

Born to Win

Taking “No” for an Answer

by Ronald L. Dart

You would think that prayer is one of the truly simple ideas in the Bible. We have needs, we ask, God supplies. Problem is, it doesn't always work that way. It would be easier, in a way, if God *never answered prayer*. Then we would at least know where we stand. I don't mean that we wouldn't worship God, in song and in prayer—many of the prayers in the Psalms are there *solely* to praise God, to honor him, to worship him. So if he never answered prayer at all our problem would be much simplified: just get busy with life and take what comes. If he answered prayer *all the time* our problems might be even easier. Although, when you think about, it's hard to imagine what the world would be like—what any one of our *lives* would be like—if *every* prayer of ours was answered. The dean of Christian apologetics, C. S. Lewis, put his finger on this in a short essay titled *Petitionary Prayer: A Problem Without an Answer*.

It is those prayers that ask something of God—prayers that make a petition—that pose the problem; for sometimes they are answered (sometimes *dramatically*), and sometimes, let's face it, they're not. And sometimes the answer is “No”. Sometimes they are answered in such a way as to leave a person wondering if God answered the prayer or if they just got better. I pray God will forgive me for suggesting that there is what appears almost a *random* quality in the answers to prayer. Mind you, I am *certain* that God answers prayers and intervenes in people's lives. I am just as certain that he doesn't do it all the time and every time. And I'm just as certain that we really can't discern the reasons for it. There is this curious situation recorded in some manuscripts of John's gospel, You'll find it in the King James Version, but nearly all the other modern translations omit a verse of this story. Here's the way it reads in the New King James Bible (which follows the same Greek text as the original King James Version). It's found in John, chapter five, and verse two:

John 5

NKJV

² Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches.

³ In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water.

⁴ For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had.

Now, part of this passage here that you find in the New King James Version is not in the NIV, or the New Revised Standard Version, or the New American Standard Bible either. The reason being that many of the *oldest* texts of the New Testament in Greek don't have it. In fact, they don't have the section that begins right toward the end of verse 3, “waiting for the moving of the water”, all the way through verse 4. Not there.

John 5

NKJV

⁵ Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years.

Now we are in a text that's agreed upon by *all* the old manuscripts.

John 5

NKJV

⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he already had been in that condition a long time, He said to him, "Do you want to be made well?"

You know, it's amazing, too, that you need to ask; but he did.

John 5

NKJV

⁷ The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; [...]"

That's in all the texts, by the way.

John 5

NKJV

⁷ "[...] but while I am coming, another steps down before me."

⁸ Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk."

⁹ And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked. And that day was the Sabbath.

Now, what is interesting about this passage is *no text* doubts the validity of verse 7, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up", which, when you take out verse 4, doesn't make much sense at all. You'd say, "What do you mean?" Can you imagine where we would be reading that and asking this question? The explanatory verse that tells you why this is significant is deemed to be a later addition. Presumably, some scribe added it to the text to explain this. It's kind of hard to figure why. *Who* would have added it? *Why* would they have added it? It's lost in the fog of history. But you should know this about that: In the earliest years of the Christian faith, the gospel was an *entirely oral tradition*. As far as we can tell, not one word of what we call the New Testament was actually written down for nearly *twenty years*; and even then it wasn't the gospels that were being written. So even though this may have been missing from John's original manuscript, the story—very strongly—was a part of the church's collective memory, and it found its way into certain manuscripts of John. Who did it, why they did it...*why* is probably pretty easy: They did it because they *knew* the reason for it. They knew the explanation of this statement the man made (which all the texts agree with), "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up." And someone dragged from his memory what was told through the churches all that period of time. All those people were down there because about once a year an angel came down, stirred the water, and the first guy to hit it was healed.

Now, it's a terrible thing...the reason I'm bringing this up is not to discuss the textual criticism of the New Testament, but to consider the theological implications of this event. For the man himself obviously believed in the moving of the water; we know that. And he believed that only one person would be healed after that. It's a *terrible* thing to consider, but we have to: This was something like a divine lottery. And we must ask ourselves: Why on earth would God do that? The answer that presents itself first is: Well, he did it to keep hope alive. He wasn't going to heal everybody, but once in a while he would heal someone so the people would know he was there, so they would have hope, so they wouldn't become hopeless. It was to affirm that God was there, he could and would forgive, and he could and would heal. And I add, with some trepidation, he healed on his own initiative.

