

HOW TO RECEIVE AN ANSWER FROM GOD

Luke 1:5-23

We're in a series of messages on "Try Prayer". The first week we talked about the four purposes of prayer. The second week we talked about the four conditions for answered prayer. Last week we talked about the six steps on how to get a word from God about a difficult situation or problem.

Today I want to talk to you about how to receive an answer from God. There are four attitudes I believe we need to have in order to receive answers to our prayers.

I heard a story one time about a young girl who wrote a letter to a missionary. It was a prayer letter and she was trying to lend her support to the missionary. Now she'd been told not to expect a response to her letter because the missionaries were very busy. So she wrote the missionary this way, "Dear Mr. Missionary, we are praying for you. But we are not expecting an answer."

I think that little girl summarized the prayers lives of most Christians. We do a lot of praying, but we don't expect an answer. Why doesn't God answer? We're going to look at that today. How does God answer? We need four attitudes in order to receive an answer from God.

1. I must be willing to let God answer in His own time.

That means according to His schedule, His timetable. In other words -- whenever God thinks it's best. The fact is, God often delays answers to prayers. He doesn't answer everything immediately. Why? Why does He wait? Why does He withhold the gift sometimes for a period of time?

I think that was the reason Zechariah was so skeptical. Sometimes I myself have a hard time believing God's going to answer my prayers. But Zechariah was an amazing guy.

An angel comes and says, "God sent me here. I am Gabriel, the archangel and you're going to have your prayer answered." Zechariah says in v. 18 "How can I be sure of this?" He's the ultimate skeptic. Why didn't he believe it?

Because he had stopped praying that prayer years before. If you read the passage casually it looks like "He went into the temple. He prayed. And the angel came and said, 'Your prayer's been answered.'" But the fact of the matter is, he and his wife had given up on this prayer many years ago. Do you think he would pray that prayer at his old age? The angel came to tell him that his prayer of long ago had just been answered. So, he was really surprised! He says, "I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." (Well along in years. That's diplomacy!) Basically, he says, "We gave up on that prayer a long time ago."

The fact is, God often delays. So, the first principle is you've got to let God answer in His own time. **v. 13 "The angel said to him, 'Don't be afraid Zechariah, your prayer has been heard'".** So, the angel says, "God heard your prayer the moment it left your lips."

You see, God is not oblivious to our prayers. He is listening. He certainly knows every heartache, every tear in your eye, but sometimes there's a delay in the giving of the gift. He hears it immediately. There's no problem with it taking time for your prayer to get to God. It is there instantly. But sometimes He delays the giving of the answer for a period of time and that is one of the hardest things we have to learn.

As a parent, the hardest concept for my kids to learn is this. They don't understand the difference between "no" and "not yet". It's hard for them.

They'll say before dinner, "Daddy, can I have an ice cream?" Not yet. They might go into a fit like I'm never going to give them ice cream. Why? Because immature people don't understand the difference between "no" and "not yet".

The mark of maturity in the Christian life is this: How long can you wait? That's a mark of maturity in life. Babies always have to have it immediately. But a mature person can wait.

I talked to a person once who said, "I tried prayer. I prayed for two weeks and nothing happened so I've given up on prayer. I've lost my faith in prayer." No, you haven't lost your faith. You've lost your patience. You spell faith -- PATIENCE. Faith is patience.

Why does God delay his answers to prayer? Usually it's because He needs to prepare us first. He needs to get us ready. He wants to bless us and in order to give that blessing to us, He has to prepare us for it. If Eze comes to me and says, "Daddy, can I drive the car today?" He's 11 years-old! I say, "Not today. Someday you'll get to drive the car. When you grow up and you're mature and you've learned how to drive, then you'll get the request answered. But not yet, because you need to grow up." God waits many times to answer our prayer for us to grow up.

