

What It Means to Ask Amiss

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One day when Julie, our youngest, was three years old, she created quite a ruckus when I refused to let her have her mother's brand new dagger-like sewing scissors to play with. Later that evening, Jeff, then nine, felt sure I didn't love him because I rejected his tearful plea for a hot fudge sundae less than two hours after he had eaten a full course dinner topped off with pie and ice cream. On other occasions, Jodi, our first-born, has felt abused because her daddy turned a deaf ear to requests that were just as dangerous and unhealthy.

In each case my children thought I was an old meany who did not love them. But if they had looked at their request through other eyes, they would have known that my denial, instead of being evidence of my indifference, was proof positive of my love.

Now, if your prayer experience is at all typical, it is shot through with requests which God apparently has not heard. You have come to him with your urgent pleas and plaintive petitions, but the desired response has not come. As a result you have been tempted to think God does not care or is not listening.

Wrong on both counts! There is a difference between prayers that are unheard and prayers that are unanswered. God has promised to hear all petitions of those who come to him with a clean heart and a right spirit. He has said concerning man: "And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate" (Exodus 22:27).

But, while God promises to hear all prayers, he nowhere promises to satisfy all whims. He will not make himself a cosmic bellhop who delivers what you want where and when you want it.

Actually, the Bible is full of illustrations of unanswered prayer: There was Moses who prayed that he might enter the Promised Land, but who died on Nebo's lonely mountain.

There was the Psalmist who prayed around the clock on one occasion without an answer. And, in a moment of despair he cried: “Oh my God, I cry by day. But thou dost not answer; and by night, but find no rest” (Psalm 22:2).

There was the prophet, who voiced the anguished exclamation: “Thou hast wrapped thyself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through” (Lamentations 3:44). There was also Paul, who asked his Lord three times for relief from a thorn in the flesh without success.

There was Jesus himself, who in the garden prayed that he might be spared exposure to the malignancy of man's sin, but his prayer was not answered.

Some of history's greatest persons have had to learn the patience of unanswered prayer. Nevertheless, while those prayers were unanswered, we cannot say they were unheard. On the contrary, those prayers were heard in precisely the same way Julie's request for a pair of scissors and Jeff's request for a hot fudge sundae were heard.

I was not indifferent to my children's pleas. If there had been any way of granting their request without damage to their well-being, I would gladly have done so. I love them. But I would not have been kind to my little girl had I provided her with a spear like instrument with which she might have seriously and permanently injured herself. I would not have done my son a favor if I had allowed him to indulge excessively in sweets which could have undermined his health. Nor should you accuse God of being deaf or indifferent because he is wise! He sees what you cannot see. He knows what you do not know. Therefore, his judgment is far better than your own.

Put this down as a profound but simple truth: “God's will is your highest good.” When you pray and your prayer is unanswered, the reason is not that God is deaf or indifferent. It is that he knows *now* what, in time, you *will* know. *His plan for you is better than anything you can plan for yourself.*

The Book of James, which tells more about prayer than any other book in the Bible, contains these words of wisdom: “You ask, and do not receive, because you ask wrongly” (James 4:3).

In other words, when you pray without apparent success, your disappointment may not be caused by any of the circuit breakers mentioned in Chapter 1 but by some fault in the character of your prayer itself. You “ask and do not receive” because you ask in the wrong way or for the wrong things.

Ailment Four: A Disregard for Natural Law

It may be that your prayer has been ineffective because you have prayed without regard for the natural order of things.

I am thinking right now of a schoolboy who prayed God would make San Francisco the state capital of California because that is what he wrote on his examination paper. He knew the correct answer began with S and ended with O, but could not remember what went in between. So, hoping for an "A" on his paper, he earnestly prayed God would make his wild guess the right answer.

“Obviously God couldn't answer a prayer like that,” you reason. “Think of the chaos involved if the Capitol were suddenly airlifted from Sacramento to the city by the Golden Gate.” Perhaps so. But a little boy became disillusioned with prayer because God failed to change the capital of California to accommodate him.

A college student also gave up praying because he had not received the scholarship for which he had prayed so hard and worked so long. He forgot that for every scholarship there were a dozen potential winners who had prayed and worked as hard as he. Even an omnipotent God could award the limited number of scholarships to only a small percentage of the applicants.

You see, there is a natural order to things and you are guilty of praying wrongly when you pray without regard for natural law. From the point of view of religion, there are two possible attitudes to take toward natural law. One of these is that God has made this a universe of law and, being law-abiding, has made himself subject to his own laws. This interpretation gives you a kind of captive God, a God who might want to suspend these laws under certain conditions but cannot do so now that he has set them in operation. This view explains many instances of

unanswered prayer, particularly those relating to accidental situations.

