

There is no doubt that God has the ability to hear us when we pray, as God is all-knowing, all-powerful and ever-present. What we may doubt, however, is that he would deem us important enough to “take time” to listen. But time does not present the same constraints upon God as it does upon us. God is infinite, after all. In addition, God cares deeply for each and every part of his creation – and make no mistake, you were created, brought into being, by God. Also, recall what God said through his prophet, **Jeremiah**, in verse **29:11**: *“<sup>41</sup> Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”* Yet, God did not stop there. He went on in his next words to promise that he is always listening when we call upon him, for he openly stated: *“<sup>42</sup> When you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you.”*

God loves you, and so he listens. He hears it when you pray to him. If you accept this, then you possess the first half of God’s promise. The other half of God’s promise, the one I speak of today, is that God promises to answer. Jesus himself made this promise to those who follow him in **Matthew 7:7**, when he said: *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.”* When we seek after God, we find him. In our prayers, we speak words to God – like one side of a conversation. Often, this conversation may seem VERY one-sided, because we desire an immediate answer. But our prayers are like a knock at the door to God’s house: **Once we knock, we wait**. If we become *impatient* and leave the conversation, it is like knocking and then going back to our car, driving away. We are no longer there when God answers, and we may miss the other part of the conversation.

And God has spoken plainly about our prayerful requests, for he said, *“Ask and it will be given to you...”* That is a promise we can count on! And yet, many of you may remember a time, perhaps several times, when you prayed ardently, *urgently*, for something that never came to pass. *How can this be? Has God lied to us?*

Perhaps such a question makes you uncomfortable, and it should. God is the very definition of good, so no deceit is in him. So, if God has not lied, then what? **Why did we not get what we asked for?** This is where it becomes difficult to explain, because I do not claim to know the mind of God. I have mentioned before that God’s answer may be “No” or Wait...be patient.” And these are both God answering prayer, but Matthew 7:7 says clearly *“Ask and it will be given to you...”* So, why does it seem that God has not given us what we asked for, as would be the case if he answers with “no”? I believe the answer to this question lies in Paul’s words in **Romans 8:25-27**, which explains

<sup>25</sup> If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. <sup>26</sup> Likewise, **the Spirit helps us in our weakness**, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but **that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words**. <sup>27</sup> And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because **the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God**.

Therefore, **what you pray in your heart and mind may not be the prayer that reaches God!** We tend to pray for what we believe would be best, whether praying for ourselves or for others. But the Spirit changes our prayers so that they are aligned with God’s will. And when we are at a loss for what to pray, when we are speechless before God because we are in such anguish or

distress that the words just will not come, the Spirit intercedes and prays for us. When we place our situation before God and trust in him, leaving it up to him how to answer, how to provide for our needs, then it becomes easier to see the power of prayer. For then we are not looking for specific things, but are watching for the hand of God in what seems impossible situations. Then, we often can discern the work of God in our midst.

Since I have encouraged you **not** to depend on a single scripture to guide you in your beliefs, let me share a couple of other scriptures about God giving us what we ask for. The apostle John teaches in his first letter, in **1 John 5:14-15**:

<sup>14</sup> And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. <sup>15</sup> And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.

Note the important condition stated here: *“if we ask anything according to his will”* – this scripture drives home how we are to understand not getting what we ask for – we must realize that in some way, it was not aligned with God’s will for the situation. This is the truth at play when it is only in looking back much later that we *realize* we would have missed out on so much if God had given us what we asked for. Remember, God has plans for us, for our good, for a future with hope, just as he proclaimed thousands of years ago, in the time of Jeremiah.

Then again, if you prefer to hear a more recent word from God on the matter, consider these words of Jesus Christ, found in **John 15:7-8**:

<sup>7</sup> **If you abide in me and my words abide in you**, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

The Spirit abides in us, awakening us to the meaning of Scripture, to God’s will as revealed through the Word. It is by this abiding Spirit that we are enabled to abide in Christ. And Jesus reveals here that our Father can only be glorified when he answers prayer in a way that is aligned with his will. It is through both the words and actions of the Son of God that *we come to know the Father’s will*. In order to keep his promise to us that if we ask we will receive, our prayerful requests must be reformatted by the Holy Spirit before being raised to the ears of the Father. The Spirit knows what is at the heart of our need and the needs of others around us, as well as what to ask for so that what God gives in answering prayers brings glory to God.

And this is not the only teaching of Christ on the matter, for we find in **Mark 11** a further truth:

<sup>20</sup> In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter remembered and said to him, *“Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.”* <sup>22</sup> Jesus answered them, **“Have faith in God.”** <sup>23</sup> Truly I tell you, ***if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you.*** <sup>24</sup> So I tell you, *whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*

Here we see a new nuance to the teachings of Christ on God’s promise to answer prayer: **If we do not let doubt enter in, if we have faith in God and in the goodness of his plans for our future, then we can be sure that God will answer our prayers and bring those plans to**

**fruition.** Another revelation in this passage is that sometimes things must die – things we might believe could be fruitful someday. This fig tree looked healthy enough that Jesus approached it to pluck its fruit – but finding it was not bearing any, he made way for other things to grow in its place. God does not waste effort or resources on things that have no hope of bearing fruit to benefit his children. This is as true in our lives as it was in the life of this fig tree.

