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Will God Not Answer My Prayers if I'm Doubting He will?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about why Hebrews is included in the New Testament canon if the author is unknown and whether God won't answer your prayers if you're doubting he will.

* If apostolic authority was an important factor in deciding which books to include in the New Testament canon as Scripture, then why was Hebrews included if the author is unknown?

* I'm beginning to doubt the efficacy of prayer since so many of my prayers don't seem to be answered. Will God now not answer my prayers if I'm doubting he will?

Transcript

You're listening to the #STRask Podcast with Amy Hall and Greg Kockel. And this is a podcast where you send your questions on Twitter with the #STRask, or you can go through our website. Our website's at STR.org. I realized, Greg, that I always direct people to the website, and I don't actually tell them where it is.

There could be people who aren't familiar with the other things that we do. If you'd like to see the other things that we have going on at standard reason, it's STR.org. Simple. Yes.

Okay, Greg, here is a question from Jason from Massachusetts. Regarding the New Testament canon, my understanding is apostolic authority was an important aspect in determining whether a book was to be considered scripture. This makes sense, but I am wrestling with understanding how Hebrews would be included if the authorship is/was in question.

Well, that's a good question. It's a fair one. And the whole process of a canonization was the right where to put this.

Okay, it wasn't the result of a bunch of Christians getting together in a council who had on their own authority identified which books were in the Bible. This is kind of the Roman

Catholic view. We wrote the Bible so we get to decide who was in the Bible, which books were in the Bible, and we get to decide what the Bible means.

There was no Roman Catholic Church during that time. There was just a lot of churches all, not as we understand it. So eventually there was a bishop in Rome, and there were bishops all over the area.

By the beginning of the 4th century, all of those Christian population areas had a representative that went to the Council of Nicaea in Rome sent to just like everyone else. Okay? So you didn't have this group of people who said this is the text. What you had is a, for lack of a better word, a progressive understanding of what was the text given by God.

Very similar to what you had with the Jews. The Jews had a text. They were a body of people that were God's people that recognized the authoritative text as a body.

And of course, some of these were prophets directly. Other words, collections of information like the historical materials, some of course, Moses, the first five books. And so what you have then in the New Testament is that church goes on, the church understood, first of all, that the apostles spoke with authority.

They were trained by Jesus. And so they spoke with authority. And if a thing had a book had a clear apostolic authority to it, either an apostle wrote it like John did or Paul, or it was written in close association with an apostle like Mark's gospel was with Peter.

And we have one citation that indicates that was the case. But the important thing is the early church understood that. We're further removed from these circumstances.

We don't have as much documentation. But there was an apostolic authority associated with them. The church just simply knew and acknowledged, well, this is Scripture.

And even is it John's writings? Yeah, no, Peter's writings talking about Paul's writings being hard to understand like and get distorted like they do, like other people do, the rest of the Scripture. Okay. And so he said, there's this identification of that.

Pardon me, you have a few exceptions to that general rule. And one of them is Hebrews because there wasn't a clear authorship there. It's clear it's not Paul because of the wording in Hebrews, it makes it clear that it's not Pauline.

Nevertheless, this was one of the books that the early church had almost a fairly unified sense, for lack of a better word, that this was authoritative, that this was from God. Okay. Now, there are other books like the D.D.K. or the Shepherd of Hermas or that had value for the Christians of that time to be read for their spiritual nourishment, but they didn't have the authority of Scripture like the rest did.

And there was some discussion back and forth. And so there was some debate, but little by little the church settled in on a group of scriptures. And this can be identified by the writings of the early church fathers, the kinds of the books they quote from as authoritative and from God, whether it's Uranus or that's quoting or Tullian, this quoting or I'm trying to think of the Uranus's disciple or disciple of John.

Polycarp. Polycarp started with a P almost in papius. Anyway, so but these all there's lots of citations of Scripture as such as authoritative in these.

And so you can see J. Warner Wallace in his book, Cold Case Christianity does a great job of charting this all out. So you can see the acknowledgement there. So the understanding of the authority of the corpus of inspired works is being solidified in the first couple of centuries.

And it turns out the book of Hebrews is included in that. And if you read the book of Hebrews, you can see why because it's a very, very profound and insightful assessment and analysis of the Mosaic law in light of what Jesus did on the cross and is declaring in no uncertain terms that the Old Testament sacrificial system is no longer in operation and no longer efficacious to forgive sins or to cover sins more specifically. And that Jesus is now the one and perfect sacrifice.

