

# Take Heart

## *Accepting Unwanted Answers to Prayer*

April 3, 2022

Today we're looking for the *answer* to all our prayers. But first, let's answer *this*: **What percentage of your prayers does God answer?** I mean, if we're being honest. It's a tricky question so, how about this one: **What percentage of God's answers do you accept?** That's the *real* question.

We're *real quick* to deem a prayer "*answered*" when *God's* will aligns with *ours* – but when the answer *doesn't* meet our expectation, we're a little *slow*. In fact, **we often won't even acknowledge an answer that doesn't match our desire**. Maybe we'll call it a "*dry season*". Ever have one of those? Where we're waiting for *God* to respond *rather* than *accepting* answers that are *unappealing*, feel *underwhelming*, or seem *unreachable*!

**[But]** The LORD is near to *all* who call on Him... in truth. – Psalms 145:18 NIV

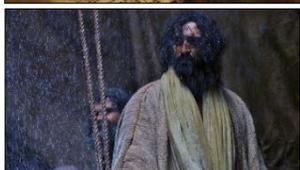
**[It's a promise]** Call to Me and I *will answer you*. – Jeremiah 33:2-3 NIV



*Right!* Do you *believe* God is *good, powerful* and *loving*? Do you *believe* He answers *prayer*? So... if you've prayed with a *right* heart, why *don't* you *believe* you *got* an answer. Cuz you *did*. But **we often miss it or dismiss it**. Because **we're experts at sorting the words we heard according to how much we like 'em!**



However, over the past two weeks, we saw how God can answer prayers in distinctly different ways with distinctly different levels of likability: sometimes He calms the sea – and sometimes He crashes the ship. But because our *instinct* is to assess according to *earthly* appearances, **it's hard to tell when we're in His will or in His way**.



If I was in Paul's place, I probably would've argued with that angel: "Ship *destroyed?! You obviously don't understand God's heart!*" *Because*, we tend to fall for this *idea* that if we're *struggling*, we must be *out of God's* will. But **struggling has always been part of the deal**. Talk about something else we *don't like* to think about – how about this *classic* promise from Jesus:



In this world you *will* have trouble. But **take heart!** I have overcome the world. **[Well, that's easy for Him to say...]** – John 16:33 NIV

*Is it?! "Take heart"* reminds me of Paul on the deck, yelling, "Take courage men, this *aint* gonna be *pleasant!*" Classic Jesus, "Take heart... and *take my answer already!*" Remember, **Christians aren't called to smooth sailing, we're called to victory! And victory by nature involves a battle**. So, we need to *prepare* long *before* we're battling the *rough* seas. But *how* pray tell?



For starters, **we need to know what we're listening for**. Now, quite often God says **"No"**. And **"No"**, well, pretty much means **"No"**. But *sometimes* He gives us a **"Slow"** – which feels just like a *no* at first, but means **"Wait; the circumstances aren't right yet"**. Other times, it's a **"Grow"**, meaning **"Wait; you aren't right yet"**. But then there's our favorite, **"Go"**, which means **"Timing's right, you're right and it's in His will!"**. (I suppose if He grants a miracle, there's also **"WHOA!"**) But, most of us mostly want to plug our ears, rather than hear the top three answers. We even brag about it, **"I won't take no for an answer"**. Then don't blame God when He **"won't answer"**. Blame *yourself* cuz you can't take it. So take the answer already... and take heart.

We often come to God *already* equipped with a nearsighted *earth-first* answer, looking for a quick **"Go"** from "the Big Guy upstairs" – believing that *all* our problems would be *solved* if we just get this *one wish granted*. Not realizing that **we're looking to our wish to save us**, which *technically* makes *it* our savior. And if we don't get it, we get frustrated and angry. Because God *won't give us our savior!*

And yet, if we *do* get a "wish savior", we can end up even *more* frustrated and angry, because of the disillusionment when it fails to *be* the *savior* we thought it *would be*. Which is why **life is especially rough on those who have it all**. I mean, What do you do, where do you turn, when wealth, health, fame, beauty, and power have failed you? Parties. Pills. Booze. Affairs. Maybe a big ol' slap at the Oscars.

Listen to this surprisingly insightful secular article that celebrity insider Cynthia Heimel wrote:

"I *pity* celebrities. No, I really do. Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis, and Barbra Streisand, were once perfectly pleasant human beings. But now their wrath is awful. I think when God wants to play a really rotten practical joke on you, He grants you your deepest wish. Sly, Bruce, and Barbra wanted fame. They worked, they pushed and the morning after each of them became famous, they wanted to take an overdose. Because that giant *thing* they were striving for, that *fame thing* that was going to make everything *OK*, that was going to provide them with personal *fulfillment* and *happiness* – had *happened* and they were still *them*."

They lost all *hope* by gaining every *earthly* answer and knowing there's *nowhere left* to turn down here. But those of us who've turned to the Lord, but haven't experienced that level of disillusionment in *our* wishes continue asking for nearsighted, earth-first, answers. **Which is why prayer is conspicuously popular after our power runs out.**

[Which is why Psalm 107 sounds so familiar:] They were at their wits' end. Then they cried out to the Lord in their *trouble* – Psalm 107: NIV

Being at your wit's *end* means you've exhausted every answer *your* brain could produce; it happens after *you've* done everything in *your* power.

