#### WHEN GOD SAYS NO

#### 25 Reasons Why Some Prayers Aren't Answered

There's a far-fetched yarn about three men who saw no other humans for a year after they were shipwrecked on an island. One day they found a bottle on the beach, which they uncorked, thus releasing a genie. As a reward, the genie promised to fulfill one wish for each of them. The first man wished that he be returned to his family back home. Immediately he vanished. The second man made the same wish, and he too disappeared instantly. The third man said, "I feel lonely here now without my two companions. I wish they were back here."

If any moral can be drawn from that whimsical rib-tickler, perhaps it's that it's not too unnatural to be selfish in our wishes and petitions—that is, we tend to "ask amiss—to use a phrase from one translation of the epistle of James in Chapter 4, verse 3. A fuller translation of that passage says, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives"—exemplified by the motive of selfishness in the third man in the humorous story. To "ask amiss" means almost literally "to ask with something missing"—and the result is that often it seems that God says "No." The Bible speaks of many ways in which something can be missing from our prayer of petition. In this little treatise I'd like to highlight about 25 of those ways of "praying amiss."

The God who split the Red Sea for Moses, who sent fire from heaven for Elijah, who miraculously routed the Assyrian attackers for Hezekiah; the God who worked miracles galore for prophets and patriarchs, and who scattered flurries of miracles through the early Church, as chronicled in the Acts of the Apostles, is the God who

"remains the same," as Psalm 102:27 reminds us. Of course, even today we hear of people who seem to be God's favorites; they get frequent and astonishing answers to their prayers. But for most of us, most of the time, God doesn't seem to answer—except by a presumed "no." God said, "Call to me and I will answer you" (Jer. 33:3), but when we do call, we seem to get a "busy signal." Are the phone lines to heaven overloaded, or what?

should ask, "Is it God's out of order?" phone or ours that's out of

"Why doesn't God | "Why doesn't God answer my call?" answer my call?" we ask petulantly. Perhaps we should petulantly. Perhaps we ask, "Is it God's phone or ours that's

order?" Since God has no defect, it must be our phone that's out of order, not his. There are two reasons why there's no problem on his end of the line, according to Scripture: First, God's ability to answer our petitions, and secondly, his willingness to do so.

What does the Bible say about God's ability to answer our requests? Paul writes in Ephesians 3:20 that the Lord "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine." And in II Corinthians 9:8 he says, "God is able to make all grace abound in you, so that in all things at all times, having all you need, you will abound in every good work." And, regarding God's willingness to answer our requests, there are, among countless scriptural supports, those banner words of Jesus: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matt. 7:7).

So, since the failure can't be blamed on God's lack of willingness or ability, the only source of failure would have to be from some defect on our part. We "ask amiss" that is, with wrong motives, or not according to God's direction book, the Bible.

### IF ALL ELSE FAILS, FOLLOW DIRECTIONS

A man finding himself becoming unaffectionate in marriage asked his doctor for an appropriate prescription. The doctor told him

to exercise by jogging 10 miles a day for 30 days. After 30 days the patient phoned the doctor, puffing, to say he'd done it. "I'm amazed," said the doctor, "that you actually ran 10 miles a day for 30 days. So, how's your love life?"

"How do I know?" the patient replied. "I'm 300 miles from home!

"Some people can't follow directions. even the specific directions that God gives in his rule book. Nobody fulfills all the many

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directions for successful prayer of petition, but the more we fulfill, the better chance we have of getting our prayers answered the way we want, for anything, especially healing.

The OVERRIDING PRINCIPLE to be observed is that of seeking priorities to avoid "asking amiss." Jesus was a man of priorities, who mandated priorities for us in our Christian value system: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his holiness, and all these things will be given you as well" (Matt. 6:33).

This prioritizing of our motives and methods for petition takes many forms which thus become conditions for successful prayer of petition. Some of these many conditions for successful prayer are the following:

1) Petition for *faith* to receive what is requested, prior to the request itself. "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6). Jesus adroitly led the father of the demonized child (Mark 9) to change his prayer from a prayer for healing to a prayer for more faith—faith to believe that Jesus not only could but would heal the boy. Jesus thus helped the man prioritize his prayer for faith over his prayer for the child's healing. In my experience in the healing ministry, I have noticed that many people ask for healing, but very few ask for faith to receive healing.

