

Is God obligated to answer our prayers? How do you respond when God says “No” to your prayers or when he answers in an entirely different way than anticipated? In this passage, Paul asks for prayer for himself and his ministry and gets some unexpected results.

1. *Paul “urges” his fellow believers in Rome to pray for him.* His appeal is on the basis of: 1) they’re family (“brothers and sisters,” see also, Rom. 12:1); 2) they belong to the “Lord Jesus Christ”; 3) the love from God’s Spirit is in them. Again, a Trinitarian prayer (also Eph 3:16-17).
2. *Paul urges the believers in Rome “to join me in my struggle” in prayer.* This expression is used of the athlete who vigorously trains with strenuous discipline. Prayer involves struggle, discipline, and sometimes agonizing against the spiritual forces of evil (see also, Col. 4:12). *When we pray we are engaging in supernatural conflict.* Prayer is among the chief weapons of our warfare (Eph. 6:18-20.)
3. *Specifically, Paul asks for prayer that he might be rescued from unbelievers in Judea.*
 - Paul already mentioned that he was on his way to Jerusalem with a large sum of money collected from Gentile churches (Rom. 15:25-27). The Jewish community was violently opposed to Paul and his gospel (Acts 9:29; 13:44-45, 50; 14:19) and he likely feared that the gift collected for the poor may be jeopardized.
 - The expression, “unbelievers in Judea” literally reads “the disobedient in Judea” (cf., NASB). Those who are “unbelievers” or “disobedient” don’t just make a neutral choice among a variety of options in the marketplace of religions. Refusing to believe in Jesus is sin, not merely a preference! It is moral rebellion of the highest order and the consequence is huge (cf., 2 Thess. 1:8-9). To reject God’s gracious offer revealed in his Son is to prefer self over God. Unbelief, and the corresponding disobedience, therefore, is a form of idolatry.

Paul was deeply concerned for his safety in so far as it posed a risk to the delivery of relief to the poor in Jerusalem. So, he urges the Roman believers to pray for him (see Acts 21:10-14).
4. *Also, Paul asks for prayer that his “service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there.”* Since Paul’s collection came from “Gentile” bank accounts, it’s likely that Jewish believers would be reticent in accepting it.
 - Paul’s sensitivities to and respect for the various cultural differences among the churches is evident. Some who are in need are better at receiving assistance than others. It takes as much grace to receive as it does to give. Paul was keenly aware of the psychology involved here and shows pastoral skill and genuine concern.
 - The import of his request has huge social implications. Poor Jewish believers accepting “Gentile” financial assistance would go a long way toward promoting unity in the Church that was (and still is) desperately needed.
5. *“Pray... so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed.”* This is a prayer request not just for him to get to Rome safely, but that he may go on to Spain and preach the gospel (Rom. 15:28).
 - It was Paul’s practice to preach the gospel where it was unknown (Rom. 15:20). His plan was to visit believers in Rome on his way to more ministry. *So, his prayer request is for the path to be cleared for the expansion of the gospel! Such priorities! Such ambition for God! Is that what drives your prayers?*
6. *Paul’s prayer request turned out very different than he expected.* Originally, Paul asked for prayer that he be rescued from Jewish unbelievers in Jerusalem and that his ministry would be

acceptable to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. His hope was that he would be “refreshed” in Rome on his way to Spain. But, Acts records different results (Acts 21:15ff).

- Paul was *not* rescued from the unbelievers in Jerusalem but was arrested (Acts 21:33)
- He did *not* go on to Rome for “refreshment,” but eventually stood trial in Rome after incarceration in Caesarea for some 2 years. Paul likely never reached Spain.
- Two other instances of unanswered prayers in 2 Cor. 12:1-10 and Lk 22:42. Praise God that some prayers are *not* answered!

So What?

- We should pray that Christian leaders might be rescued from opposition of outsiders who try to destroy their ministry. We should also pray that the ministry efforts are acceptable by those to whom they minister.
- We should prayerfully and respectfully identify and adhere to cultural differences in so far as the gospel is not compromised.
- Imagine getting everything you prayed for! How might your life be different? When God says “No” or answers in unexpected ways it demonstrates that prayer is not some magical, mechanical incantation that views God as one who can be manipulated by our pleading. Prayer is not superstition, but an expression of a dynamic relationship with God who is all-wise, all-good, and all-powerful.
- God always gives us what we need, but not always what we want. He’s more interested in *us* than in seeing our requests granted.

“I asked the Lord that I might grow
in faith and love and every grace;
might more of his salvation know,
and seek, more earnestly, his face.

I thought that in some favoured hour
at once he’d answer my request;
and by his love’s constraining power,
subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of this, he made me feel
the hidden evils of my heart,
and let the angry powers of hell
assault my soul in ev’ry part.

‘Lord, why is this?’ I trembling cried,
‘Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?;
‘Tis in this way’ the Lord replied,
‘I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I employ
from self and pride to set thee free,
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
‘That thou may’st seek thy ALL in me!’

— John Newton

Next week: God’s Providence, Our Prayers: Part 1