The frustration we have is we usually think we're ready to receive the answer. But He's just waiting for us to mature. Sometimes I kind of feel like Habakkuk. Habakkuk's big question was "Why?" "How long, Lord?" he says. Have you ever said that? "How long are You going to let me go through this?" That's a legitimate question. If He sees and He cares and He's got the power to do something about it, why doesn't He? Why doesn't He work it out?

The answer is, He usually wants to change you first. He wants to change your attitude. After you've learned the right attitude, then God's free to go to work on the problem. But God is more interested in making you mature than He is about making life easy.

So, instead of saying, "Lord, change this situation!" you start by saying, "Lord, change me." "Lord, change me in this marriage." "Lord change me in this job problem." Once you're in line, then God can go ahead and answer.

Do you have a financial difficulty? Maybe what God's saying is "I want you to learn the right attitude about money first and then I can help you out." Is there a problem in your marriage? Maybe God's saying, "First you need to change your attitude and then I can start working in your marriage."

The fact of the matter is this: God is never late. His timing is perfect. We may think He's late but He's never late. God's delays are not God's denials. "Not yet" does not mean "No".

What do I do? How do I pray when prayer is being delayed? I've prayed and it's not been answered immediately, what do I do?

You keep on praying until one of three things happens:

1. You get the answer. When you get it then you can stop praying. Obvious.
2. You get the assurance that you're going to get it. And sometimes God does that. Which I talked about last week. Through his word, through other people, through circumstances and sometimes through dreams. He says, "I'm going to give you this" and you're sure of it and you stop asking God for it and you start thanking God for it and you start acting on it. **Mark 11:24 says, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."** You believe it in advance.

When I was working at a bank in the Philippines, I got a telegram one day, it was a long time ago, there was no email yet, and the telegram said I had received a six-month systems engineering scholarship in Japan. I didn't wait for the money to come in to start acting on it, I started getting ready. I bought some new clothes and shoes, and packed all my stuff in my luggage.

I got ready and said goodbye to my friends and I took off. I acted in faith. I had the assurance that the money was coming. We can act that way with God.

So you keep praying until you get it or until you get the assurance.

3. You keep praying until God reveals to you that it's not His will. When you figure that out, you become uncomfortable praying about it and you don't have any peace so you stop praying.

So in order to receive an answer from God, one, we must be willing to let God answer in His time.

2. I must be willing to let God answer in His own way.

Not only whenever He thinks best but however He thinks best. God's ways are always better and usually bigger when He answers. God says in **Isaiah 55:9**, "*As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*" The reason God often delays an answer to prayer is so He can answer in a way bigger than you thought originally.

What would have happened in this story if God had answered Elizabeth and Zechariah's request for a baby immediately? What would they have gotten? A little Jewish baby. And they would have loved him or her. They would have cherished the baby and it would have been great. But God delayed the request for a number of years and then when He answered He gave them John the Baptist, cousin of Jesus Christ. The last Old Testament prophet, the only prophet able to see the prophecies about Jesus fulfilled, John the Baptist was like an announcer. He was the forerunner saying, "Here He is!" and is pointed to Jesus. Because God delayed the request, He didn't just give them any Jewish boy. He gave them John the Baptist.

Let God answer in His own time and you let God answer in His own way. If God had answered some of my prayers exactly as I'd asked them, I would have gotten shortchanged. His answer was much greater than what I asked for.

God says, "Let me answer in My time and My way." You're praying about a job. You want to get this job change and all of a sudden it falls through. Don't sweat it! God's got a better idea. You're praying about a situation. All of a sudden, it doesn't work out. Don't worry about it. God's got Plan B. Actually it is Plan A -- yours was Plan B! Let God answer in His time and His way.

Sometimes the worst thing in the world for us is to get our requests answered. Remember the prodigal son. What did he say? "Give me my inheritance!" He got it and it ruined him.

3. I must be willing to let God answer in His own power.

Don't try to help out God. Don't ask for it and then you go out and try to work it out on your own. Let God answer in His own power. That's called a miracle. And God says, "Let Me do it in My own power."

