

GOD'S ANSWER TO PRAYER

Several months ago, when a bishop was asked about praying for rain, he said, "God does not control the weather. Atmospheric pressure does." There is a joke about a minister who was asked to pray for rain. He said, "It is no use. The wind is in the west."

God has commanded us to pray. He tells us that our prayers arise as incense before Him (Rv 8:3). Perhaps we are not always sure that He will hear us. If we ask, "Why does God not answer all our prayers?" what makes us ask that? How do we know God does not answer them all? Did the Father answer Jesus' prayer, "Take this cup from Me?" Perhaps we say that God has not given us things we have asked for. Perhaps one of us has been sick, and God has not restored his health as he has prayed. The apostle Paul had a similar experience. He had what he called a "thorn in the flesh." Three times he asked the Lord to remove it, but it was not removed. Yet he did not say, "The Lord has not answered my prayers." God wanted better things for Paul than relief from his special trouble. Paul recognised that the Lord's answer was that he should bear this affliction. God had given him "the messenger of Satan" to keep him from feeling proud because wonderful things had been revealed to him. The Lord wanted Paul to know that God's grace was enough for him, and that God's power was at its best when Paul was weak (2 Cor 12:7-10).

When the Lord does not give us some blessing we have prayed for in this life, that does not mean that He has not heard and has not answered. His answer can be "Yes" or "Wait", or "I have something better", according to His divine wisdom. In cricket a batsman has to call to his partner after he plays the ball in front of him. It is: "Yes", "No", or "Wait." Sometimes God knows that "Wait" is better for us. Moses' prayer to see the Lord's glory was only partly answered, from Moses' point of view. He saw the Lord's back, not His face (Ex 33:18-23). Moses pleaded with the Lord to let him go over to see the good land beyond the Jordan. Because the Lord was angry with him and would not listen to him, the Lord said, "That is enough. Do not speak to me any more about this matter." Nevertheless, He allowed him to look in all directions over the land from the top of Mount Nebo. God told David that Bathsheba's child would die because David's adultery and murder had made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt. David pleaded for the baby's life after the Lord struck the child, and he died. Yet Bathsheba had another son, Solomon (2 Sm 12:14-24). The elders of Israel wanted to inquire of the Lord, but, because of the detestable practices of their fathers, the Lord said, "As surely as I live, I will not let you inquire of Me" (Ezk 20: 1-12). In this case the refusal was more like a prophetic sign.

In John 16:23 Jesus makes the solemn pronouncement: "I tell you the absolute truth, if you ask the Father for anything, He will give it to you in My name." So we must pray in Jesus' name. That should be self-evident for us. St Paul wrote to the Ephesians: "By one Spirit He [Jesus] enables both of us [Jews and Gentiles] to come to the Father" (Eph 2:18). We have access to the Father through Jesus. When we go to the Father with our petitions, we can do that only through Jesus, who has opened the way to the Father by removing the roadblock of sin. So, when we pray, we should remember that Christ by His death on the cross has made it possible for us to approach God. That is what it means to pray in Jesus' name. In 1 John 5: 14 we read: "We have confidence in God that, if we ask for anything according to His will, He listens to us."

As Christians, we do not want to ask anything that is against what God wants. Our old, sinful natures want to get things that God does not want, but not the new human being in us. As Christians "we have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16). What we want and desire ought to be the same as what God desires and wants.

In some things we can know beyond any doubt what God wants. When we pray for the forgiveness of sins, we know that God wants to give that to us. He assures us that "the blood of Jesus His Son washes us clean from every sin" (1 Jn 1 :7). So we should not doubt that God will grant our prayer for forgiveness. When we pray for the success of the preaching of God's Word, so that many may be brought to faith, we can pray that and be sure that it will be heard. For God "wants all people to be saved and to come to know the truth" (1 Tm 2:4). His Word will not return to Him without accomplishing its purpose. When we pray for those many spiritual blessings that God in His holy Word has so graciously promised us, we know that we are asking for what God wants for us, and our prayers will be heard.

However, in some things we Christians may be unsure what God wants. When we are sick, do we know whether it is God's will to make us well again? We do not know when it will please God to take us out of this life, or to take a loved one from us. If we pray for earthly possessions, we do not know whether God wants us to get them, or when He wants us to get them. Does God ever answer "No"? We may not realise that our old sinful natures are leading us to ask for things that will hurt us. Do we, as Christians, want God to give them to us even if they will hurt us? When a child asks its mother for a sharp knife to play with, a wise mother will not only put

the knife away, but also give the child something better for it. If possible, it will be something more interesting or more useful. In areas where we cannot know what God wants, we should pray, "Do what you want for us, Lord." As Christians, we want God to give us only what is according to His good and gracious will. When the Lord, in His wisdom, says "No" to some request, we should not doubt that He has indeed, like a loving parent who wants what is good for us, heard and answered what we have prayed for. We will thank God for having answered us, as He wants, and as is best for us. For that is what we, as Christians, according to the new nature, also want.

Sometimes we may also fail to recognise that God has answered our prayers because He has answered in ways in which we had not expected. We had it all figured out in advance. We wanted God to do something, and thought we knew how it should be done! So did Naaman, when he came to the prophet Elisha to be healed of leprosy. Elisha sent a messenger telling Naaman to go and wash in the Jordan River seven times and he would be clean. This made Naaman angry. He said, "I thought he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel are? Could I not wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage (2 Kng 5:11-12). We should not want to deal with God in that way. We should not make up our own minds how God should answer us. When He answers differently, we should not be disappointed and complain that God has failed us. If we say, "Thy will be done", that leaves the way in which God answers our prayers to Him in His wisdom.

When we pray we should pray with confidence. We should keep in mind what James writes: "But let that person ask in faith, having no doubts. For anyone who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. To be sure, such a person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord" (Jm 1 :6-7). Therefore, when we pray, we should not have the attitude: "It probably will not do any harm: but it may not do much good, either." We should not think: "Perhaps God will listen to us." We should pray with confidence. When we pray we should believe, yes, know, that whatever we ask in Jesus' name, whatever is according to what God wants, He will indeed give us according to His promises to hear our prayers. God keeps His promises. For us, as Christians, there is no unanswered prayer.