So why did Christ heal *this* man on *this* occasion when the man hadn't been able to make it to the water before? (And I get the feeling he had been there probably for more than just one year, waiting for the moving of the waters.) The answer is in the text:

John 5

NKJV

⁸ Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk."

⁹ And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked. And that day was the Sabbath.

You see, by Jewish law the man was not supposed to carry a burden on the Sabbath day. Jesus told him, "take up your bed and walk." He didn't tell him just to get up and walk; he said, "Take up your bed." And the guy... I mean, what would *you* do? Someone who told you to take up your bed and walk and healed you of a terrible disease... man, if he told you to stand on your head, you'd do it. Jesus was throwing down the gauntlet before the Pharisees on the issue of Sabbath keeping—not a question of *whether* to keep the Sabbath, but *how* it was to be done. The Pharisees placed technical Sabbath observance *even above healing the sick if you were able to do it*. So there was a method behind this seemingly random event. But you can't find any method behind what this poor paralytic had seen on more than one occasion: when the water was stirred, and the first guy there was healed, and nobody else was.

Now, I'd like to connect this to another healing of Jesus. The story is found in Matthew, chapter 15, verse 21. Jesus decided to get out of Jerusalem and from Judea altogether, and he...

Matthew 15

NKJV

²¹ [...] went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon [*on the coast*].

²² And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed."

Now, you have to wonder why Jesus healed *at all*. I mean, there is no particular reason why he couldn't have made it through his entire earthly ministry, done everything he wanted to do, and never healed a single person; because when you ask the question of why he healed at all, you then have to answer the question: Why didn't he heal *everyone*? (And he didn't.)

Now, I've heard some people call it a kind of divine advertising: he healed people to get attention to the gospel; but that cheapens what Jesus was doing and saying. And to say that he healed people because he cared about them, and because he had the power to heal, because he could... it founders on this very story.

Matthew 15

NKJV

²³ But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us."

The snub is almost complete, and the disciples said, "Let's just get rid of her."

Matthew 15

NKJV

²⁴ But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

“She’s not within my mandate.”

Matthew 15

NKJV

²⁵ Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, “Lord, help me!”

²⁶ But He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs.”

Ouch. That doesn’t seem like the Jesus we know. And her desperation shows in her response. She was so desperate the *insult* that this could have implied went right over her head, and she said:

Matthew 15

NKJV

²⁷ And she said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.”

She *reasoned* with him.

Matthew 15

NKJV

²⁸ Then Jesus answered and said to her, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Now we pass *clean out* of the realm of random acts of kindness and random acts of healing. Her faith was a factor. But how come Jesus didn’t spot that faith earlier than that? The answer: It was only partially on display; it did not become fully on display until she came all the way through and persisted to the end. What was it that identified her faith as “great” faith? She didn’t take “No” for an answer.

In the essay I was citing from C. S. Lewis, he put his finger right on this issue that we’re talking about here. The paragraph I want to read to you is a little bit difficult to read because it’s a very, very long sentence. You’ll have to concentrate now. C. S. Lewis wrote:

Again and again in the New Testament we find the demand not for faith in such a general and (as it would seem to me) spiritual sense as I have described but for faith of a far more particular and (as it would seem to me) cruder sort: faith that the particular thing the petitioner asks will be given him.

C. S. Lewis - Petitionary Prayer: A Problem Without an Answer

Now, what he’s saying is this: Again and again in the New Testament we find the demand, of us, that the particular thing we want will be given to us if we have this kind of faith. He said:

It is as if God demanded of us a faith which the Son of God in Gethsemane did not possess, and which if He had possessed it, would have been erroneous.