And if you continue in the old system, you're not forgiven. Only Jesus forgives sins for the reasons that writer describes. And so when you read through this book, you see there's this for lack of a better word, there's a self-presenting element of the authority that's there.

And this is what the early Christians understood what they saw. But if this seems a little bit weird, when I talk about why people should believe the Bible is the inerrant word of God, I give reasons. I give six of them characteristically use my hand and the fingers of my hand and a fist, et cetera, to illustrate these reasons.

But it turns out that's not the reason I believe the Bible is inspired. And it's not the reason the most people believe the Bible is inspired because most Christians do and they haven't even heard my talk. It's because of the self-presenting element there that the Holy Spirit is convincing our heart of the authority of Scripture.

I'm not talking about burning in the bosom. I'm talking about something different, not something we seek. And we're praying, God, give me a feeling so I know that this is your book.

That's what the Mormons do. No, you read. You don't have to ask for a feeling.

You read it, you engage it, and you come to the conviction that this is God speaking here. And that work of the Holy Spirit in individual Christian's life, testifying to the authority of Scripture, is something like what happened in the assembly of the canon.

Now the assembly of canon was more organized, obviously.

It wasn't just a completely subjective thing. It was based on apostolic authority largely, but it wasn't the only factor. And there were books the apostles wrote.

I'm thinking of one in particular, a letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians that we don't have. Why don't we have it? Because God didn't deem it appropriate to save it for the canon, thinking from God's perspective. So just because an apostle wrote it doesn't mean that it was going to be received as canon.

But the ones that we have are the ones that the Holy Spirit super intended. There are objective guidelines, but they're not completely objective. There's this somewhat subjective element as well, but it's not on an individual Christian basis.

It's the testimony of the whole church. And it could be the early church actually did know for sure who had written Hebrews. And there are some who argue that Peter did write it through a scribe who, because he did that often.

So there could be slight differences. The manuensis they called him right. And some people, and I think the argument also is that they gathered Hebrews with Paul's letters in the organization of the canon.

So it's possible. I don't know. There are a lot of different ideas about who wrote it.

But it's possible also the early church knew who wrote it. And so they were also basing it on that. But do you know if this was ever a controversial book? I think it was a controversial book because of, as I recall, but I don't have my notes all in front of me.

I think revelations were a little controversial too because it was so weird. But in any event, there's a FF Bruce wrote a book called The Text of the, no, not The Text, the canon of scripture. There it is.

The canon of scripture. There's been other books that have been written quite a few since then to try to explain the process. Our friend Michael Kruger, I think has done some work in that and K-R-U-G-E-R.

So the work is out there, but I was just kind of giving an overview of the whole process here. And there is a, the super, the Holy Spirit super intended the process. It wasn't some group that had independent authority themselves that said, okay, here's the right books.

It just didn't work out that way. He inspired particular books and we recognize those books as being inspired. Okay, let's go on to a question from Katnip.

Katnip? Katnip. So many of my prayers don't seem to be answered by God. And now I'm beginning to doubt the efficacy of prayer.

Will God now not answer my prayers because I'm doubting He will? Well, that's, that is a very practical question. And it's one that, and you know the same that, that we've talked about a lot. And sometimes there are things in our lives that are really important that we pray for over and over and over again and see no movement in.

And that's discouraging. And then we read, well, if you pray believing, then you receive. I said, well, if I received more often, then I'd believe more.

And then I'd receive more than I'd believe more. But if the prayer is not answered, then I believe less. If I believe less, then I get fewer prayers answered than I believe even less.

You see, it's a spiral one direction or another. So I'm completely sympathetic to Katnip's concern. And I think part of what's going on is that when we're praying for things that really matter to us and God says, no, those stand out.

And what we don't often see are the other things that we pray for that God says yes to. And we don't kind of take notice of them because they're not first and foremost in our heart. All says to be devoted to prayer, keeping alert to it with an attitude of Thanksgiving or keeping alert in it.

They're different translations. But the point there seems to be at least in part that we pray and then we're to watch and be aware of God answers the prayer so we can say thank you for that. I think prayer is a mystery and some people seem to be better at it.

Now most people seem to be better at it than me. And it's been a struggle for a long time. I've talked about it on the air a number of times and even written some pieces about it offering.

Well, it's hard for me, but here's some things I do to make it easier. In fact, not too long ago I did something on the air with a new book that you recommended to me, not Valley of Vision, the way you said it. Be thou my vision as a guide.

So this particular issue though is a hard one for a lot of Christians. And part of what I think of when I have unanswered prayer, say first make a mental inventory, is it my fault? Okay. On the one hand you have not because you asked not, James.