- 2) The exercise of the faith of serene expectancy ("without doubt") should have priority over the faith of urgency ("please, please") (Mark 11:22). This prioritizes the charismatic gift of faith over the virtue of faith. "Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive if you have faith" (Matt. 21:22). When the petitioner asks, "he must believe and not doubt" (James 1:6). "Have faith in God... Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (Mark 11:22:24). This is called "claiming" your need as if already attained. "Faith is being sure of what we hope for" (Heb. 11:1). This attitude of certainty is not "engineered," or "cranked up" by will power, but is a charismatic gift ("faith given" Acts 3:16). It is the particular kind of faith to be prayed for prior to the need-request.
- 3) Forgive others "from your heart" before asking for anything from God. Immediately after telling us about the need for faith in prayer, Jesus speaks about the condition of our giving forgiveness to others before making our petition. "When you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins" (Mark 11:25).

Unforgiveness blocks petition prayer, for it leaves us in a state of sin that sets us at enmity with God, and hence poor candidates for getting any prayer answered. "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. If you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matt. 6:14-15).

- 4) "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4). "Will (the wicked) find delight in the Almighty and call upon him?" (Job 27:10). "Find delight in the Almighty and . . . lift your face to God. (Then) pray to him and he will hear you" (Job. 22:26-27).
- 5) Seek adoration and praise of God before petition. "Hallowed be thy name" comes before "give us this day..." in the Lord's Prayer. How much of your prayer time is spent in petition prayer, compared to adoration and praise? (Pope Paul VI noted this *priority*

of praise and worship in prayer—without neglect of petition—as a sign of being Spirit-filled.)

6) "In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Phil. 4:6). If, as Paul says, the petition is to be made with thanksgiving, it presumes that we should thank God even before our petition is answered, which is a way of expressing the expectant faith mentioned above.

Nine out of ten lepers healed by Jesus (Luke 17) neglected to return and give thanks—a proportionate cross-section of modern society. Thanksgiving denotes a worshipful state of mind, which is as important as believing in God's power to help us in our needs. Unfortunately, for most of us, fervor of petition takes priority over fervor of thanksgiving.

7) When the petition deals with healing, the petitioner must seek priority in spiritual healing over physical or emotional healing. A state of sin is itself a spiritual sickness that needs healing. But sin also interferes with the effectiveness of prayer for other healing needs, as corrosion on a battery terminal interferes with electric current. Sin is like a collapsed bridge on the road to God. We must first repair that bridge before we can proceed to encounter God for our other needs of body and mind.

A clear conscience is a condition for answered prayer. "You rebelled against the Lord. . . (so) he turned a deaf ear to you" (Deut. 1:43-45). It's useless to ask God for favors while spitting in his face by living in a state of sin. But "if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask" (I John 3:21-22).

To seek spiritual healing implies that one is truly sorry for one's sins and is desirous of being free from every evil thought, word and deed. "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened," the psalmist reminds us (Ps. 66:18). His prayer shows that he recognizes a connection (often causal) between spiritual and other

healing needs: "O Lord. . . heal me, for I have sinned" (Ps. 41:4). Jeremiah echoes his sentiments: "Heal me, O Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved" (Jer. 17:14).

The Lord explains the need for spiritual healing as a priority: "This people's heart has become calloused. . . otherwise they might . . .turn, and I would heal them." (Acts 28:27, quoting Is. 6:10). "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Is. 59:2). When Jeremiah complained, "Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?" the Lord responded, "If you *repent*, I will restore you" (Jer. 15:18-19).

Although much illness is sin-related, this does not mean that all illness is the result of personal sin or unrepentance, for that would leave unexplained the illness of infants and saintly people. Personal sin was not the cause of the blind man's blindness, Jesus said (John 9:3). Yet all illness stems ultimately from original sin by our protoparents, Adam and Eve, while much (not all) of it also stems from intergenerational bondage along with personal sin: "God does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation" (Exod, 34:7). (For an exhaustive treatment of intergenerational bondage, see the book by this author, "Healing Your Family Tree" (Our Sunday Visitor Press, Huntington, IN, available also from CTM, Box 19100, Los Angeles, CA 90019.)

