

62 - Not Yet

John 10:40-11:6

One of the most wonderful aspects of watching Jesus in action is that we're seeing how things ought to work. He never prayed a wrong request; no prayer of His ever went unanswered because of a lack of faith, and no spiritual opposition was too difficult for Him to overcome. Whenever we get into the subject of prayer the question always arises as to why some prayers are answered, and it appears, some are not. Because we humans sometimes do pray amiss or lack faith or encounter strongholds that are too tough for us, trying to explain our disappointments in prayer can become very confusing. We're never entirely sure which part of the "failure" is our fault and which was actually God's will, but we didn't know it. Yet when Jesus ministered, there was no element of human failure. We're watching perfection, which is why this account of the raising of Lazarus is so interesting. It shows us that there is a right time for a prayer to be answered and that God's answer may arrive after we have passed the point when it appears to be too late.

Before we go any further into this subject we need to recognize the fact that we are specifically told that it was God's will to raise Lazarus. When Jesus heard the report He said, "This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified" (v4). That is not the case with everyone who dies. There is a time for each of us to die, so we can't read about this miracle and then decide that if we have enough faith and are patient, God will raise up every person we pray for. Even Lazarus went on to die a natural death, and his body stayed in the grave.

But notice: Even though in Lazarus' case it was God's will to do a miracle, it was not His will to do it immediately. There was a right time for the miracle, and until that time arrived Jesus waited. When He finally reached Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for four days. His sister Mary was so heartbroken she didn't even come out to greet Jesus (v20), and Martha responded to His statement about her brother "rising again" (v23) by assuming that Jesus meant he would be resurrected at the end of the age (v24). Clearly both women had passed the point of hoping for a miracle for their brother. And who can blame them? By every normal standard it was too late. Yet the fact remains, when they asked for help God didn't say "no." He said, "not yet." There are times He says the same to us.

A visit to Bethany (Jn 10:40-11:4)

• DBS (Wed-Sat)

So Jesus' initial response to their request was to wait. He heard their plea (v3); He declared that it was God's will to do a miracle (v4); He loved them dearly (v5); but there was a right time for this miracle to take place, and it wasn't yet (v6). God had a plan to use this miracle to save many (v45).

Persevering in prayer (Lk 18:1-8)

Jesus taught His disciples that it is normal to have to pray for a long time in order to receive an answer, even when what we are asking for is God's will. Sometimes we ask for things that aren't His will, and the answer is "no." A wise person will gladly receive that reply because he or she trusts God's wisdom and love, and therefore desires His will above their own. But still we have to learn to persevere in prayer, not because God doesn't hear us the first time we ask, not because He doesn't want to help us and not because He doesn't love us dearly, but because there may be other reasons that delay His answer. Here are four possible reasons:

1) The devil is actively opposing us. We are engaged in a spiritual battle.

• Matthew 12:29, "Or how can anyone enter the strong man's house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong [man]? And then he will plunder his house."

• Daniel 10:2, "In those days I, Daniel, had been mourning for three entire weeks."

• Daniel 10:12-13, "Then he said to me, "Do not be afraid, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart on understanding [this] and on humbling yourself before God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to your words. But the prince of the kingdom of Persia was withstanding me for twenty-one days; then behold Michael one of the chief princes, came to help me."

The world is a battlefield, not a stage. We are in a war, not a written play where everything happens according to God's will. Once we realize that and once we accept that God has given us spiritual authority which we must use to partner with Him in that battle, then we understand why we have to pray and continue praying for a long time, if necessary.



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2) God must do a deep work inside us before we are able to receive His answer.

- Genesis 12:1-2, “Now the Lord said to Abram, “I will make you a great nation.”“
- Genesis 12:4, “Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.”
- Genesis 15:5, “And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ And He said to him, “So shall your descents be.”“
- Genesis 17:17, “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear [a child]?”“
- Genesis 21:2, “So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him.”