There's an important truth in this story about Zechariah and Elizabeth. The fact is this: God often waits until the situation is humanly impossible before He answers. When did God give Zechariah and Elizabeth a baby? After they were beyond childbearing years. They said, "We're too old!" They were physically unable to have kids. Then God answered.

Why? Because when God answers an impossible situation, who gets all the credit? Who gets all the glory?

The same thing happened to Sarah and Abraham. One day God came to Abraham and said, "You're going to be the father of a great nation." Abraham said, "I don't have any kids, but that's great!" So he waited and waited... All of a sudden Abraham is ninety-something years old and still nothing's happened.

In the meantime, he has decided he's going to help God out instead of letting God do it in his own power. So he goes and gets a second wife and has a child by her. God says, "That's not My plan! Let Me do it in My time, My way and My power." So at age ninety-nine and His wife is ninety, an angel comes to him one day and says, "Abraham, you're going to be a Father." He goes home and says, "Honey, you're never going to believe what I just heard. You're going to have a baby." Imagine her shock. In fact, she laughed. But we know the rest of the story. Sarah did give birth to Isaac.

The point is God waited until it was humanly impossible, then He answered the prayer with a miracle.

But let me warn you about prayer: If you start praying about something, particularly a problem, do not be surprised if it gets worse before it gets better. You're having problems in your marriage and you start praying, and your mate gets more hostile, or you're praying about a financial problem and all of a sudden it gets worse, or you're praying for somebody to get well, and they get sicker.

Why? Because sometimes God will let things get to the point of hopelessness in order that He might gain the most glory out of it. Let God answer in His power. His plan is to let the thing get out of our control and when you're about ready to give up hope, that's an opportunity for a miracle.

There's a beautiful story in the Bible that illustrates this. The story of Mary and Martha. They were sisters. They had a brother named Lazarus. One day Lazarus got sick and so Martha and Mary sent for Jesus to come for Him to be healed. They sent a message "Jesus, come quick. It is an emergency situation. We need You right now. Our brother is sick. You've got to come right now!" They were frantic. A lot of times we pray that way. "God, You've got to do something now! It's urgent. Do it now!" But nothing happens.

In the story about Mary and Martha, Jesus intentionally delayed. He was just a few miles away from their home but it took Him three days to get there. You look at it from an outsider's viewpoint and it looks like Jesus was callous. It looked like He didn't care, just impervious to the situation and didn't care. He waits two days. Then on the third day, He turns to His disciples, "Let's go." He goes to Lazarus' home. By this time Lazarus has died and Mary and Martha come running out and they both said the same thing, "Jesus, where have You been? If You had been here when we called You, this wouldn't have happened. You delayed and our brother's dead." They're rebuking Jesus.

We do the same thing. We say, "Why, God? Why are You doing this? Why haven't You answered?"

Jesus just calmly looked at them and said, "Mary, Martha, if you'll just believe, you will see the glory of God. You'll see a miracle." He walks up to the cave, because they buried them in caves. They moved the stone out of the way and Jesus says, "Lazarus, come forth!" Somebody has said that it's a good thing that He said, "Lazarus" because if He had just said, "Come forth", everybody who was dead would have come forth. That was a *rhema*. It was a specific word, to a specific man, at a specific time. He says, "Lazarus, come forth." He never said that to every other dead person in the valley. He just said it to one man and that man came forth.

The point is, Jesus waited until the situation was humanly impossible and then He bailed him out. He did it in His own power.

Which gives God the most glory? Raising the dead or curing a sick person? God always does it in a way that gives Him the most glory.

Do you want to have an answer from God? Be willing to let God answer in His own time. Be willing to let God answer in His own way. Be willing to let God answer in His own power.