8) Emotional healing should be prayed for as a priority over physical healing, since most of our physical ailments are either caused by or aggravated by emotional (psychological) factors—perhaps as much as 90%, according to some specialists in psychosomatic healing. Disorders like spastic colitis, some cardiovascular ailments, some skin diseases such as psycho-dermatitis, etc. require a psychological healing prior to a physical one. Healing prayers are more effective when directed to the removal of the psychological causes of the disorder, rather than the symptoms.

A sound mind makes for a sound body, as the dictum of holistic healing proclaims. And this norm is found frequently in Scripture, at least implicitly: "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones" (Prov. 17:22). "O Lord heal me, for my bones are in agony. My soul (inner being) is in anguish" (Ps. 6:2-3).

Emotional healing is part of God's healing plan, as well as physical healing, for "the Lord heals all your diseases" (Ps. 103:3). Jesus healed "every kind of disease and sickness (Matt. 4:23; 9:35), including emotional disorders: "He has sent me. . . to release the oppressed" (Luke 4:18). And Jesus conferred this universal healing power on his disciples (Matt. 10:1), and on anyone who believes in him (Mark 16:18). But this power would be less effective if we prayed for a physical cure without praying first for a cure of its underlying psychological cause.

- 9) The petitioner should seek deliverance healing (especially from a spirit of infirmity possibly present) prior to seeking a physical healing. Paul was attacked by some kind of spirit of infirmity: "There was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me" (II Cor. 12:7). Jesus cast out a demon from a woman "crippled by a spirit for eighteen years" (Luke 13:11). For many persons with physical ailments like that woman, or any number of possible needs, a petition prayer might be unavailing without a prior deliverance prayer. For instance, in some cases a deliverance may be needed from a spirit of addiction, a spirit of lust or perversion, a spirit of anxiety, depression, or anger, or even a spirit of divorce, etc.
- 10) Another priority (when the petition involves healing) is to be had by praying for health more fervently than praying for healing; that is, a prayer for *preservation* of health before a prayer for *restoration* of health. Preventative (prophylactic) healing is better than curative (therapeutic) healing. It is better to preserve eyesight than to be cured of blindness, better to pray to prevent arthritis or back pain than to pray for their cure.

Preventative healing requires less faith than curative healing, and many lack the maturity of faith to acquire a healing, but have enough faith to receive a stabilizing of their health; they may have enough faith to clear up a pre-cancerous condition, but not enough to be cured of metastasized cancer—which wouldn't have become advanced if the pre-cancerous condition had been healed by prayer.

Cognate to this is the lack of appreciation of the thousands of marvelous ongoing healings taking place in our bodies by our immune system, while we complain about those few parts of the body not being healed. "They did not realize that it was I who healed them" (Hos. 11:3).

- 11) An important priority to be cultivated is a yearning to reverence God more earnestly than the yearning for one's own health needs. "Fear (reverence) the Lord and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones" (Prov. 3:7-8). This reverence or "fear of the Lord" is one of the personal gifts of the Holy Spirit (Is. 11:2).
- 12) Infidelity in marriage is mentioned in Scripture (Mal. 2:13-16) as a reason for prayers being unanswered. This Goddesigned priority has been scandalously disregarded in our adultery-riddled society today. An anti-matrimonial spirit invades the lives of many, and negates their prayer power, as Scripture reminds us: "A spirit of prostitution is in their heart... When they... seek the Lord, they will not find him; he has withdrawn himself from them: (Hos. 5:4-6).
- 13) Husbands lacking in considerateness and respect for their wives, or not maintaining a close partnership with them in spiritual endeavors will find their prayers hindered, says Peter (I Pet. 3:7).
- 14) Interpersonal conflict in a family or any group is a sign of spiritual immaturity that renders prayers of petition ineffectual. The prayer of the apostles over the demonized boy failed to heal him (Luke 9). Jesus blamed it on unbelief and perversity (verse 41). The

apostles' "perversity" was their pettiness in arguing about who was the greatest (verse 46). Sins like pettiness in family arguments, for instance, can prevent a healing prayer from being effective, as can any form

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of sin, especially any form of uncharitableness, as Paul explains: "You are still not ready. . . There is jealousy and quarreling among you" (I Cor. 3:3).