C. S. Lewis - Petitionary Prayer: A Problem Without an Answer

And in that last sentence C. S. Lewis underlined the problem he was struggling with. Here this woman (that we just talked about) is an example of *persistence* in prayer, cited as an act of faith where the woman would absolutely not take “No” for an answer. It’s a great example for us. It had nothing whatsoever to do with worked-up faith. The faith was expressed in what she *did*, and it arose out of a *passion* for her daughter and a sense of desperation. But it is *totally* unlike that petitionary prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane. When Jesus came to the garden on that terrible night he withdrew about a stone’s throw from his disciples and he...

Matthew 26

AKJV

³⁹ [...] fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as you will.

Jesus wanted to find a way not to do this.

Matthew 26

AKJV

⁴⁰ And he comes to the disciples, and finds them asleep, and said to Peter, What, could you not watch with me one hour?

⁴¹ Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

⁴² He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, your will be done.

⁴³ And he came and found them asleep again: for their eyes were heavy.

⁴⁴ And he left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words.

Luke tells us that, at that point...

Luke 22

AKJV

⁴³ [...] there appeared an angel to him from heaven, strengthening him.

⁴⁴ And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

⁴⁵ And when he rose up from prayer, and was come to his disciples, he found them sleeping[....]

Now, the scripture tells us that Jesus...

Hebrews 4

AKJV

¹⁵ [...] was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.

That would not be possible unless he could know the cold fingers of fear around his heart as he anticipated what was coming for him that night, for he knew it. In some ways, these were the worst hours of all.

Now, looking at this example and comparing it to the woman’s *raw* faith that she had in the answer to prayer, Lewis wrote again. He said:

We might say that in his tender humility Our Lord, just as He refused the narcotic wine mingled with myrrh, and just as He chose (I think) to be united to a human nature not of iron nerves but to a nature sensitive, shrinking, and unable not to live through torture in advance, so He chose on that night to plumb the depths of Christian experience, to resemble not the heroes of His army but the very weakest camp followers and unfits; or even that such a choice is implied in those unconsciously profound and involuntarily blessed words: “He saved others, himself he cannot save.”

C. S. Lewis - Petitionary Prayer: A Problem Without an Answer

And what C. S. Lewis is pointing out for us is that a different kind of prayer would have been *impossible* for Jesus. Unlike the Gentile woman, Jesus could not pray with absolute faith that his request would be granted; for the entire purpose of his coming would have been cast aside. And we tend to follow more the example of Jesus than of the woman who persisted in the face of outright rejection—who would not take “No” for an answer. We pray, most of the time, “Thy will be done.” But Lewis cast this in a light that I hadn’t thought about before. And I’m going to quote him again; he says:

I do not of course mean that the words “Thy will be done” are merely a submission. They should, and if we make progress they will increasingly, be the voice of joyful desire, free of hunger and thirst, and I argue very heartily that to treat them simply as a clause of submission or renunciation greatly impoverishes the prayer.

C. S. Lewis - Petitionary Prayer: A Problem Without an Answer

I will bring my petition before God. I will lay it before him with all my heart. But then I add the words, “Nevertheless, not *my* will but *your* will be done.” It is, in my prayer life, a clause of submission—a willingness to accept the will of God even though it may disappoint. But contrast this from what C. S. Lewis is suggesting. He says this clause should be “the voice of *joyful desire*”: Thy will be done. In other words, one *joyfully* desires the will of God over our own. And Jesus said (in Mark’s version):

Mark 14

AKJV

³⁶ [...] Abba, Father, all things are possible to you; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what you will.

And as in Matthew:

Matthew 26

AKJV

³⁹ [...] O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as you will.

Jesus acknowledges that we come to prayer with a divergence of will: My will and God’s will are not necessarily the same. (I might even say almost never are they the same.) But then he said this:

Matthew 26

AKJV

⁴⁰ O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, [...]

Which almost seems as though he had come to an acceptance.

Matthew 26

AKJV

⁴⁰ [...] if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, your will be done.

What seems to be happening in prayer that night is a *merging* of Jesus' will with that of the Father. And, you know, we may someday come to prefer his will to our own—not in the abstract, but in reality. For which of us, if we have an active prayer life, have not come to the place in our life that with hindsight we've looked back over our shoulder and have been absolutely *grateful* that our prayer was not answered, that *our* will was *not done*, that God's will came in its place.