God's answer may be “Yes,” but at that moment we don't have the spiritual health or depth yet to receive it. So His answer is to begin to work on us until we reach the place where He can answer our prayer.

3) The person we're praying for has a free will and can resist God. However, as we continue to pray God continues to pursue them, and when the situation is right they may receive Him.

4) God is waiting in order to allow the situation to develop to the point that when He acts, people will recognize that it was His power that did this miracle.

- Exodus 7:3-5, “But I will harden Pharaoh's heart that I may multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt, The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out My hand on Egypt and bring out the sons of Israel from their midst.”

God times His miracles, so they will reach unbelievers and prove to them that He is the true God. He always prioritizes reaching the lost.

Assigning blame

There can be times when we have every reason to believe we are praying according to His will, and yet we don't fully receive what we were hoping for. This can be a dangerous moment. We may begin to assign blame:

- 1) We may decide it's God's fault. He didn't do His part. And there are many bitter people who spend the rest of their lives angry at God because they feel He could have helped but didn't.
- 2) We may decide that another person is to blame. Their sins brought the problems, or they didn't have enough faith to stand with us in believing for a miracle. Deep hatred over such things can split families and end friendships.
- 3) We may decide it's our own fault. If we had only done this or said that, if only we had been able to have enough faith, the miracle would have happened. People who blame themselves like this can begin to medicate their misery with addictive substances and behaviors, or slide into depression, or contemplate suicide.

Choosing humility

The only way to avoid assigning blame for such disappointments is to deliberately choose humility. It is possible to refuse to sit in the judgment seat. It's possible to choose to trust God's overruling grace, accepting the fact that He alone knows the answer to the question, “What went wrong?” and that in His infinite wisdom and love He has ways to make bad situations turn out right. Even in her disappointment, Martha was confident that her brother, Lazarus, would rise again at the end of the age. And that's no false hope! When that resurrection takes place, death will be gone forever. If that were the only miracle we received in a situation we prayed for, we would still have reason to shout for joy. Frequently we struggle with the answers to our prayers because we forget how short this life is and how long and real eternal life is. We may be grieving here on earth while our loved one is rejoicing in heaven.

Scheduling prayer

Jesus told us “not to lose heart” (Lk 18:1); Paul told us to “pray without ceasing” (1Th 5:17). To do that, prayer must become a regular part of our daily lives. We have to decide that we are going to continue praying until our answer comes, no matter how long that may take. In some cases we may have to pray for a person or a situation for decades or even the rest of our lives, and that will never happen unless we build patterns of prayer into our lives. Prayer must become part of our daily and weekly routine. We can't wait for some inspiration to move us to prayer, though we're happy to respond when those promptings come. Each of us must discover times and ways to pray that work for us and then stick to our commitments. All schedules will be interrupted by unexpected events, but if we're truly determined to pray, we will return to that schedule as soon as we can.



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Motivating prayer

What is it that keeps someone praying for a long time? We might think it's faith, and faith is surely part of the answer. But the only motivation that will keep a person praying for someone else for as long as it may take is love. Love won't let us stop. Love won't let go of God.

So who do you or I love enough to pray for this way? A family member, a friend, a church, a prominent person, a nation, a mission field? I think one of the saddest things that can happen is for us to assume that when God says, "Not yet," He means "No." If we don't understand the difference, we will quickly lose heart and quit. And many spiritual battles are lost this way. "Not yet" doesn't mean "No;" it means "Yes, but you'll have to fight for it." The question before us today is, who are we fighting for? Who do we love enough to refuse to stop praying even after it appears to be too late?

Questions

- 1) Have you scheduled special times of prayer into your days and weeks? If so, tell us when and how you pray. Does your schedule get interrupted? Is it difficult to return to your routine?
- 2) Have you ever fought for someone by praying for them until an answer came? How long did you pray? What kept you going? What did God do?
- 3) Have you ever had an answer to prayer delayed for one of the four reasons listed under "Persevering in prayer"? Tell us what happened.