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Why Didn't God Answer My Prayer for Guidance?

June 23, 2022



#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about why God didn't answer prayers for guidance regarding a major life decision and whether there's evidence that God is more likely to say yes to a prayer request made while fasting.

* When facing a major life decision, I prayed daily for guidance and for the Holy Spirit to order my steps, but I didn't get an answer, and my decision turned out to be the wrong one. Why?

* Is there evidence (biblical or extra-biblical) that God is more likely to say yes to a prayer request made while fasting, and if not, then why fast?

Transcript

[Music] This is Stand to Reason's #STRask podcast. I'm Amy Hall and with me is Greg Koukl and we're here to answer the questions that you's in on Twitter with the #STRask or through our website. If you' go to our website and you'go to the' page for the #STRask podcast.

In our archives you will find a link there that says Submit a Questions. We're trying to make it easier for everybody to'p participate since not everyone'has Twitter. We'want to make sure you'can'ask your question.

Alright, Greg. This question comes from Operation Pre-crime. Operation Pre-crime? Pre-crime.

Okay. Facing a major life decision and up against a hard deadline, I'pray daily for guidance and for the Holy Spirit to order all my steps. Crickets.

No answer, slash no confirmation. Made a decision, turns out to be the wrong one, which now sets me back even further. Why? - Well, I think there's a presumption here that the Holy Spirit is going to make the decision and then indicate what that decision is, okay? And I think that's a mistaken approach.

That's one, I think, one problem here. Notice no confirmation. Well, this word is part of a system that we've for many, many years have taught against as being non-biblical.

The Bible doesn't teach that God makes the decisions for us essentially and then drops little hints called confirmations when there's enough of them kind of lining up as to what his decision is so that we can make our decision. Now, there were two things going on there. There was the mention of confirmation and also wisdom.

So I'll speak at that in a moment, but I'm just speaking to the confirmation issue. If what we're doing is praying for God to tell us what to do essentially, and I think this is what most Christians are looking for when they are trying to make decisions, we want to know God's will for this and when we use the phrase God's will, we mean what is God's individual will, what does he desire for me to do in this circumstance? And this presumes that he is the one who makes the decision and then communicates that decision to us somehow. And generally, it's through a series of nudges and hints.

People have used different passages to justify this that then one cobbled together, a series of confirmations, we presume, this is the way that God wants us to go and off we go. And by the way, using that method causes all kinds of problems too. People make lots of bad decisions doing that, okay? Now in this case though, the other half is I prayed for wisdom and then I did not make a good decision, all right? Well, there's a number of things that might be going on here.

You can pray for wisdom, but not in a certain sense, take advantage of the sources of wisdom that are available to you. If the presumption is if I pray for wisdom, it's just going to, the wise choice will just appear in my mind, I don't think that's the way God usually works. He doesn't usually work immediately like from God to you.

And that's the way this whole decision-making thing often is characterized. Though sometimes he does. Sometimes there's a dream or a vision or an angel shows up or Jesus shows up or there's a prophetic word and these are in the book of Acts.

Not the nudge nudge hint system, but supernatural directives that come from God in a supernatural and clear unmistakable fashion, okay? Usually wisdom is immediate. God gives it immediately. What does that mean? That means through other means.

It's still God's action, but in the abundance of counselors, there's victory. That from Proverbs, which is a source of all kinds of wisdom. And then it tells you don't do this dumb thing, do this smart thing.

If you're not a student of Proverbs, and I encourage every single Christian to be a student of the book, find the date, read half the chapter on a given date. If it's an even month, I'm sorry, if it's an odd month, read the first half, if it's an even month, read the second half. This is not burdensome.

Takes you four or five, well, maybe five to 10 minutes if you're reading reflectively. You do that every day and you're gonna learn a whole bunch of stuff that you should do or you shouldn't do in order to not do something stupid, but do something smart, okay? So if you're praying for wisdom, but not and are not availing yourselves of the sources of wisdom that God provides, don't expect for it just to appear in your head, so to speak, this is the smart thing to do. Look in Proverbs, check with other people, do your research, a lot depends on the question in mind.