So *living in faith* – trusting that the Spirit will bring our requests before the Father in such a way that they are in line with his will – perhaps we can **find patience** to wait upon God to answer our prayers, much as we wait for someone *we truly wish to see* to make it to the door when we stand on their porch and knock. You can stand in your prayers with anticipation, knowing that God may answer your requests in surprising ways, while trusting that what comes out of your prayers will likely bear fruit beyond whatever you could ask or imagine.

Standing in such faith can be hard, but it is made easier when we strive to live according to our understanding of the will of the Father. That is what living in Christ does for us – it provides assurance that, no matter what is happening around us, praying “*Thy will be done*” will bring about what God knows to be best.

If you read your Bible from cover to cover, you will find many passages that do not come up in the lectionary, things which are often overlooked in sermon preparations. More importantly, you will develop an *overarching sense* of both God’s will for creation since the great beginning and how God has worked to shape this world towards his good will. You will also discover that humanity, since time immemorial, too often ignores God’s will and works towards its own ends.

I bring this up because the Bible also teaches that *we will receive according to what we give*. If we dole out evil, we will receive the same evil in return. This truth is presented in **Leviticus 24:17-22** which says:

<sup>17</sup> Anyone who kills a human being shall be put to death. <sup>18</sup> Anyone who kills an animal shall make restitution for it, life for life. <sup>19</sup> Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: <sup>20</sup> fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered. <sup>21</sup> One who kills an animal shall make restitution for it, but one who kills a human being shall be put to death. <sup>22</sup> You shall have one law for the alien and for the native-born, for I am the LORD your God.”

This was the teaching of God to his people from the beginning – *good* should be returned for *good*, and when evil is done, the punishment given should be in proportion to the evil. This is the true interpretation of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth,” NOT that God condones any retaliation for wrongs done.

Reward for doing good isn’t spoken of here, although it is implied. And Jesus, once he came, taught how God responds to the good we do for one another. In **Luke 6:37-38** Christ said,

<sup>37</sup> “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; <sup>38</sup> give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for **the measure you give will be the measure you get back.**”

Note here that both what we do and what we do not do will affect what we receive. When what we do (or *refrain* from doing) is aligned with God's will, then we can be sure that God will bless us. It is **never** about earning God's blessing, but IS about being prepared to *accept the good from his hand* instead of looking elsewhere and becoming distracted from what God has planned for us.

God's question for you today is this: ***Do you have the faith and courage to seek his will?***

Or put another way:

*Are you ready to open yourself to his possibilities, to trust that whatever he makes come about is better than what you could ask or imagine? Are you ready to lay your cares and concerns before him and then pray: **Thy will be done...** as Jesus taught in **Matthew 6:10**?*

Paul teaches in **Philippians 4:6-7**, *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."* It is the anxious heart that tries to maintain a false sense of control in dire situations. It is the anxious heart that fears letting go and trusting that God has the best interests at heart for everyone concerned, not just what we want or believe we need. Thus, it is only by letting go of control, by turning things over to God and trusting in his goodness, that we can find peace even in the most trying of circumstances.

Such trust and release are not easy. It may be the most difficult thing you have ever been asked to do. The heart wants what it wants. And it is in times of stress and loss that what we hold highest in our hearts becomes clear. We may believe our life will lose its meaning if things don't come out according to what we desire. Maybe we want a particular job...or we don't want to lose someone's presence in our daily life because they have a hold on our hearts, and so we fear praying *Thy will be done...*

Paul knows this, and so he admonished believers that in EVERY situation we should lay all our cares and concerns before God in prayer. Then we can ask for what we want, laying our petition before the Lord, doing so with thanksgiving. We can do so knowing that however God chooses to answer our prayer prayed in the name of Jesus Christ, it will be for the best. And when we do, Jesus becomes our source of peace, for we know God through Christ and trust in him.

When we learn to pray in spirit and truth, praying as Jesus taught: *"Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..."* then the peace that we will find will go beyond understanding. It may not make sense, and cannot for anyone not ready to give everything over to God, to place things in our Father's capable hands. The peace we gain at such times will have no *earthly* explanation, for it will be God's peace descending upon our hearts and minds. Having such trust when we pray allows us the space to take care of those around us, caring for those who have no peace.

So, God's Spirit is saying to you this day: Be assured that God is listening, that your prayers are heard and will be answered according to God's steadfast love and faithfulness.

*We give all thanks, honor, and glory to God, trusting in his will for our lives and this world, seeking comfort, assurance, and peace through the power of his Holy Spirit. I lift all of these, your children, up before you in prayer, praying fully and fervently: Thy will be done! Amen.*