A few years ago I had a convertible which I enjoyed very much. One lovely summer day I was driving along with the top down when I heard a mother yell, "Tommy, come back here!" Instinctively I slammed my foot on the brake and came to a halt. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a little boy, about four years of age, dart across the street in front of me, directly into the path of an oncoming car whose driver had not yet seen him. Realizing the danger, I blew my horn and prayed: "Oh God, don't let it happen."

Almost simultaneously, the mother began to scream, "No, God, no!" Apparently my horn and the screams attracted the attention of the other driver, for she hit her brakes. The expression of horror I saw on her face verified for me her later testimony that when she saw the child and applied her brakes, she prayed, "God, don't let me hit him." But, in spite of her prayer, she did hit him.

Now, from the point of view of the first interpretation of natural law, you would have to say that even though God wanted very much to spare Tommy the pain of serious injury, he was powerless to do so because he had made himself a captive of his own laws. There were forces at work in that moment which he could not conveniently suspend. To do so would result in havoc. And, while this particular point of view answers certain questions about unanswered prayer, in the judgment of many it is inadequate.

There is a second interpretation. This is the view that natural law is something which having been created by God is now sustained by him day in and day out, moment by moment, eon after eon, because in his loving wisdom he knows this is best.

Actually, what science calls natural law is really nothing more than the sum total of man's observations on how things work. The scientist has observed that under certain conditions, certain things behave in a certain way every single time! And, because they always have acted in this way, he is led to the erroneous conclusion that they must do so, whether God wants them to or not.

A more meaningful, and to my way of thinking more accurate, conclusion is this: *The predictable behavior which science observes and calls natural law is really the love, wisdom, and faithfulness of God at work.* Natural law operates with dependability because God wants it that way. Thus, G. K. Chesterton's earthy comment that the sun doesn't rise because of natural law but because God says "Get up and do it again" may be closer to the truth than the most precise system of astronomy which omits God.

How does prayer fit into this understanding of the order of things? Well, in the first place, you must reckon with the fact that it is God's faithfulness in sustaining his laws which makes life possible on this planet. Suppose the chemical ingredients of your food were the product of caprice. Suppose there were no dependability about it. Suppose the food you eat today and find nourishing turned out to be poisonous tomorrow. You would be in a terrible fix. It would become necessary that every nutrient you now enjoy be subjected to exhaustive tests each time it was used, lest on some occasion it would prove harmful to you.

Or suppose the various laws governing gravitation, propulsion, momentum, or the endless physical laws you have come to count on, were subject to the sudden and arbitrary whims of a changeable mind. Not only would life be destroyed on this planet, but the planet itself would be put in jeopardy.

You can live and move and have your being you can plan with some sense of security about the future because, and only because, this is a universe of law. And since you wish to live and move and have your being since you wish to be able to plan your future with some sense of security you should also want God to continue to sustain his laws, because this is the best for you and for all mankind.

This confidence in the ultimate good of an orderly universe should be your conviction in spite of the fact that the same laws which sustain life are capable of destroying it. Earthquakes, fires, floods, sickness, even death are part of the natural order of things. And when, in spite of all your praying, someone you love and desperately need is taken from you as a result of some catastrophe, the insights of Christian faith should lead you to say:

God did not will this individual tragedy, but he did will the laws and the continuation of those laws which permitted it.

Does that outlook on life seem bad? Look at the case of little Tommy again. At least three people prayed he would not be hurt. I prayed. His mother prayed. The driver of the other car prayed. But we were praying wrongly. The sparing of his injury was incompatible with natural order. The scientific principle known as inertia made it impossible to stop the car in the short distance remaining. If God had suspended that principle once, the movement of objects such as automobiles would never again have been dependable.

And if the car was allowed to strike the child (as it was), the only way for him not to be hurt would be for all the warm, soft, human characteristics which made him a lovable child to suddenly change into some kind of impervious material which could resist the shock of being hit by a ton of steel going twenty miles an hour. If such a change could occur, all the natural laws operating at that moment would become equally subject to suspension. Nothing would be dependable, and unimaginable misery would thereby be inflicted on the other four billion inhabitants of the earth.

At that moment the sparing of this little boy's injury was incompatible with the continuance of natural law. Therefore, God chose the greater good. God allowed the tragedy to happen, not because he is unloving or indifferent to the pain of a little boy, but because he is truly loving, because he is sensitive to the chaos which a capricious act however well intentioned could inflict upon the whole human race. (Tommy's injuries were not serious and he continues to live an active life!)

To pray, therefore, without regard for the natural order of things whether it be for San Francisco to become the capital of California or for the laws of physics to be suspended is to pray wrongly. You should not rebuke God as being unfeeling or unwise when such prayers are unanswered. Rather, seek to understand the true love and wisdom which are characteristic of his way.

Ailment Five: A Disregard for Others

A second manner in which you may be guilty of praying wrongly is when you pray without regard for the welfare of others.