Do your due diligence, so do your part to participate with God in gaining the kind of wisdom that you need to make a good decision, all right? There is a dynamic here between God and us working together. Work out your salvation in fear and trembling, for it's both God that is working within you both to will and to work for His good pleasure. So there's this odd combination there.

We are working with God as working at the same time. That's in Philippians what, two or so, somewhere in there. So this is the way it works with God.

God works medietly. We often pray that God would change someone's heart regarding something, but oftentimes that person's changed heart comes from God through another person who shares with them, talks with them, or some other circumstance that helps them to see what's good and their heart gets changed, okay? Sometimes it's direct. I mean, I was reading in first Samuel the other day and a couple of weeks ago now I guess, and there was Saul and it said, Saul changed God's, I'm sorry, God.

Oops. God changed Saul's heart. Okay, God just cabami, you know? And in the book of Acts, the Lord opened Lydia's heart to believe the gospel.

There was the gospel being preached, but her receptiveness was as a result of a direct act of God in her life. So I'm just pointing out that guidance and wisdom and that kind of thing is not something that happens unilaterally by God's actions usually. Usually we have to employ some proper means in order to get the wisdom that we need that we're praying for, okay? And then God can use the means to mediate wisdom to us.

So the prayer is a good one, but if the prayer is in isolation from other appropriate actions, I'm not surprised you would not get, you would not decide on a course of action that would be productive. And I actually don't really know what a wrong decision amounts to here. And because sometimes that look, circumstances that look like bad decisions, that is we look at the results and they were not savory to us.

Doesn't mean that God has not ordained that for some purpose that you did not have in mind in your life. Lots of marriages are like this, okay? That is, well, I wanted it to be one way and that's what I thought was a good wise choice and then it just isn't working out. Well, that means it's getting tougher and tough relationships are the kinds of things that God uses to conform us to the image of his son.

And that's God's purpose in this. Incidentally, just as an aside, I'll recommend a book. It's called Sacred Marriage.

Can't remember the guy's name off the top of my head. The subtitle of my Sacred Marriage is maybe God designed marriage not to make us happy, but to make us holy. Good thought, well, the book is about that kind of thing. Anyway, so those are some of my thoughts, Amy.

That's kind of along the lines where I was gonna take this, Greg. It's sometimes you're presuming that the Holy Spirit has the same goals that you do. And our goals are I want everything to go smoothly.

I want to advance in my career. I want ABCD, whatever it is, whatever the decision is about. Satisfying relationships.

Right, whereas the Holy Spirit's goal is to make us like Christ. And this is when we go back to Romans 8, 28, all things work together for good for those who love God. That's, start there.

That's what you can hang your hat on. That's what you can count on that regardless of all of the wisdom you're trying to build into your decision and the decision you're making, what you know for sure is that all things are working together for good. God is ordering your steps.

And maybe that means he's teaching you to be more wise because you make a wrong decision and you learn to be. - How you get wisdom, that decision. - Yes, that's how you mature.

And he doesn't just want to make everything work out. The very next verse says that he, you know, he causes all the... - Those who make shows, he predestines. - Well, he cause all things to work together for good so that he can conform us to the image of Christ.

That is our good. That is what God is working towards. So if you make a decision that is unwise, or let's say it was a wise decision, but for reasons you could not predict, it turns out that it did not give you the things that you expected to get.

Number one, you know that it's working for your good. And number two, you know that that good is to make you like Christ. And that will involve many times more suffering than contentment.

- That's right. And by the way, if you make a decision that you'd... - Wait, just because I didn't mean content, I meant comfort. We should learn to be content in our situations, but more suffering than comfort.

- Right, right, okay, good point. I didn't catch that. I was thinking about this other thing and that is... - Oh no, what have I done? - Oh, I remember if the decision you made that

you would have made differently in the past, knowing what you know now, is a decision you're obliged to honor marriage, for example, then you cannot undo that.

You made a promise, marriage is for one man, one woman, becoming one flesh for one lifetime. That's Jesus' point in Matthew 19. So then what you have to do is you have to stick with it and work it out as best as you can, all right? If the decision you, the unwise decision, you think you made the wrong decision, is something you can change, well, I'm gonna leave this job and get a different one, okay, that's all right.