4. I must be willing to let God answer for His own purpose.

Not only whenever He wants, however He wants, but also for whatever reason He wants. Why does God answer prayer? What are His reasons? The entire Bible summarizes why God answers prayer in two statements: For our growth, and for His glory. He answers a prayer when we can grow through it and when He can be glorified in that answer.

Why did God answer Elizabeth's and Zecharias' prayer for a son? Because He needed a John the Baptist. He had a purpose for that little boy. He knew that Elizabeth and Zecharias would raise him well.

Remember the story of Joseph in the Bible? God said to Joseph in a dream, "You're going to be a ruler one day. You're going to be the ruler of a great county." Then what happened? Joseph was promptly sold by his brothers into slavery. He goes as a slave into his master's home, his master's wife tries to seduce him, he would not give in, so the wife has him put in jail. Sold into slavery and then maligned and put in jail. His whole career is downhill.

But God made him second in command in Egypt in His own time, in His own way, with His power -- Joseph had nothing to do about it -- for His purpose.

I think the greatest example of what I'm trying to say we can see in the life of Paul. Paul was willing to let God answer his prayers in His own time, His own way, His own power, for His own purpose. The Book of Romans. This is a letter that Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, which was the capital of the Roman Empire at that time. In chapter 1, v. 7 *"To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:"* He says he's been praying for them -- v.9-10, *"...I remember*

you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. v. 15 *"That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome."*

Paul's desire, his one motive in life, his ultimate goal, his dream was to preach in Rome. "I want to go to the most significant city in the world. I want to preach to the movers and the shakers." I can imagine what his dream was. "I'm going to go to Rome. I'm going to rent the coliseum for three nights. I'm going to pass out flyers. I'm going to get a great PA system and a good Christian rock group to back me up and we're going to have one great crusade. Nero's going to get saved...." He had visions of preaching in Rome.

Now, jump to Romans 15 where we find Paul's great prayer. He lived and breathed his desire to go to Rome. In v. 20, he says, *"It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation."* And then in v. 24, *"I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while."* He wants to come to Rome. Did God ever answer Paul's prayer? Yes, but notice how He did it.

In Acts 28:16, Luke says talking about Paul, *"When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him."* That's not exactly what Paul had in mind -- house arrest. He ended up as a prisoner in Rome. He had been put through the Roman court system and he ends up in Rome as a prisoner in a house chained to a Roman centurion. That's not exactly his plan.

The point is this. Paul made it to Rome. But he was willing to let God work it out in God's way. How did Paul get there? Through Felix and Agrippa and Caesar -- Roman leaders.

Get this: Sometimes God answers our prayers through the most unlikely people. Paul probably never imagined that Felix, Agrippa and Caesar were going to be the answer to his prayer to get to Rome.

Also, we see that God answered in His own time. No telling how many times Paul packed his bags and tried to head off for Rome. It was in his blood. He wanted to do it more than anything else. The fact of the matter is, God is never in a hurry. You study the Gospels, and read about Jesus' work, how many times did He say, "It's not time yet." He was never in a hurry.

Then God answered for His own purpose. Paul wanted to go to Rome to preach. Why did God want Paul in Rome? To write. While Paul was in Rome under house arrest, he had a lot of time on his hands. What did he do? He wrote a bunch of letters to different Christians all over the Mediterranean. They put them together and they're now part of the New Testament, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon. We got the whole New Testament because Paul was allowing God to answer in His own way, His own time, for His own purpose. Paul was such an activist the only way God could get him to slow down and write what we now call the prison letters was put him in jail.

Paul's real desire was that he might make an impact for Christ on the world. He thought the best way to make that impact was to preach in Rome.

Sometimes God denies our original request to give us what is really the desire of our heart. What made a greater impact: preaching in Rome for a three-day crusade or writing the Bible? Obvious.

Let me summarize by sharing with you this thought from Bill Hybels: *"If the request is wrong, God says, No. If the timing is wrong, God says, Slow. If you are wrong, God says, Grow. But if the request is right, the timing is right and you are right, God says, Go!"*