

Dear Friend,

Many years ago I talked with a woman whose 22 year-old son had been killed while climbing mountains a year prior to our conversation. Understandably, she was yet very distraught by her loss. Her great question, was, “why had God permitted her son to die?” Here anguish was made worse by the fact that she had prayed that God would keep him safe. So why had God not answered her prayer? As we talked she explained how she had finally resolved these issues. She read a book that had just been published entitled “Why do bad things happen to good people?” In it, the author explained that God didn’t want bad things to happen to people but that he couldn’t do anything about it. He empathized with our pain but humans were free and so he couldn’t interfere with any of their decisions. While this kept her from being angry with God, it did nothing to help her anguish and sorrow. She was left with a god who sympathized but who was powerless, just like us.

Pain and suffering, for many people, call into question the goodness and power of God or even his existence. Additionally, suffering experienced in spite of specific prayer to the contrary greatly amplifies the problem. Many seek to solve the problem by making up a god who cares but who cannot intervene. Others, like Job’s three “friends”, solve the problem by placing the blame upon the one who prays, claiming that the bad thing happens because of his or her lack of faith or sinful behavior. While there are many examples of God’s refusing to listen to the prayers of people and his bringing calamity upon those who pray because of their sin (Jeremiah 7:16ff, 11:14ff), for the Christian this is never the case as Christ has born God’s wrath against us and has made us God’s own children. Furthermore, unanswered prayer or suffering in spite of prayer is not the result of the fact that God cannot interfere with human will (Note how most of Paul’s prayers specifically ask God to interfere with human emotion, knowledge, and will (Eph. 1:15-20, 3:14-21, Phil. 1:9-11, 1 Thess. 3:12-14, etc.).

Prayer is not a magical incantation by which we manipulate the deity into doing what we want him to do. Faith does not believe that God will do whatever we want. Rather prayer is the expression of our desires to God, trusting in his love, power and wisdom to answer in the way that is best for us and most to his glory. We pray because we are needy and because our Father loves to care for us. He is glorified by his supplying our need in his wise and perfect way. There is a most amazing example in the life of Paul of how believing prayer and the will of God are worked out in his life.

In Romans 15:22-33 Paul tells the church in Rome about his plans for the future. His immediate plan is to go to Jerusalem with the gift of money the churches in Greece and Macedonia contributed to meet the needs of the poor Christians living in Jerusalem. Then, after he completes that work he plans to go to Spain and visit the church in Rome on his way. His hope is that they will help him get to Spain. In vv. 30-33 Paul says, “I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed.”

If you were a member of the congregation in Rome and joined Paul in his struggle by asking God to “deliver him from the unbelievers in Judea,” what would you expect to happen? My guess is that no one would envision God’s answer to his or her prayer for Paul’s protection in what actually transpired in Jerusalem. You can read about what happened to Paul when he went to Jerusalem and how he eventually got to Rome in Acts 21:17 through chapter 28. He was beaten by a mob and then imprisoned for over two years. He had to go through at least three “trials” and arrived in Rome as a prisoner after a 3-month voyage in which he almost drowned. The book of Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome. As far as we know he never made it to Spain but was eventually martyred in Rome.

What this prayer and this answer shows us is that when we pray we must understand that how God chooses to answer our prayer is not always going to look like the answer we wanted. Faith believes that God hears our prayers and knows our needs and will answer in ways that accomplish his good and perfect will in accord with his infinite wisdom. His answers are not going to be exactly what our finite and sin-riddled minds think should happen. Every promise that God made is yes for us in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20). They will be literally and completely fulfilled to us at the resurrection. Until that time, the ways in which he provides for us in answer to our prayers will be according to what is best for us in light of living in a world full of sin and with a nature that still wants to obtain life apart from Christ. We ought always pray and not lose heart, knowing that our just and loving Father will give us everything we need for life and godliness in order that one day we might join all the saints in enjoying “his eternal pleasures at his right hand.”

Learning to pray,