But just keep in mind that when you make decisions, there are moral obligations that accompany those decisions that have to do with other people. And whatever those obligations are relative to the decision you made, then you have an obligation to do the right thing, even if it's not the most comfortable thing. - And what you can do in every situation is learn how, as Paul says in Philippians 4, you learn to be content in all of these situations because you learn how to depend on God, you are having your character shaped, you are learning how to be patient, you are perhaps struggling, and he says it sets me back even further, that's why this sounds to me like it's probably a career choice.

Yes, you're set back maybe in your career opportunities, but again, that's not what's most important. Your soul is what's most important. And I would bet it would be interesting for you to write all of this down now and go back in 10 years and see what has happened because of that.

I can look back in my life. Things that I thought were devastating. And then 10 years later, I realized, oh, that's why that didn't happen that way.

Now it's abundantly clear to me. And I thought it was a terrible thing that happened. So in 10 years, I would look back on this and I suspect that your trust in God will be strengthened.

And just bringing this back to the praying for guidance. Greg, I loved everything that you said, you pray for wisdom, you seek wisdom, and then ultimately you trust that God is in charge and all things are working for good. And because of that, you know that you do your best, you make your decision, and then you know that God will use it for your good no matter what that is.

Just a postscript now on wisdom, because of the date, I'm in the early part of the month, and so I'm reading the early chapters of Proverbs. A whole bunch of time is spent in the first part of Proverbs telling you to get wisdom, get wisdom, get wisdom. I just read chapter eight, I think yesterday, or maybe it was seven, I don't remember, but anyway, it says get wisdom, get wisdom.

Later on, you have more of these short pithy statements that apply to particulars of your

life, but there's a whole lot of Proverbs that tells you to get wisdom, okay? And wisdom is calling, but so is the woman of folly, calling as well, which is sometimes characterized as a prostitute. They're both calling, they're both making the same appeal, and the writer says, listen to wisdom, get wisdom, learn wisdom, and do those things that are sound. So, I'm just underscoring the importance of wisdom, particularly the things that are taught in the book of Proverbs and making those a regular part of your life.

- And just one last note, if you did not know what was going to happen when you made this decision, don't think that you know what would have happened if you'd made the other decision. - That's right, good point. - For all you know, that could have been a worse decision.

You just don't know, there are too many things we don't know about our decisions. - Okay, Greg, here's a question from Mike Fritz. Is there evidence, biblical or extra-biblical that God is more likely to say yes to a prayer request, well, made while fasting, rather than just a regular prayer? If so, why is it not taught more emphatically, if not, why bother? Not trying to be disrespectful.

- Yeah, it's a fair question, and I don't take it as disrespectful to me or to God for that matter, because I think this is a bit of a conundrum. Fasting was this ordinary part of life for biblical Christians and Old Testament saints. When I say ordinary, I don't mean they were doing it every week or something, but there are occasions in which they gave themselves to that for spiritual purpose.

However, the scripture doesn't talk a lot, people have written books about fasting, but as I recall, my reading, it identifies the fact of fasting and different types of fasting, no food, no food or water, whatever. But it doesn't talk about the details of it and how it works and the efficacy of it. So I know that there have been seasons where I fasted once a week for six months regarding certain things, and I'll just say candidly, they didn't turn my way.

So fasting isn't a guarantee that you're going to get your prayers answered. Some might suggest, and maybe you know more about the same, is that what fasting does is it takes your physical, you take charge over your physical desires. You're just saying, I'm in charge, the answer is no to food for this period of time.

And usually, scripturally, the idea of fasting is accompanied with prayer. So it isn't just fasting, it's fasting in prayer. And so there is a focus during the fast of seeking God and his face.

Now, does that mean your prayers are going to be answered when they would not have been answered if you didn't fast? I don't know. I don't know. I think that there is an efficacy to fasting spiritually, but I think that has different dimensions.

