the request. But sometimes there is a delay in the giving of the answer. **The answer is given at just the right time - God's time.** When we don't see an immediate answer to our prayers, we tend to get discouraged and give up or even get angry with God.

When my children were little, they'd often ask for something and I'd have to say, **"Not yet. You have to wait."** As they got older they learned to accept that answer without making a fuss. But when they were young and immature, they'd carry on, stomp their feet, and even cry. As they matured they began to understand that **"not yet"** doesn't mean **"no"**. My son

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David would come to me and asks, "Mom, can I drive your car?" I would say, "Not yet. You're not ready to drive my car. You need to be older." David had to wait until he got his permit before I could let him drive my car. He wasn't ready to drive my car even though he really wanted to. He wasn't prepared to drive my car even though he thought he was.

When God delays the giving of the answer to our prayers, it doesn't mean he's saying, "No." It doesn't mean it's not going to happen. It doesn't mean he hasn't said "**Yes**" to what you've asked. It just means he's saying, "**Not yet, you have to wait.**" When the time is right, God will give you the answer to your prayer. Other things need to happen first before it will be the right time for God to give you the answer. First, God needs to prepare you for the answer. But like Habakkuk in the Old Testament, we get impatient and cry out to God, "**How long, O Lord. How long are you going to let my prayer go unanswered?**"

It's very difficult to wait for a prayer to be answered. We think if God sees what we're going through and doesn't do anything when we ask him to, what's up with that? Why isn't he responding? That's a legitimate question. If God hears and if God cares and if God has the power to do something about our situation, why doesn't he? The answer is - he's waiting until we're ready. He's waiting until we have the right attitude. Now the problem is, we usually think we're ready for the answer long before God thinks we're ready. We think we're ready to receive the answer but God's waiting for us to mature. God is more interested in making us mature Christians than he is in making things easy for us. He's more interested in changing what's on the inside of us than he is in changing what's on the outside. So the way we can prepare ourselves to receive God's answer is by **asking God to change our attitude** and get us ready. Then we'll be one step closer to receiving the answer from God that we've been praying for.

Our prayers will be very different when we do this. Instead of praying, "**God, please change my spouse**", we'll pray, "**God, please change me in this marriage. Change my attitude about my marriage and prepare me to receive your gift of a loving relationship with my spouse.**" Once your attitude is what God wants it to be, then he can go ahead and give you the answer to your prayer.

Are you having financial difficulty right now? Maybe God is trying to get you to have the right attitude about money before He can give you what you're asking for? Are you praying for someone in your life to change? Maybe God is waiting for you to change first before He can give you the answer to your prayer.

The fact of the matter is - **God is never too late. His timing is perfect.** We may not understand His timing, but God is never too late. If God had answered Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayer any earlier, they would have just gotten an ordinary little Jewish boy. Instead, they got an extraordinary little Jewish boy who would become the forerunner to the Messiah, the last of the great prophets who pointed the way to Jesus Christ.

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When you pray, you must be willing to let God to answer in His own time. That's the first attitude that will increase the effectiveness of your prayers.

SECOND, YOU MUST BE WILLING TO LET GOD ANSWER IN HIS OWN WAY. You must be willing to let God answer in the way he thinks is best. God's ways are higher than our ways. He is willing to give us far more than we can ask for or even imagine. Think of Hannah in the Old Testament. She prayed and prayed for a little boy. All she wanted was an ordinary little boy to love. But when God gave an answer to her prayer he gave her Samuel, the greatest of the Old Testament Prophets. God had something far greater in mind for Hannah.

There are two problems or pitfalls when we pray. One is that **we ask too little of God.** The other is that **we want what we ask too quickly.** We don't think big enough when we pray and we want it now. In Ephesians, chapter 3, verse 20, Paul begins to close his letter. He says, *"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen"*

When we pray, we ask too little and we expect it right away. It takes time for God to prepare us to receive all that he wants to give us. We couldn't handle it if we got it all at once. John D. Rockefeller once said, **"I would never give a man a million bucks all at once because he couldn't handle it. I would however give it to him over time, a little at a time, until I saw he could handle it."**

The truth of the matter is, if God had answered some of our prayers just the way we asked him to, we would have been shortchanged. Instead, his answer - given in his time and in his way is far greater than anything we could ask for or imagined.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had prayed for an ordinary baby boy, but God had something far greater in mind for them. He was preparing them to be the parents of John the Baptist. Hannah had prayed for a long time for an ordinary baby boy and God gave her Samuel, the greatest of the Old Testament Prophets. We must learn to let God answer in His own time and in His own way. It will always be better.