- 15) The prayers of persons involved in the occult will not be answered by God, since they are seriously offending him, by consorting directly or indirectly with his enemy, the devil. Thus, the Lord is "against magic charms" (Ezek. 13:20)—such as the "Italian horn"—and the use of astrology (Is. 47:13-15). He also regards as "detestable" anyone "who practices divination (fortune-telling), sorcery (curanderos, etc.), interprets omens (tea leaves, etc.), engages in witchcraft, or casts spells (hexes or curses), who is a medium (channeler) or spiritist (one consulting spirit-guides) or who consults the dead (by a seance)" (Deut. 18: 10-11). "Does God listen to the cry (of such a godless person) when distress comes upon him?" (Job 27:9). Such a one has extremely warped priorities.
- 16) An important (and difficult) priority to keep in mind is the desire for God's glory in the expected healing, or other answer to prayer, more than the desire one naturally has for the comfort of the healing itself. Jesus highlighted the fact that only one of the ten cured lepers took the trouble to return to "glorify God" while the priority of the others focused primarily on the enjoyment of their cure (Luke 17:18).

On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you desire your healing? On the same scale, how much do you yearn for God to be glorified by your healing? Which is higher on the scale? That depicts your priority value system, and consequently your prayer's success-potential.

- 17) "Pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4)—and not just family members. "Seek the good of others" (I Cor. 10:24). "Carry each other's burdens (Gal. 6:2). If we are not to "ask amiss," we must keep an element of altruism in our petitions, especially in group healing sessions.
- 18) One common obstacle to prayer is simply selfishness or avarice, which always tends to eclipse God's glory as the basic motive. James explains this: "When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your own pleasures" (James 4:3). Thus, a prayer to win the lottery, if it be merely so that one may become rich, will not get high priority in the courts of heaven. Probably more of our prayers are infected with selfishness than we recognize.
- 19) An often neglected priority is saturation with Scripture as a condition for answer to prayer: "If you remain in me, and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you," (John 15:7). Those who devoutly read God's word frequently are the best candidates for answered prayer. Psalm 119 says: "Before, I was afflicted... but now I obey your word" (v. 67). "If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction" (v. 92). "I have put my hope in your word" (v. 114 and 147). "May your hand be ready to help me, for I have chosen your precepts" (v. 173).
- 20) Matthew reminds us (quoting Is. 53:4) that Jesus, in healing the sick, "took up our infirmities and carried our diseases" (Matt. 8:17). Peter says "by his wounds you have been healed" (I Pet. 2:24). We can thus "dump our illnesses on Jesus" to rid ourselves of them. If by his wounds we have been healed, then Jesus has already suffered our pains for us, so we can simply "let go" of them. This approach to healing requires consummate faith—a degree attained and exercised by very few Christians.
  - 21) One condition for successful prayer of petition (men-

tioned five times in John's gospel) is that the prayer be made *in Jesus'* name. "Until now you have not asked anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete" (John 16:24). In ancient times an individual's "name" summed up his whole person.

In asking in Jesus' name ("through Christ our Lord," etc.) it must be not simply a prayer that mentions Jesus' name, but prayer in accordance with all that comprises the person bearing that name. Samuel Chadwick once said, "To pray in the name of Christ is to pray as one who is at one with Christ, whose mind is the mind of Christ, whose desires are the desires of Christ, and whose purpose is at one with that of Christ." It is prayer designed to carry forth the work that Jesus did—prayer that he himself will answer: "I will do whatever you ask in my name. . . You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:13-14).

Jesus promised, "The Father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (John 15:16;  $\,$  16:23). The Father cannot refuse the prayer of

Jesus, so when we pray "in his name" by humbly and devoutly subsuming to ourselves the personhood of Jesus, we make our prayer as effective as if Jesus were saying that prayer himself. We can then paraphrase Paul's words, "I no

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longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20), to read: "I no longer pray, but Christ prays in me."

22) Plurality of petitioners gives an added assurance that our prayer will be answered. Jesus advocated community prayer when he said, "I tell you that if two of you on earth (the smallest possible community) agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matt. 18:19-20). Perhaps that's why the author of Hebrews wrote, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing" (Heb. 10:25).

In the rule of prayer, one plus one equals far more than two.

Hence, it is helpful to ask the citizens of heaven to join with us in our prayers, for they are one family with us on earth (Eph. 3:15).

23) Another difficult condition for successful prayer is perseverance; it is especially difficult when the need is great or the hurt is severe and we want to scream for immediate relief. That's the time we must patiently keep on asking, like the widow who kept on importuning the judge for justice in her case (Luke 18:2-8). Jesus told his disciples this parable "to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (verse 1).

