

PRAYER BOOSTERS**The Role of Faith in Prayer**

This is a tricky subject. What do you do when someone says, "if you had more faith, your prayer would be answered?" Have you ever thought that maybe your prayers were not answered because of your lack of faith?

In my preparation for today I was comforted by some words from John Piper, a renowned theologian and author. In reply to a letter someone had written to him about Matthew 17:14-20 John Piper said "I don't really understand this issue about faith and find it baffling." You don't normally hear theologians say that.

We read in this passage that the disciples had been given authority to cast out demons and heal the sick. They had seen God work through them in the past. But in this case their prayers didn't seem to work and they could not understand why. Jesus says it was because of the littleness of their faith but then he says that they only needed faith the size of a mustard seed to move a mountain. The mountain bit is not literal, but a Jewish expression for anything of great difficulty. How does this work? Their faith is too small, but then if they just had a tiny bit of faith they could do amazing things.

The gospels tell us that Jesus rebukes the disciples a bit for lack of faith. When Peter was trying to walk on water and began to sink Jesus said he had little faith. Matthew 14:31 This seems a bit harsh. The incredible thing about that story is that actually he did walk on water. But then it says Peter took his eyes off Jesus and started to look around, and began to sink. Why did you doubt me? says Jesus. Jesus had told him to come and he was Lord over the waves.

When the disciples were in a boat in a storm and petrified he called out their lack of faith. Matthew 8:26 These were experienced fishermen so had been in storms before. They were panicking because they had been trying for some time to deal with the situation, and they were at the point where they were about to capsize and almost

certainly die. Maybe the issue was that they didn't wake up Jesus earlier. They used their natural ability first.

When the blind man Bartimaeus was healed, Jesus said it was because of his faith. Mark 10:52 He commends the woman who was bleeding saying her faith had made her well. Matthew 9:22 He praises the son of the centurion who was so confident in Jesus ability to heal that he said to Jesus. You don't need to come to my house. You can just say the word and he will be healed. Luke 7:9 That is faith. He understood that it wasn't anything magical in Jesus touching him. It was about the power of God at work and that power was not about physical presence. Jesus said he could not do many miracles in his hometown because of their lack of faith. Matthew 13:58

So clearly this faith thing is linked to prayer in some way. But how does it work? Some Christians say that faith when it comes to prayer is like a tool. If we have enough faith or if we use this tool correctly, our prayer will be answered. It seems there are two problems with this view of faith in relation to prayer:

First, it puts the power of answered prayer in the hands of the one praying - and therefore it places the blame for unanswered prayer on the one who prays without sufficient faith. So, God has to bow down to our faith. It puts us at the centre.

Secondly, it very easily leads to selfishness where we use God and prayer to achieve our personal ends and means. This is a sort of name it and claim it mentality. Faith is a tool to get what we think we need.

Piper and other theologians who have wrestled with this say that the issue is not the quantity of faith that is the issue. It is the quality of the faith.

Maybe the disciples had come to think that they were somehow special and so they were partly responsible for the answered prayer. So, their faith was a bit in God and a bit in themselves. It would be difficult not to feel a bit special if every

time you laid hands on someone they got better. Human nature would lead to pride. Maybe their motive was wrong, and they were seeking to impress the crowds. James 4:3

Jesus prayed three times for the cross to be removed. Matthew 26:36-44. No one is suggesting that he didn't have faith. But ultimately the request has to be submitted to the will of God. Paul prayed three times for his "thorn in the flesh to be removed, and he had plenty of faith. 2 Corinthians 12:8 In the end, true faith is in the goodness and character and the power of God. I.e. it is in a person, not a result.

In Hebrews 11 we have the great chapter of faith. It starts by defining faith as confidence (v1) then it tells of the great men and women of faith in the Old Testament, -the heroes of the faith. They achieved great feats for God. But others were sawn in two and suffered greatly. (v35) It says all of them did not see all they were promised. (v39) There was a sense that they did not see the full fulfilment of what they believed God had promised them. But they kept faith in God, despite this.

