

Prayer Blockers

Why many of our prayers are never answered prayer blockers

By Mike Fleischmann

Still ringing in my ears are the words of a 12-year-old religious skeptic: “I don’t think there’s really a God up there. Once I prayed all summer for a 10-speed bike, but I never got one.” Or maybe it’s the disappointment of a teenaged girl: “I don’t understand why God won’t give me a boyfriend.” A young couple spends years preparing for overseas missions, only to find the door closed. A committed wife prays for the salvation of her spouse, but he is as distant as ever from the Lord. A Christian candidate for public office asks the Lord for victory, but on election night there is no celebration.

Perhaps the ringing in my ears is the sound of my own voice. All of us at one time or another have struggled with not receiving something from the Lord.

Sometimes we do not get the desires of our hearts for reasons known only to God. However, I believe that many times we do not get our desires simply because we fail to pray effectively.

The Bible is filled with images of God’s people coming before Him in humble entreaty. A desperate ruler, a drowning prophet, and a barren woman all petitioned the King, and the King responded. We are exhorted to “present [our] requests to God” (Phil. 4:6). We are promised that if we ask “it will be given” (Matthew 7:7). We are reminded that the “prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). But unfortunately, our everyday experience of petitionary prayer may lack power and rarely seem effective.

What causes such a power line to break? What obstacles prevent God’s people from receiving what they ask for? The Bible indicates several reasons why we do not get what we want from God.

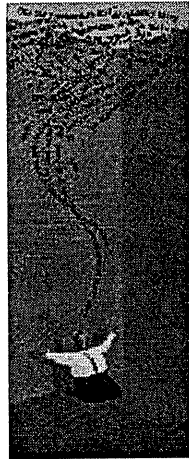


Illustration by Randy Verougstraete

We do not ask.

James 4:2 says, “You do not have, because you do not ask God.” Some people don’t get what they want from God because they simply do not bother to ask for it.

The desires of our hearts can be like concert tickets not picked up at the window, or an unredeemed gift certificate. The Bible suggests that there are times when the desire is right, the provision is made, and God is willing, but we simply fail to ask. That is not to say that God never showers blessings on us without our entreaty—doubtless He does. But what a shame it would be to miss receiving because we neglected to ask.

Many times, however, this is exactly our experience. We thank Him for the day. We bless the food. We pray about minor injuries and sniffles. But we neglect to request the things we desire most. Perhaps it is a fear of failure, or not wanting to be presumptuous. Maybe we do not want to put God to the test. Whatever the reason, we do not ask for things of any consequence, and thus we rarely receive things of consequence.

If you could ask God for anything, and knew He would grant it, what would you ask for? The salvation of your entire block? The healing of a family relationship that's been severed for more than 20 years? A wind of revival to sweep through your church, bringing a new zeal for God and passion for the lost? A Bible study on your campus with 100 people in attendance every week?

What would you ask for if you knew you could not fail? And when was the last time you plainly asked? Some people simply do not have because they do not ask.

We ask, but we don't really believe.

Have you ever experienced something like this? While sitting around the circle in your Sunday school class someone shares a request: "I just found out yesterday that my aunt in Nevada has been diagnosed with cancer. I would like to pray that God would heal her." The room is quiet except for the rustling of a few papers. The leader clears his throat and says, "Fine. Are there one or two of you who would be willing to pray for this one, and then I'll close?" And so the class asks God for the healing of someone's aunt in Nevada. But the truth is that no one in that room is expecting a miraculous healing any more than they are expecting the rapture to occur during the Sunday school hour. If someone were to rush through the door during the lesson and shout, "Stop! We just got a phone call from Nevada, and the cancer has miraculously disappeared!" probably half the people in the room would fall off their seats!

We are often guilty of faithless prayer. Out of Christian obligation we politely pray for healings, miracles, and the like without any expectation of them actually happening. Sometimes we hedge our prayer by saying "Lord, if it is Your will, we ask You to touch her body." Unfortunately, this often serves as nothing more than a pious disclaimer which says, "I know You can do this, Lord, but I doubt You will!"



Illustration by Randy Verougstraete

James 1:5–7 tells us that God is a generous giver to those who ask Him. However, "when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord."

Did you catch that? The person who asks for something, but doubts that it will actually happen, gets exactly what he or she expects . . . nothing! A pious request without expectation of a positive answer may impress your prayer group, but it will not fool God.

