

## CHAPTER 18

### ASKING GOD FOR HELP

*what about sickness and death?  
...and how about healing and life!*

18. ASKING GOD FOR HELP

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Before reading further, consider how you would answer the question: What things can we ask God for and what things can't we?

## Help!

Help! We all shout this sometimes. Life is unpredictable, and things can change at a moment's notice. Health issues, various dangers, lack of resources, and challenging relationships can all impact our ability to live normal lives. We invite God into our lives and desire to serve Him and do good, but things happen and our plans get thwarted. What should we do then?

We could go through life simply making the most of the circumstances that face us. After all, our days on earth are as a shadow (1 Chronicles 29:15). But is this the best we can hope for, or can we ask God for something better?

And if we ask Him, can we rely on Him to help us?

## Our greatest need

A good place to start with is our greatest need, which is, without doubt, our eternal salvation. God wanted to save us so much that He gave up His own Son for us, even while we were enemies with Him (Romans 5:6–10). We were completely helpless, but God freely offered salvation to us.

Given the fact that God helped us so much with our salvation, it is inconceivable that He would cease helping us immediately after we begin a relationship with Him.

In all likelihood, we did not see salvation as our greatest need until God started convicting us of our sins. The same applies today. We can overlook our critical needs in favour of things that are less important.

## Why would God help us?

God wants to help us simply because He loves us. He cares for us far more than we care for our own children.

Matthew 7:9–13 Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (NIV)

## God helps people in many ways

In the Bible, we see many examples of God answering prayers and offering to help people in their time of need.

God forgives all our sins, heals all our diseases, and turns our lives completely around for good (Psalm 103:2–5). He provides food, drink and clothing to those who love Him (Matthew 6:25–34; Psalm 37:25–26), protection from all kinds of troubles (Psalm 23; 34:17), peace (Isaiah 26:3), strength (Isaiah 40:31), protection from disease (Psalm 91:10), health (Exodus 23:25), healing (James 5:14–15) and good sleep (Proverbs 3:24). He heals our broken hearts, comforts us when we mourn and delivers us from captivity (Isaiah 61:1–2). He has a solution for our loneliness (Psalm 68:6), and He cares for the refugee, widow and orphan (Psalm 146:9). He guides us when we lack understanding (James 1:5–8). He delivers people from debt (2 Kings 4:1–7) and promises to prosper those who seek righteousness (Psalm 1).

## Are there limits to our prayers?

From God's side, He can do anything because He is God. He can help us in ways far beyond what we can imagine.

Ephesians 3:20–21 Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen (NKJV)

From our side, we can ask Him for anything, as long as it is something we can believe Him to do.

Matthew 21:22 And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive (NKJV)

We cannot expect God to answer prayers that are not good in His sight. He is completely good and perfectly righteous.

Some things we cannot pray for, and some things we should not pray for. Obviously, we cannot ask to be God ourselves, as this is impossible. James and John asked Jesus whether they could be the most senior people in His Kingdom. Jesus could not grant them their request, but left it to the Father (Mark 10:35–40).

We are not in charge of this world. We share it with around eight billion people who may want very different things than we do. God has to balance our prayers with the interests of others.

## Praying for a good life

When we start praying, it is natural to begin with our own immediate needs.

Many people see things like love, health, purpose, happiness, peace, security, freedom, and respect as essential to a good life. Their prayers centre on these things.

However, we need to remember our time on earth is relatively short compared with eternity. Where possible, we should place greater emphasis on heavenly objectives than earthly ones (Hebrews 11:13–16).

Colossians 3:2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things (NIV)

Sometimes heavenly goals can only be achieved through experiencing need or hardship.

## Trials and tribulations

If everything went smoothly in our lives, with no stresses or problems to overcome, there would be no opportunity to refine our characters and no growth in our relationship with God.

Acts 14:22...We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God (NKJV)

(See also Philippians 1:29). Our attitude to trials should not be to run away from them, or pray that we never have to face them, but rather to let God work the changes He wants to bring about in us (James 1:2–4). We need to learn to endure persecutions, tribulations, and hardships (2Thessalonians 1:4).

Philippians 4:11–13...I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength (NIV)

## When should we pray?

A good rule of thumb is to ask God to help us with the things we cannot do ourselves.

We should fulfil our own responsibilities to provide for our needs and for those depending on us, rather than asking God to do these things.