There is a note of more than passing interest in Jesus' example: He did not make his prayer *once* and then walk away. We're told in the gospel accounts, when you put them all together, he prayed this way a "third time". What intrigued me about this was something that Paul said. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he was talking about his own experience, in his own life, and the things that he had gone through. You'll find this in Second Corinthians, twelfth chapter. He said:

2 Corinthians 12

NKJV

⁷ And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, [...]

I mean, God had shown him stuff that he never imagined he's see. And he was worried, and thought it might be that he would become exalted over it. "Lest that should happen"...

2 Corinthians 12

NKJV

⁷ [...] a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

⁸ Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

Three times. Jesus went back *three times* and prayed this prayer. *Three* different times Saul made special pleading with God that this would go away and he wouldn't have to deal with it. And God said to Paul:

2 Corinthians 12

NKJV

⁹ [...] My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness. [...]

So now what Paul gets through his head is that his weakness (the thing he was struggling with) actually honored God—that God was glorified by it. *God's* strength was what was seen rather than *Paul's* strength. And so Paul, finally seeing what God's will was, said:

2 Corinthians 12

NKJV

⁹ [...] Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

"Because if I didn't have these infirmities it might not." He had come to that place C. S. Lewis was talking about, where he said: I *gladly* accept and look forward to the will of God.

2 Corinthians 12

NKJV

¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Jesus asked three times. Paul asked three times. And in each case there was an acceptance of God's will in preference to his own.

But this is very different from the prayer of the woman who would not take "No" for an answer, and C. S. Lewis points out that this is also *very different* from Jesus' *promise* at the Last Supper. You'll find this reference (actually there are more than one of these in this whole section dealing with it) in John, the 14th chapter. Jesus said to his disciples that night:

John 14

KJ2000

¹³ And whatsoever you shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

¹⁴ If you shall ask anything in my name, I will do it.

This does not seem on the surface to be qualified, and this was one of the things that C. S. Lewis found troubling in the contrast between these two types of prayer: one that won't take "No" for an answer; and the other one that prays, "Thy will be done." In John 15, he says this:

John 15

HCSB

¹⁶ You did not choose Me, but I chose you. I appointed you that you should go out and produce fruit and that your fruit should remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in My name, He will give you.

But you have to understand: these promises of Jesus which seem so absolute and so demanding of faith on our parts, they have a context. The Last Supper included a ceremony; you know it. It included bread and wine and the words, "This is the blood of my covenant." What was being established on this occasion was a *new* covenant, and the discussion that followed was an elaboration of the *terms* of that covenant. These "whatsoever you ask" clauses were merely *one side* of the covenant. The other side of the covenant is this—John 14:21:

John 14

AKJV

²¹ He that has my commandments, and keeps them, he it is that loves me: and he that loves me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him.

To who? To "he who has my commandments and keeps them". Earlier he says:

John 14

AKJV

¹⁵ If you love me, keep my commandments.

Jesus later says:

John 14

KJ2000

²³ [...] If a man loves me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. [*And move in.*]

In John 15, verse 7:

John 15

AKJV

⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you will, and it shall be done to you.

Did you catch the “if”? “If you abide in me and my words abide in you.” So all this “whatsoever you ask”-ed is not unconditional; it is one side of the deal which includes, “If you love me keep my commandments.” The apostle James will later write, “You know,”...

James 4

AKJV

² [...] you have not, because you ask not.

³ You ask, and receive not, because you ask amiss, that you may consume it on your lusts.

⁴ You adulterers and adulteresses, know you not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.

Every man should know well who his true friends are, and you can't be in covenant with God and with the world at the same time. And it's possible, in James' words to “ask amiss”, or to ask when you don't have the *standing* to ask. But I wouldn't take that last too far, because the woman who would not take “No” for an answer did not have the *standing* to ask. She asked anyway, putting her faith in the mercy of God to the test, and her daughter was healed.

So now maybe we shouldn't take “No” for an answer, and we can pray until we prefer God's will over our own.

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