Can we have faith in a particular outcome in prayer? Yes, I think we can. If we have sought God, and believe what we are asking is in line with his will, if our hearts are clean, and maybe have sensed God confirm what he will do, I believe we can have a confidence. (while remembering that God does not promise health, wealth, protection from hardship and suffering.)

I think the more we understand God's character and heart, the more likely it is our prayers will be in line with his will. I think when we have seen God answer in a certain area, it gives us more confidence in the future. I have seen God's provision of staff at church over many years, and so I have confidence in God answering this prayer. Other areas I have less confidence. (like seeing provision for buildings 😊)

But I think our confidence in the outcome has to be like in the book of Daniel when King Nebuchadnezzar threatened to put Daniels friends in the fiery furnace. Daniel 3. Their reply is a classic. V 17-18 We believe God will be able to

save us. And we think he will. I.e. they were Confident God would rescue them. Why did they think that? Millions of people over the years have died for their faith and not been saved from martyrdom. I don't know why they had that confidence. Maybe they felt God whisper it into his Spirit. I would just be thinking, "Well, I hope it is all over quickly." I would have little faith in God rescuing me.

But they say even if he doesn't God is still God. That is, their faith was in God more than the outcome. They were not going to bet absolutely everything on being saved. They were not going to say, "Well, if God does not save me then he is not real or to be trusted. "They were not going to become bitter and disillusioned if God did not answer as they thought.

For whatever reason, they had faith God would rescue them. But they also allowed for the sovereignty of God. Maybe God had a different plan. Maybe they had heard wrong from God. Maybe God had something better in mind.

It seems this is just like the great heroes in Hebrews 11 who never saw all that God had promised them, but instead they believed God was working out his purposes despite what they experienced. I think this is a really good attitude to have.

The quality of our faith improves the more we grow in understanding the character of God and the heart of God: that God cares, that God is able, that God is good, that God's desire is to see his kingdom come about, that God is sovereign

This understanding has to be deeper than just in our heads. We have to be totally confident in our hearts. It is easy to think that God cares about other people and will answer the prayers of other people who are more spiritual than me but that he doesn't really care for me. It is easy to think that God might powerfully answer other people's prayers but not mine because I am not really good enough. It is easy to think that God we read of in the Bible is somehow different from God today, that God has somehow changed. Are we confident in the character of God?

The quality of our faith grows as we learn to discern the whispers of God. This is when our desires begin to align with his heart and when we see what God is up to and hear those whispers. Then we grow in confidence of God working in a particular situation.

We grow in faith as we step out of faith in one area and see God come through. John Ortberg wrote a great book once called, "If you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat." What he means is if you don't sometimes put yourself in a position where you are totally reliant on God, then you will not see God's power at work. Faith grows as it is stretched. Personally, I have to say, I don't like the stretching process. It seems a good recipe for stress!! But if we don't stretch our faith, like a muscle it does not get bigger, in fact it starts to wither. When we can do something in our own strength, then we don't really need God at all, and we can lose that sense of relying in confidence in God.

The quality of our faith matters. The quantity not so much.

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SMALL GROUP REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

1. What is one thing that God impressed upon you this week from the devotions? Have you sensed God speaking to you at all in the silence?
2. Have you ever wondered if you don't have enough faith to see your prayers answered? Or been told this? How has it impacted you?
3. What do you reconcile the "contradiction" in the Matthew 17 passage that many have found puzzling?
4. Have you ever been very confident in the outcome of a prayer and yet not seen it come about? How has that impacted you?
5. What types of prayer do you have more faith for and what types of prayer do you have little faith for? What has led you to this position?
6. What is impacting your confidence in the character of God?
7. What can you do to improve the quality of your faith?
8. What is one thing you are going to do differently after this prayer journey?
9. If this is your last week, get the paper out that you wrote on what you hoped to get from this prayer journey. How have you progressed towards this goal?
10. How can your group help one another in the discipline and practice of prayer?