"But what if I don't have the faith to really believe she will be healed?" Then pray for what you can believe. Pray for God to comfort her, to give her grace, to glorify Himself through her

suffering. Start by praying honestly, then pray for God to increase your faith. Some people don't get what they want from God because they ask, but they do not really believe.

We do not ask persistently.

Luke's Gospel records two of Jesus' parables that make the same point. In Luke 11:5–10, Jesus tells of a man who goes to his neighbor at midnight to borrow some bread. The hour is late, the neighbor is unwilling, yet because of the man's persistence he gets up and gives him what he needs. Luke 11:9 instructs us: "Ask [or literally, keep on asking] and it will be given to you; seek [keep on seeking] and you will find; knock [keep on knocking] and the door will be opened to you."

In Luke 18:1–8 Jesus tells a second parable "to show them that they should always pray and not give up." In this story, a persistent widow petitions a reluctant judge. The point is the same as in the first parable. If even unwilling humans will respond to persistent requests, how much more will God, the generous Giver, respond to the persistent cries of His elect?

Some people ask God for their heart's desires, possibly with mountain-moving faith, but fail to persist. Yet I know of people who prayed without much promise for 10, 15, even 20 years, believing that God would do a work in my heart. How thankful I am now that they persisted and did not give up when the prospects were dim.

Perhaps we pray for too many things. By the time we pick up the prayer chain at church, and a dozen new requests in our Sunday school class, and another five in the morning service, plus a bunch more at our small group, how can we possibly persist in all of these?

Ask yourself, if I could pick only five things I'd like to see God do over this next year what would they be? Then determine to persist in making daily requests without fail for the next year. As you are able, you certainly can pray for others also. But make your prayers like the bullets from a high-precision rifle: specific and persistent. Don't shoot prayers like pellets from a shotgun: scattered everywhere, hoping to hit something.

We ask with wrong motives.

For the disciple of Christ, the core of petitionary prayer is a request for the Kingdom of God to come and the will of God to be done. It is a heart cry that the purposes and plans of God come to fruition, and that He be glorified therein. That is not to say that God does not heal bodies, bestow employment, win wrestling matches, and give life mates. But it is to say that we must carefully weigh our requests against the Kingdom purposes of God.

James 4:3 says, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." The people to whom James was writing evidently viewed God as a great big vending machine in the sky. Just pick whatever you would like and push the button.

We must remember that God's ultimate concern is not with our team winning its ball game, but in Himself being glorified in our ball game. His ultimate concern is not that we all have perfect health, but that we lift up every ounce of our health to His honor. His ultimate concern is not that we have a high-paying job, or possibly even a job at all, but that we praise Him for what He provides. His ultimate concern is that we are consumed with His glory in whatever state we are in.

I believe that God delights in giving even the smallest of things to His children, but we must weigh the motives of our hearts against the substance of our requests. We must ask, is my ultimate desire in this to see God glorified in my life and in others? The Bible plainly says that

some people do not get what they ask for because they ask for the wrong reasons.

We ask with sin in our hearts.

In Psalm 66 David boldly proclaims the goodness of God, who heard his prayer and answered his request. But he adds to this a careful warning: “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened” (v. 18). To petition God while knowingly keeping a special place in your heart for some favorite sin is to devalue God’s requirement for holiness.

First John 3:22 says, “[We] receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.” Proverbs 28:9 is particularly colorful: “If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable”—that is, they make God ill!

At times I have approached God in reverse order. I have bargained with Him: *If You would only honor my request, then I would be willing to make a necessary life change.* I want to make sure I’m going to get the goods up front! But you see, sometimes we don’t get what we want from God for just that reason—we ask with sin in our hearts.

Getting Beyond the Ceiling

No article on petitionary prayer can truthfully offer guarantees of the desired answer every time. But we have clear statements from God that teach why some of our prayers seem to get stuck at ceiling-level. God delights in responding to heartfelt requests from His beloved children. But we must ask in faith, with persistence, from a life of purity, and for the glory of God.

» **See Also:** *On Your Own: Prayer Power*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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On Your Own
Prayer Power

Certain attitudes and behavior can block prayer. Others can lend it power. What conditions for powerful prayer can you find in the following verses?

Eccles. 5:1-2

Mark 11:24

John 15:7

James 5:16

1 Peter 3:7

1 John 3:22