Proverbs 20:4 The lazy man will not plow because of winter; He will beg during harvest and have nothing (NKJV)

James 2:15–16 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, Go in peace; keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? (NIV)

God can provide for our needs even without us asking. Matthew implies this when he says if we seek the Kingdom of God first, we need not worry about our essential needs (Matthew 6:33).

Many times, though, God expects us to ask.

James 4:2...you do not have because you do not ask (NKJV)

## Will God listen to us?

We need a meaningful relationship with God in order to receive answers from Him.

1 Peter 3:12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil (NIV)

Why should God listen to someone who is not listening to Him?

Our relationship with God is based on love, and we love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). We demonstrate our love by obeying His commandments (1 John 5:3).

If we have not forgiven someone (Mark 11:25), or if we have wronged someone (Matthew 5:23–24), God may want us to put things right before He answers our prayer.

There is no point in praying if we know we are not right with Him.

Psalm 66:18 If I regard iniquity in my heart, The Lord will not hear. (NKJV)

(See also 1 John 3:21–22.)

## Praying in faith

When we pray, we should pray in faith, confident that God will answer.

Mark 11:22–24...Have faith in God. 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. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them. (NKJV)

Jesus often told people that their faith was the reason their prayers were answered (Matthew 8:13, 9:22, 9:29; Mark 10:52; Luke 7:50, 8:48, 17:19, 18:42).

Some people naturally think pessimistically to prepare themselves for disappointment, but this hinders them from releasing their faith.

We should pray positively, expecting an answer, and pray once. We should not keep asking as though we must convince God.

Matthew 6:7–8 And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. (NKJV)

He already knows our needs.

## How do we know God is willing to answer our prayer?

To pray confidently, we need to know He is willing to answer our particular prayer.

1 John 5:14–15 Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know we have the petitions that we have asked of Him. (NKJV)

Our starting point should be that God is willing to answer any prayer made in faith.

Matthew 21:21–22 Jesus replied, Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, Go, throw

yourself into the sea, and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer (NIV)

God does not give us a list of acceptable and unacceptable prayers. Instead, it depends on our relationship with Him. If we are pleasing Him, we can assume He will answer.

Psalm 37:4 Delight yourself also in the LORD, And He shall give you the desires of your heart (NKJV)

## Removing our doubts

We must not underestimate the importance of faith.

Hebrews 11:6 But without faith it is impossible to please Him... (NKJV)

Having faith and overcoming doubt is the key to receiving anything from God (James 1:6–7). We battle doubts in different areas:

### **(i) Doubt about our relationship with God**

Although we do not have to sin, all of us struggle with it, and from time to time we need to confess our sins to God. If we find ourselves doing this frequently, we may feel our level of holiness is not where we want it to be. We might then question whether we are worthy enough to come before God with our prayers.

We can overcome this doubt by remembering what Jesus provided for us when He died on the cross. He died so we can have our sins forgiven. But He accomplished more than this. While He lived on the earth, He was tempted to sin but overcame. Therefore, He is more than an innocent sacrifice – He is a righteous sacrifice.

This means when we believe in Jesus, we not only have our sins forgiven, but we take on His righteousness. Through faith, God sees us as perfectly righteous. This means we can come right into God's presence with our request.

**(ii) Doubt about whether God is willing**

Sometimes we need confirmation from God that He is willing to answer our prayer before we can release our faith (see Matthew 8:2–3).

We will do this if we doubt God's promises. They are hard to believe because they promise so much. The temptation is to change 'whatever we want', into 'whatever God wants for us'. We can place such an emphasis on God's sovereignty that we find it difficult to take the initiative or express our freedom of choice.

Another factor in this is our limited understanding of the matter we are praying for. Situations can be complex, and if we saw the full picture, we might pray differently. This lack of understanding can be a source of doubt.

We can handle this doubt in a couple of ways.

Firstly, we can pray without full understanding and trust God to reveal anything hindering our prayer from being answered.

Secondly, we can seek God to confirm whether our prayer is a good one to make. Only when we have our assurance will we release our faith and trust God for the answer.

**(iii) Doubt about whether God will do what He promised**

A prolonged delay in our prayer being answered may cause us to question whether God will do what He promised us. We must resist these doubts very strongly indeed. God is utterly faithful, and He means what He says. If He has promised us something, He will do it.

Numbers 23:19 God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it? (ESV)

If we suggest to others that God is not always faithful, we dishonour Him and we sin (James 1:5–8).

If we sense our faith is not that strong, we can increase it by reading the Bible and choosing to believe it (Romans 10:17).

