

Prayer Promise

Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. (John 14:12-14)

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (John 15:7)

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. (John 15:16)

In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete. (John 16:23-24)

If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer. (Matthew 21:22)

What do these verses mean? They aren't to be taken too literally. For example, we can't sharpen jello or stab someone with a rubber band, no matter how earnestly we pray. Nor are they meant to be applied frivolously. You will never walk on water, unless maybe it's a frozen pond. It's meant to be taken seriously by serious believers for serious purposes.

Lots of believers on 9/11/2001 prayed for their lives to be spared, yet almost 3000 people died, many of them cruelly and painfully. We know that some of them were true believers, and we can reasonably speculate that a great many of them, at least in those final moments, were true believers. So, obviously these verses don't apply to that sort of scenario, even though it seems serious and worthy of

God's immediate and favorable attention. What about prayer for God's intervention to stop islamic extremist wackos from cutting off heads and persecuting Christians? Apparently, these verses don't cover that, either.

So, what DO these verses mean? When DO they apply? Give us some real-life concrete examples of God actually living up to these promises. Maybe you have been very sick, and then you got well, to which you attribute God's divine intervention? Or maybe it was a loved one who recovered miraculously? Not terribly convincing, since we all know from experience that sometimes people recover, and sometimes they don't. Does that mean the people who died weren't praying hard enough? Does that mean the people who recovered are therefore better people in some way, or more devout or stronger in their faith than the less fortunate? That doesn't seem reasonable, since the most devout Christians suffer and die, no matter how much they believe, no matter how much they pray, and no matter how many of their friends and relatives pray for them. Besides, if heaven is as great as Christians claim it is, what's so wonderful about recovering from a grave illness and delaying the blissful passage into heaven? Maybe recovery is a sign of divine punishment?

Please explain to us, good Christians, exactly what these verses mean in plain, simple English. Please don't bother with the bit about God always answers prayer, but sometimes the answer is no. These verses are very straightforward. There is nothing to suggest that we have to read the fine print to get the full impact of Jesus' words. They don't say God *might*, or He will *sometimes*, or void where prohibited, some restrictions may apply, etc. The only requirement is that you believe. Matthew 21:22 couldn't be clearer. Yet it is at odds with reality. It just doesn't work that way, does it? If so, you should have no trouble providing plenty of convincing and compelling real-life examples.

Why aren't believers out there healing the sick and bringing dead folks back to life? Why aren't they praying for wealth so they can give money to the poor and needy? Why aren't they praying that somehow all the world's starving children might be fed and clothed? Or maybe they have prayed for those things? How's that working out?

Obviously, Jesus intended his followers to be mature and serious enough to understand that his prayer promises were not intended to be used in a frivolous, selfish, unreasonable, or nonsensical way. But, other than that common-sense caveat, Jesus didn't mince words. He said that within those obvious guidelines, and having met the belief test, he will give us what we ask for. He didn't say he might give us what we pray for. He didn't say he'd give it serious consideration. He didn't say anything about saying "no". He didn't say he'd give us what we pray for only if he agrees that it is the best possible solution or outcome. Modern Christians say all those things, but Jesus did not say any of those things. So, why do Christians put words in Jesus' mouth? Isn't Jesus fully capable of saying what he means and meaning what he says?

The literal interpretation of these verses is absolutely crystal clear. There is no ambiguity. There is no fine print in the Bible's account of Jesus' promises. Jesus didn't send his promises to the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Jewish elders for them to add their lists of exceptions, qualifications, restrictions, deadlines, disclaimers, disqualifiers, and exclusions. Yet modern Christians seem to want to add their own fine print. Why?

Here are some of the common claims we hear today from Christians.

Keep in mind that prayer is not our way of getting God to do what we want.

Really? Then what is the purpose of prayer? Then why does Jesus say (in John 15:7) If you remain in me and my words remain in you, **ask whatever you wish**, and it will be done for you. Why do Christians directly contradict the very words of Jesus himself (at least, according to John)? What part of *it will be done for you* do they not understand?

His answer may be some variation of "yes" or "no" or "wait, not now."

Where do Christians get that idea? Jesus says no such thing. Christians want to erase what Jesus said and insert their own wording. But it is their duty to understand and obey the Bible, not write it.

It is important to remember that God is all-knowing and is aware of the entire timeline of history. He knows every possible outcome of every possible choice in every possible situation; we do not. He sees the “big picture”; we see a partial brushstroke. We must trust that His answers to our prayers are the best possible solutions.

Then why pray at all? What's the point? God is going to make sure his will is done, no matter what. We can't change that, through prayer or anything else, if this interpretation is correct. Since we do not and cannot understand what's best overall, given our limited knowledge and understanding, why bother God with our silly requests?

Under this interpretation, there is only one prayer that makes any sense at all, and even it is gratuitous: “Thy will be done.” We are all familiar with the Lord's Prayer, which says just that. But if that's what Jesus had in mind, why did he make all these other promises about prayer? Christians seem to have no satisfactory answer to that.

It seems dishonest to me that Christians don't mention any of these conditions when they are trying to win converts to their faith. In my experience, Christians quote the verses and then are perfectly content to let the prospective recruit draw the obvious conclusions. It's only later, when the convert notices that things don't really quite work as advertised that Christians trot out the fine print.

I have had a lot of personal experience with prayer as a committed fundagelical Christian. It eventually became apparent to me that what the Bible says and what actually happens in real life are totally different things. It wasn't easy for me to accept that reality. It was a slow, painful process. But I was not very good at pretending. The plain simple truth is that God does not answer prayer at all, and I chose not to pretend otherwise.