David encourages us to "wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord" (Ps. 27:14). Of himself he wrote, "I waited *patiently* for the Lord, and he turned to me and heard my cry" (40:1). If all our prayers were answered immediately, we would often be disillusioned as we would come to realize that God's timing, not that desired by our restive petulance, is ultimately the best for us.

24) One very important condition is that we seek only God's will when we pray. We often gloss over the words of the Lord's Prayer when we pray, "Thy will be done on earth (in my life on earth now) as it is in heaven." John makes this a bottom-line condition for prayers of petition: "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us" (I John 5: 14). St. Augustine says, "God will infallibly answer requests made sincerely that redound to our eternal happiness or his glory. He mercifully refuses requests that will not redound, directly or indirectly, to this end. The physician knows better than the patient what is necessary for health. Jesus reminds us that our heavenly Father can be trusted to give us only what is good." (See Luke 11:11-12).

We may be praying to get a particular job—our will. But this may not be the will of God, who might desire another job for us, with better pay or advancement opportunities, or to provide the locale where we are to meet our future spouse, or a person who will be converted by our example, etc. We may be asking, for ourselves or for another, a cure of a terminal illness—our will—without considering the fact that God's will at that time may be to grant the ultimate

healing of death, so as to usher the patient to eternal bliss; in heaven we would immediately be overwhelmed in recognizing the impropriety of asking for our will without consulting his—which is always better.

Jesus' Gethsemane prayer was paradigmatic of all petitions in suffering; it was formulated by him to coincide with the will of the Father: "A second time he prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup (of suffering) to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done" (Matt. 27:42).

It is ultimately God's will, in one form or another, that is fulfilled. But it should be sought out and yielded to, even before we pray for our desires. When we are unable to "find out what pleases the Lord" (Eph. 5:10), we should follow Paul's advice to the Romans: "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom. 12:2).

As St. Thomas Aquinas teaches, there are some things that fit into God's conditional will (with an "if" attached). We see an example in the three references to Hezekiah's healing from a terminal illness (II Kings 20:1-11; II Chron. 32:24-26; Is. 38), when God promised a fifteen-year extension of his life because of his prayer of petition.

25) A final condition for successful prayer—also related to God's will—is that we shouldn't demand an answer on our own terms. Our request may be God's will, but perhaps the *means* we seek to obtain it may not be his will. God may choose to heal by surgery or a new medicine while we seek a miracle; he may bring prosperity by an inheritance or a job promotion while we seek a lottery win, etc.

## IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED

In this little treatise I have tried to show some of the many ways that we can abort our petition, especially for healings, by "praying amiss." By avoiding these pitfalls in prayer of petition, our

prayer experience will take on a new richness and beauty. Answers will begin to come. God will surprise you with the graciousness and increasing swiftness of his responses to your prayers. Healings and other prayer-answers that seemed impossible will begin to occur in your life and in the lives of others for whom you pray.

If, after fulfilling all the conditions listed here for successful prayers of petition, you still experience delay in getting a response from God, then just continue to "pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1), with the persistence of the annoying midnight beggar of bread in Jesus' parable (11:5-13). "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint" (Is. 40:31).

Paul didn't get discouraged with his three-time failure of petition for relief from the "thorn in the flesh" (II Cor. 12:8). Because of reasons known to God alone, he was given an answer to his prayer other than what he expected—a consoling word of divine support: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (verse 9). That paradoxical power-in-weakness renewed his strength, as Isaiah's words promised—strength that forged him into Christianity's greatest missionary.

If your prayers are not answered in the way you hope, let your hope be in the Lord rather than a mere hope for a healing or an answer to prayer that puts self-interest before God. Hold fast to your faith in God (Mark 11:22), and with Jeremiah make your claim: "The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for (hope in) him" (Lam. 3:24).

From a human point of view this apparent "non-answer" to prayer is a worst-scenario situation. But when you cross the threshold of eternity, and see the situation from God's point of view, and the ineffable beauty of God's will in all this, you will come to realize, in a superlative way, his boundless love. In that context all his answers and apparent "non-answers" will make perfect sense. Then you will truly know that his prayer-spawned grace was more than sufficient for ##### you.

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