This ailment is not unrelated to my previous point. While God sees the individual, he also sees the crowd. He will not do anything to benefit one person that would be to the detriment of many. “The Lord looks down from heaven, he sees *all* the sons of men” (Psalm 33:13).

Suppose, for instance, I am scheduled to give an address in Oakland, four hundred miles north of Bakersfield, California, where I live. Arrangements are made for a flight which will take me directly to that city. But, because of carelessness on my part, I miss the plane.

Feverishly I check with the airlines and discover there is another flight destined for San Francisco, across the bay from Oakland. The passenger agent estimates that if the flight is on time, and if I can secure an adventurous taxicab driver who will take me across the Bay Bridge at breakneck speed, I just might make my speaking engagement.

So I climb aboard the plane, praying all the while that by some sort of miracle I will avoid the embarrassment of missing an engagement resulting from my carelessness. Lo and behold, as the plane approaches the airport, the pilot announces over the intercom that due to heavy fog over San Francisco we will land in Oakland. Absolutely thrilled at the miraculous way God has answered my prayers, I deplane in Oakland and grab a taxi which speeds me to my speaking engagement in good time.

However, while my convenience is being served, there is a doctor on the plane who is desperately needed at a San Francisco hospital for emergency surgery. Because of this delay his patient has been put in jeopardy.

Another public speaker, scheduled to make a much more important address than I, has been placed under great strain by this “miracle” which has taken place for my own private benefit and, after a wild taxi trip through heavy traffic, he arrives at his meeting just in the nick of time. The poor chairman of that particular program nearly has ulcers because his star attraction is late.

The other passengers are also subjected to varying degrees of anxiety as are the crew members whose plans have been upset – and all of this distress occurred so that I, who had missed an earlier flight due to carelessness, might be spared the embarrassment of arriving late for a speaking engagement.

Obviously I have overstated the case for emphasis. But surely you can see the chaos that would result if God indiscriminately answered individual prayers without concern for the total good. Therefore, if at times you pray in blind or selfish disregard for the needs and rights of others, you may expect your prayers to be unanswered. God, who “knoweth and doeth all things well,” will not needlessly burden or inconvenience many to accommodate the one.

Ailment Six: A Disregard for God's Sovereignty

Finally, you may be guilty of “praying wrongly” when you pray without regard for the sovereignty of God. If all your prayers were answered, you, not God, would be in control of things. You would be the ruler of earth. And, though the thought might be enticing for a moment, I am sure you don't feel you could govern things better than he.

A Scottish woman earned a modest living by peddling her wares along the roads of her country. When she came to an intersection, she would toss a stick into the air to determine which way to go. On one occasion she was seen tossing the stick into the air not once but three times. When asked why, she replied, “Because the first two times it pointed a way I didn't want to go!”

Many of your prayers may be like that. You ask God for guidance, but when on occasion he directs you down a dull or difficult road, you choose another path because it seems brighter. How unfortunate! Though you see only the road's beginning, God sees its ending too. He knows which way is truly best.

So do not try to thwart his will. Seek it. Do not pray in such a fashion as to deny his sovereignty. Acknowledge it. Remember: what God plans for you is better than anything you can plan for yourself! Pursue prayer in this conviction, and you will discover it really does change things for the better.

Two little children were playing house. One was a five-year-old, the other three. In the course of their playtime, the mother overheard the older child say, "Now it's time to go to bed. First we must say our prayers."

Kneeling down beside their make-believe bed in their make-believe house, the children folded their hands and bowed their heads. The older one prayed, "We've had a lovely day today, God. What do you plan for Tuesday?"

Those simple words express the kind of faith and trust God wants from you. He loves you. He longs to help and please you. He wants to work with you so all things will fit into a pattern for your good. If you will let him if you will commit yourself to him in such a way that you do his will as if it were your own then you will set in motion forces which make it possible for him to do your will as if it were his own. When that happens, the faith-filled words of a little child can become your prayer to: "I've had a lovely day today, God. What do you plan for Tuesday?"

CORRECTIVES

For Ailment Four, A Disregard for Natural Law.

To pray without regard for natural law is to pray wrongly. Do not rebuke God as being unfeeling or unwise when such prayers are unanswered. Rather, seek to understand better the true love and wisdom of his way.

For Ailment Five, A Disregard for Others.

While God sees the individual, he also sees the crowd. If, therefore, you pray in blind or selfish disregard for the needs of others, your prayers will be unanswered. God will not bless one to the detriment of many. To enrich your prayers and their product, widen the scope of your concern.

For Ailment Six, A Disregard for God's Sovereignty.

God sees what you cannot see. He knows what you cannot know. Do not try to outguess him. Submit to his sovereignty. His plan for you is better than anything you can plan for yourself.