And it may be the case that in fasting, that makes your prayer more effective. In the case of David fasting regarding his child who is sick, his child through best sheep, but it didn't help. God took that baby's life.

In other circumstances, it seems to make a difference. But this is true about prayer as well. Sometimes your prayer gets answered the way you want, sometimes it doesn't.

So prayer is a bit of a mystery for me, that is the calculus of prayer. I do know some things you have not because you ask not. Oh, okay, that's important.

I better ask. Oh, and you have not sometimes because you ask with the wrong motives, seeking to spend it on your pleasure. Both of those are in James.

All right, oh, that gives me another guideline. First Peter says, "Husbands, sometimes your prayers are hindered because you're not treating your wives well." Oh, okay. But even under the best of circumstances, it doesn't mean that everything you pray, even if you fancy that the things you're praying for are according to the revealed will of God, it doesn't guarantee that everything is going to be answered.

Well, how could that be? I don't know. To me, that's part of the mystery of all this. In fact, I was praying this morning on the way to the studio, some particular things that I could identify very clearly.

This is what your word says is good and tied to human flourishing in relationships. So I am praying for this, not just for me, but for some others in their circumstances. Okay.

So what's God gonna do? I don't know. Maybe what he ends up doing is waiting for a long, long time to answer that prayer and I'm still waiting too. But this to me is, I feel, Amy, I'm a little bit.

In fact, you and I have talked about this before and we've had, I've show out your counsel on this because I think the calculus of prayer is hard to figure out. And certainly fasting and praying is part of the dynamic of prayer and also that calculus, I can't, it entirely makes sense out of it. Tell me out here.

I think the place to start is to know that prayer is not about finding certain techniques that will get you to get God to give you the things that you want. - To guarantee you get what you want, right? - It's not about finding certain ways to say things or certain whatever. It's because God is a lot smarter than we are and even things that are good that we want may not be good for us for various reasons and he might have other things in mind.

So it's not a matter of finding the right things to say or the right way to say it so that we can sort of manipulate God into doing what we want. So that's the place to start. Beyond that, I think what fasting does is it reminds us of our creatureliness, of our dependence

on God, of our need.

We can't, we require even food. We require things to sustain us. So when we're denying ourselves that, we're reminding ourselves of our dependence on God and our need and it humbles us.

It reminds us that we are dependent on God for everything that we have. And I suspect that what, and I don't know because you're right, Greg, the Bible does not say anything specific about this, but it could be that the purpose of the fasting is to point us to prayer. As we are hungry, as we are realizing our need, that causes us to pray more and stay focused on prayer.

And so it could just be that. I don't think it's an extra, it's not a way of gaining God's favor or doing like that. I think it could just be reminding us to pray and keeping us in a place of need and dependence and a right posture before God.

- And humility, I know that there have been times when I've been really, really upset about circumstances and angry at God too. And I was just a fireball of emotion and seething. But when I would fast for a day or maybe two days, it's like all of that ugly wind went out of my sails and it calmed me down and it allowed me to come before the Lord with a whole different attitude.

So I mean, like I said, I don't do that very often, but actually I fast a lot, I fast between meals. So it's a joke Amy, just saying, oh, we might have missed you. And I think they should call it a slow anyway and not a fast.

'Cause nothing moves fast when you're fasting. It's all slow. - It does change your perspective on life.

It's hard to be prideful when you are hungry. - Vulnerable. - Yeah, vulnerable, yes, that's another way to put it.

It just reminds us of the truth about who we are and our actual inability to control everything. So that's kind of what I think is going on. And it is hard not having more information about it, but what we also know is that we should do it because the Bible does indicate there is that pattern shown to us in the Bible.

So even if we don't know exactly why, we should still be doing it. - Jesus didn't say if you fast, he said when you fast. - Mm-hmm.

Well, we're out of time, Greg. - That was fast. - Well, thank you, Mike.

And thank you Operation Pre-Climb. - What's up with that too? Operation Pre-Climb, I'm wondering. - We hope to hear from you again.

And if you have a question, send it on Twitter with the hashtag #SDRask or go through

our website. We'd love to hear from you. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cocle for Stand to Reason.

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