

DOES GOD ANSWER ONLY TRIVIAL PRAYERS?

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The Bible tells us that our God is a God of love (John 3:16; 1 John 4:8, etc.). He is way more willing to give good gifts to His “children” than even the most loving earthly father is (Matt 7:7-11). To put it in other words, God enjoys showering His beloved ones with little gifts. Just to say “I love you.” And I believe He loves to do this in some of the most personal and practical ways imaginable. Perhaps you’ve just lost hope of finding a parking spot in time to meet a critical appointment. You send up a desperate prayer and suddenly a space appears. A worried mother wonders where her boy is and sends up a quick prayer. Just then the phone rings and she discovers all is well. Or you survive a harrowing experience and discover later that several friends felt impressed to pray for you at exactly that time. Millions of believers around the world have experiences just like this every day. It is reasonable to suggest from this that God is real and that He loves to make His presence known to those who are open to it.



But just now the skeptic in you is saying, *Wait a minute! Are you trying to tell me that God manages the comings and goings in every parking lot around the world just in case one of His followers needs a spot at the last minute? If prayer is sometimes timed to remarkable events, what about all the times when people pray and “nothing” happens? What about all the real heartaches in this world that are met with silence? What about women who are raped and their cries for help go unheeded? What about men who contract terminal cancer in the prime of their life and feel as if their prayers go no higher than the ceiling? What about parents who pray for wayward children and go to their graves without a clear response from God?*

These objections have serious weight. Believers often fail to realize how trivial their experience of God’s presence may seem to others who have suffered deeply in this life. Our glib expressions of how God is working in our everyday lives can be like a knife in the heart to someone experiencing the absence of

God. We must never forget that the absence of God in everyday experience can seem the norm to most people. It is even something Jesus experienced when He was on the cross (see Matt 27:46 and parallels). In spite of the deep intimacy with God that characterized every day of Jesus’ ministry, in the 24 hours before His death Jesus experienced increasing darkness to the point where He could no longer see the Father’s reconciling face. The withdrawal of a sense of God’s approving presence caused Jesus the deepest anguish (see *Desire of Ages*, page 753). To experience the silence of God, then, is no indication that a person is actually forsaken by God or is an incorrigible sinner. But at times like that it can feel as if God answers only trivial prayers.

The story of Job may also be instructive here. Job’s experience makes it clear that there is no answer to most of the specific objections raised above, at least in this life. The tragedies in Job’s life were certainly unexplainable in earthly terms. They

came from “nowhere” and made no sense to him. They had to do with complexities in the larger universe that Job never came to understand. The fascinating thing is that even when God came down in person to talk with Job about these issues (Job 38:1 - 41:34), He never mentions the real reason for Job’s suffering, a reason the reader of the story is allowed into (1:6-12; 2:1-7).

From the book of Job we discern that there is a cosmic conflict in the universe that affects all that we do and all that we experience. God’s actions are sometimes limited by larger considerations in that conflict, things we may never understand until eternity. Perhaps God’s intervention in Job’s situation would have upset the whole space-time continuum of the universe in a way even quantum physicists could not understand. In other words, God cannot explain what we cannot understand. What we do understand is that larger divine interventions can change things

in a way that causes collateral damage at some unspecified time in the future. Major actions of God have ripple effects in the lives of many people and their descendants over decades and even centuries. As those ripples play out in the course of history, they can have consequences that we cannot foresee but God in His infinite wisdom can. He may understand that the good we hope God will do in the present could cause even greater harm than His silence in answer to our prayers.

There is an interesting biblical illustration of this. It is the story of Hezekiah as told in Isaiah 36-39. Hezekiah was one of the most faithful kings in the history of Judah (2 Kings 18:5-6; 2 Chr 31:20-21). He was faithful to God in his personal life and devotions. He expanded the borders of the country. He restored the temple that had fallen into ruins. He restored the priests and Levites to their regular services. He restored the feast days. He removed the rival altars around Jerusalem. He ordered

the “high places” of rival worship all around the country to be destroyed. He destroyed the idols and images that the people had come to rely on. His prayers protected Jerusalem when it was surrounded by overwhelming Assyrian forces. It would be understandable, therefore, for people to think that Hezekiah’s premature death would be a tragic thing for the nation and a mistake for God to allow. I can almost see the ancient bloggers and pundits questioning God’s character in relation to this development. But it was not to be.

When the time came for Hezekiah to die, he pleaded bitterly with God on the grounds of his lifelong faithfulness (Isa 38:1-3). God granted him an extension of fifteen years (38:5), along with a major astronomical token of His presence (38:7-8—how Hezekiah came to have this experience is not explained). Everyone seemed to have gotten what they wanted from God. Yet during those extra fifteen years two things happened that undid all the good that Hezeki-

ah had done during his lifetime; the visit of the Babylonian envoys (39:1-8) and the birth of his son, who became the evil king Manasseh (2 Kings 21:1-9). In the context of the cosmic conflict between God and Satan major interventions in people’s lives are very complicated. The ramifications are usually way beyond our understanding.

Having said this, I still want to argue that a believer’s experience in a parking lot is not necessarily imaginary. I cannot explain the timing and the effort involved in God’s actions. But I do believe that God would answer every prayer in a positive manner if pleasing us were the only consideration. If finding someone a parking space or timing a phone call will not upset the space-time continuum of the universe, why wouldn’t a loving God intervene? If a woman makes a full commitment to Jesus just as a rain shower happens to be passing, why wouldn’t God arrange that if the stakes were low enough? I guess what I am saying is that the lower the

ultimate stakes, the lower the potential consequences of any particular divine intervention, the more likely that a loving God can use the circumstances of life as a token of his love. We serve a God who delights to please His children whenever so doing would not cause harm to anyone.

Having said that, those of us who have experienced this kind

of intimacy from God need to be careful when and how we share such experiences with others. Our well-intentioned testimony can do harm even when God's gift did not. While we should rightly acknowledge the small tokens of God's favor in our lives and rejoice over them in the right circumstances, we need to also be aware of how often our testimonies cause pain.