But **what if we prayed at our wit's beginning?** The moment we first *knew* of a need. Or *before*.



Well, when we seek the *Lord's* answer *before* we think one up, two holy things happen: **we admit our inability and we affirm His superiority.** And *that* serves prayer's most *powerful* purpose; *not* as a tool to get God to *do* what we *want* – but to get *us* to *want* what *God's* doing. And that is much *likelier* to happen at our wit's *beginning* than at our wit's *end*.

In my BC days, I was so *determined* to find my answers *anywhere* but God, that I got to my wit's end, drove five more miles, and *then* broke! And what's so frustratingly *humbling*, is that the *moment* I cracked, the morning my mother *died*, and I *truly* gave God my attention, He had answers for *everything*. Some I *liked*. Some I *didn't*. But *all* of them *clearly* worked together for my good. And oh, the painful path I could've spared myself if *only* I'd turned to Him at my wit's *beginning*!



Last Sunday, we saw Jesus calm the seas, collapse the waves, and teach His terrified disciples the true *pecking order*. It's like He's saying, "You *NEED* to know – I'm not just someone who *has* power; I am power. Anyone and anything, that has any power, has it on *loan* from Me." ... and that includes the wind and waves, *unruly brats*, ain't they?

But, like the disciples, **we question His methods by our measure.** They said: don't you care if we drown? (Mk 4:38) – we say, "*don't you care if I lose my job?!*" But, what we *really* need to do is *choose* to *trust* what we already *believe* to be true. Follow me on this: *if* you're upset with Him for *not* calming your storm, it means you already *believe* He has the *power* and *authority* to *calm the storm*. So how can you *not* trust that He has a powerful reason for *not* calming the storm? Can't really have it both ways; believing He has limitless *power* and *authority* but *not* the *wisdom* or *love* to use it.



The Lord *IS* power. And *love*. And *wisdom*. So why are His *own* so afraid of Him when He puts it on display? **They couldn't imagine how someone so powerful could love anyone so powerless.**



But, that's just it. They're so powerless, so vulnerable, so helpless; and *that* makes 'em so lovable to One so loving. *Like* babies! And our loving Dad's got the ultimate answers for His needy babies... if we'll accept them. *Unruly brats*, ain't we? We just *need* to *understand* that He *IS* power and *IS* love; so we can *hear* and *accept* and *act on* His unwanted answers in *our* life. Like a *Dad*. Which should change how we hear *this*:

If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. – John 15:7 NIV



Careful! Keep picturing *Dad* and keep that genie in the lamp! It's a little embarrassing that we *all* need this reminder, but prayer *isn't* magic. Even though it's *tempting* to think of it that way. But, *magic* is an attempt to *control* power, so that God might become an instrument of *my* self-centered will.

Whereas **prayer is a process of *surrender*, a practice of *submission* to power even as I'm making my humble requests**, so that *I* might become an instrument of *God's* will.

**Don't take prayer *lightly*. The prayer process takes serious *effort*.** Paul praises a guy who was always "laboring *fervently* in prayers". (Col 4:12) Like those *fervent* and *persistent* prayers that *James* calls *powerfully* effective. (Jas 5:16) Just remember, *fervent* praying does *not* involve any form of *grunting* to get God to *do* something.

**Fervent prayer is a righteous stubbornness to force ourselves to surrender our trust to God's answers when earthly appearances seem contrary.** And **persistent prayer includes ongoing adjustments to our actions after each answer**; it trains us to live in a constant state of readiness to respond to God's leading. And that's why it is only by fervent and persistent prayer that we can align ourselves to His will and ever hope to experience true satisfaction and fulfillment and joy.

**So, if you need an answer, and your heart's right and you've prayed, surrender to this truth: you have an answer.** It might be hard to hear over *your* will, but it's there, with a *no*, *slow*, *grow*, or *go*. It doesn't mean you stop praying for a different answer, it means you acknowledge the one you're given and adjust your attitude accordingly before moving on. And then pray again. It's a *process*! **Sometimes for us to grow, He waits for us to accept the no, before giving a go.** So, take heart... prayer works – *always*! It's only when we label prayers as "unanswered" that we lose heart, because it so diminishes the reality of prayer's *power*. So like He said, and we read last Sunday:

Humble *yourselves* ... under God's mighty hand, that *He* may lift you *up* in *due* time. **[In the meantime]** Cast *all* your anxiety on *Him* because *He* cares for *you*. – 1 Peter 5:6-7 NIV

And if you ever hear anything come out of your mouth that sounds anything like, "He hasn't answered yet", put one hand over your mouth and slap yourself upside the head with the other. **God is *never* not working and He is *never* absent.** So don't discredit *Dad* by telling people *He's* gotten distant, or *He's* putting *you* through a "dry season". Just be honest, say "Sometimes my will is so *UNALIGNED* with God's and I am so bent on *NOT ACCEPTING* His answers – that it's *LIKE* He's not even there."

**[But]** The LORD *is* near to all who call on Him, **[well]** ...in *truth*. – Psalms 145:18 NIV