#### **(iv) Doubt about whether God can**

We shouldn't normally experience this doubt, as, by definition, God can do anything. However, people sometimes express this doubt in order to provoke God into doing something they want. If we find ourselves speaking this way, we should repent and ask God to forgive us, as it is an act of rebellion against Him (see Psalm 78:17–22 and 2Kings 7:1–2).

#### **The battle of faith**

Once we make a prayer in faith, we will likely experience a battle with doubt and unbelief, especially if we are praying for something important.

Prayers are easily forgotten, but a prayer made in faith is a different matter. You cannot forget a prayer made in faith because you have to keep believing until you receive the answer.

Satan knows just how important our faith is and will resist us in whatever way he can. Typically, this is through doubts, fears, and negative circumstances. He knows if he can get us to doubt, we will not receive or lose the answer (James 1:5–8). We need to persist and not give up.

Hebrews 10:23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful (NKJV)

#### **Overcoming fear**

Not only do we have to deal with our doubts, but we need to overcome any fears as well. The fears we battle will centre on what happens if our prayer does not work.

When Peter walked on the water, he stepped out in faith and began to walk. But when he noticed the wind and waves, he feared he would drown and began to sink (Matthew 14:25–31).

Some fears are so big that we won't want to take the risk of believing. We are happy to pray about the matter, happy to trust God with the

outcome, but not willing to trust God to change anything. We can mask this fear by praying ‘if it be your will . . .’ – a phrase we should reserve for when we really do not know God’s will.

Unanswered prayers can bring with them disappointment, embarrassment and pain. No one wants to have to deal with their trust in God not being vindicated.

The way to handle fear is to determine beforehand to trust God even if things go completely wrong. Trust Him with all our heart to answer our prayer and trust Him if things do not work out. He is utterly good, and there will be a good reason if our prayer is not answered. We can also trust Him to help us manage the pain and the fallout, should this be necessary.

## Mind battles

When there is a lot at stake, it can get very noisy – noisy in our minds. Confusing thoughts, distractions, fears, doubts, all sorts of thoughts – these can dominate for a time and sometimes overwhelm us. Yet we can overcome them. We need to learn how to fight the devil and stand firm in our faith.

2 Corinthians 10:3–5 For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (NKJV)

## Another doubt: do we have enough faith?

Another doubt we have to deal with is whether we have enough faith to see our prayer answered. People may say you need a lot of faith for what you are praying for and then question whether you have enough.

One time, Jesus’ disciples asked Him why they could not cast out a demon from a child (Matthew 17:14–21; Mark 9:14–29;

Luke 9:37–42). Jesus replied that they should have had faith to cast the demon out, and what is more, they only needed a tiny amount of faith to do so. Although He had given them power and authority to drive out demons and to cure diseases (Luke 9:1), clearly they still needed to exercise their faith. He was disappointed with them as He knew they could have cast the demon out of the child. However, He also said this was a time when they needed to pray and fast to get the answer.

Sometimes we will need to pray and fast in order to see an answer to our prayer. But having said this, it must be possible to break through. God is faithful; He would not give us these promises if they were too hard to receive.

Luke 17:5–6 The apostles said to the Lord, Increase our faith! He replied, If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, Be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it will obey you. (NIV)

Our faith should be in God and what He promised. We will fail if we try having faith in our own faith.

## Keep humble before God

The promises God gives us bring with them an enormous responsibility to use them well. We can easily lift ourselves up and use them to satisfy our own carnal desires. God knows what things we are really asking for and why we want them.

We need to keep humble when we pray to a great God. Sometimes our prayers are not answered, and we have to remember God is in control, not us. Life is complicated, and God can have different motives than our own, so we need to continue to trust Him even when things do not work out as we hoped.

## Put others first

Everyone's greatest need is salvation, and most people do not have a saving relationship with God (Matthew 7:13–14). Therefore, most of the time, other people's needs are greater than our own.

When we ask God for help, it is good to think first about others and whether we can help them.

Philippians 2:4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. (NKJV)

Sometimes our needs appear so important that we forget what is happening elsewhere. We need to look around and try to see things the way God sees them.

### *Questions to consider*

1. The phrase 'God helps those who help themselves' is not from the Bible. How much truth is there in this statement?
2. How good do we need to be for God to answer our prayers?
3. Does God ever reluctantly answer prayers?
4. How much of our praying is focused on ourselves and how much on others?