THIRD, YOU MUST BE WILLING TO LET GOD ANSWER IN HIS OWN POWER. If you don't trust God to answer in His own power, then you'll always be trying to answer your own prayers. Don't try to help God out. He can do it on His own. Let God answer in His own power. That's why it's called a miracle. We learn from the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth that God often waits until a situation is humanly impossible. When did God give Zechariah and Elizabeth their baby boy? It was after they were beyond child bearing years. They said, **"Lord, we're too old to have a baby."** And then God answered their prayer for a son. They were physically unable to have children. And then God answered. Why? Because when God intervenes in an impossible situation, he gets all the credit. He gets all the glory. When God answers our prayers in his own power, it's clear that he's the one responsible. Zechariah and Elizabeth had to let God answer in His own power.

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A similar thing happened to Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament. God came to Abraham and said, **"You're going to be the father of a great nation."** Abraham said, **"That's great, Lord, even though I don't have any children."** So Abraham waited and waited and nothing happened. Sarah didn't get pregnant. So he thought he'd help God out a little and he went and took for himself a second wife and he had a son to her. But God said, **"Abraham, that's not the plan. Thanks for trying to help me out, but that's not how I'm going to do it. You have to let me answer in my time and in my way and in my own power."** So at the age of 99, and Sarah 90, God comes to Abraham and says, **"Abraham, you're going to be a father."** Romans 4:19 says, **"...Abraham faced the fact that his body was as good as dead - since he was about a hundred years old -and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised."**

Let me warn you about something. When you pray for something, it just may get worse before it gets better. You may be praying about your marriage, and God may allow it to get worse before He's going to make it better. You may be praying for a child who is struggling, and God may let that child get worse before he gets better. You may be praying about your finances and God may allow them to get worse before they get better. Why is that? It's because God wants to demonstrate His power in your life by making something happen in a seemingly impossible situation so there is no doubt whose responsible for the answer to your prayer.

Think of Mary and Martha in the Bible. Their brother, Lazarus, got sick and they sent word to Jesus. They said, **"Lazarus is dying. Come quickly."** Jesus was only a few miles away when He got the news. He could have gone right away; instead he waited for three days. On the fourth day he showed up and Mary and Martha really let Him have it. They said, **"If you had come when you got the message, Lazarus would still be alive! Now he's dead and it's too late."** Jesus calmly answered, **"If you just believe, you will see the glory of God."** Then Jesus went to the tomb, had the stone removed from the opening and shouted, **"Lazarus, come out."** And Lazarus came walking out. And Jesus said, **"Now take off his grave clothes."**

What's the point of that story? The point is this: Jesus waited until it was humanly impossible for Lazarus to get better and then He gave them the answer to their prayers. What would have gotten their attention more: for Him to heal someone who was sick or for Him to raise someone from the dead? Which would have caused them to give more glory to God? Which would have caused them to recognize God's awesome power more?

A similar thing happened involving a little girl, the daughter of a man named Jairus. He sent for Jesus to come and heal his daughter of a fever. Jesus was on his way to Jairus' home when he stopped to talk to a woman who had touched the bottom of his cloak. Jesus stopped to heal her and explain to her why she had been healed. Meanwhile, Jairus' daughter died and he sent another servant to tell Jesus, **"Don't bother coming. She's already died."** Jesus went on

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to Jairus' house anyway. When it was the right time - when the situation was humanly impossible - Jesus demonstrated his power.

We must be willing to allow God to answer our prayers in His own time, in His own way, and in His own power.

FOURTH, YOU MUST BE WILLING TO LET GOD ANSWER FOR HIS OWN PURPOSE. God answered Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayers because he needed a John the Baptist to announce the birth of his son, Jesus. The same is true for Joseph in the Old Testament. God allowed terrible things to happen to Joseph. He was betrayed by his brothers, beaten and thrown into a well, sold into slavery, unjustly accused of something he didn't do and thrown into prison, and when everything looked completely hopeless, God answered Joseph's prayer for help and raised Joseph up to be second in command to the Pharaoh. Why? It was because God needed someone who could save His chosen people from famine and starvation. We must be willing to let God answer our prayers for his own purpose. He will bring things to pass that are far greater than we can even imagine when we are willing to let God answer our prayers for his own purpose.