Well, we're asking. Peter says if husband, if you're not good to your wives, that's going to hinder your prayers, the first Peter three. Oh, okay.

David says, if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me. So there can be some sin that we're living in that we're not willing to deal with and that could hinder the effectiveness or prayers, but we could do an inventory on that. But you know, sometimes, sometimes God just says no.

And part of what I have to do when I encounter that is I have to ask myself, is that

because God doesn't answer, and did I not get answered because God doesn't answer prayer? Well, wait a minute. I know lots of people get prayer answered in dramatic ways. And I mean dramatic in the sense that it can't happen by itself, accident.

There is a, there's a correlation between the prayer and the answer that's so poignant. It's hard to dismiss as being God responding to the prayer. So other people get their prayers answered.

So God does answer prayer. We see prayers answered in the New Testament, but we also see times when it, it doesn't get answered. Jesus prayed three times in the garden to get 70.

Now he knew his prayer wasn't going to be answered because, because he understood God's plan and he submitted to God's will. So he was more expressing his anguish about what he was about to face. But Paul, he prayed about the thorn in his flesh, which I think was a person and no luck there.

My power is perfected in weakness. So sometimes God decides not to give you what you ask for because he's going to do something different in your life. He's going to sustain you through it and he's going to accomplish some different end.

And this is kind of the place I land, Amy. And I benefit a lot from your counsel on this, you know. Things don't happen to us by accident.

That is, anything that befalls us, which includes unanswered prayer, has to go through God's hands before it gets to us. He's got to kind of give approval. And sometimes he lets it go through his hands to us so that we pray to get it out.

But sometimes there's some other things that God has for us. And the thing that is my bottom line with regards to unanswered prayer, I know too much to deny that God exists. I know too much to deny that God answers prayer.

I'm tempted to think, well, God just doesn't answer my prayer very often, which may be true. But God is his reasons for that. What helps me is I think about there will be a payoff.

There will be a time when all of this comes home, not to roost. I guess that's a negative connotation, but there will be a payoff, I guess. Jesus, Jesus, rather Paul writes in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, talks about momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

I focus on the verb. That's the affliction that's producing the weight of glory that's to come. And so maybe God has allowed this affliction that I can't pray myself out of because it allows me, as I endure it, and keep looking to him, to store up treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroy nor thieves break in and steal.

But I will benefit from eternally, even though I'm not getting what I want here in the temporal moment. So I think prayer is enigmatic. I think it's kind of a mystery.

I don't understand the calculus of prayer, how to get which levers to push to get what I want. But as C.S. Lewis says, it's not mechanical. You're asking a person for something and a person can say, wait, and a person can say, no, for that person's reasons.

And that person is God who cares about us. And so it's up to us to keep asking, pray continually, ask, seek, knock kind of thing. And in some things in my life, it will never be said that I have not because I asked not.

At least I'm covering my basis. And I think that should be the case for the rest of us. We pray hard about the things that really matter to us and then we let God decide.

And I wish my presence answered more frequently. So I'm sympathetic with Katnip on that. I always think about that wonderful book, John Newton on the Christian life, where it basically talks about his theology and how to live as a Christian.

And one thing that he said, John Newton said, was that there are times when God feels absent. He's teaching us certain things through those times. We learn how to be obedient, even when we're not receiving anything dramatic or maybe we can't feel him, but we learned to persevere.

We learned to trust him without any dramatic interventions in our life. And part of what happens there, I think, is that we learn not to see God as a tool for some other thing. So imagine you're getting every prayer answered, how easy it would be as a fallen human being to start seeing God as a means to other ends.

When we're not getting what we're asking for, we won't see God as a means to other ends. We'll learn to look to him and to trust him and who he is above those things that we want. And I think that's a huge thing that happens when our prayers aren't answered.

So I want to say that even if your prayers aren't being answered, even if you're praying for the wrong things, prayer is still valuable. I think about that image in Revelation of the incense rising to God, the smell of the prayers rising to God and the beauty of that. So never think that it's useless just because your prayers aren't answered and you don't receive what you want.

The prayers themselves are valuable. I can't remember which psalm it is, but one psalm talks about how the different things God wants us to do that glorify him. And one of the things he says is we call out to him when we're in trouble and then we glorify him.

So our actual, our praying, our expressing our need and our dependence on him, even that glorifies God regardless of how he answers because we're expressing our trust in him and our acknowledgement of him and our need. So even if your prayers aren't being

answered, they are still valuable. Don't let that discourage you from praying.

Now I will also say the better we know God, the more likely we are to see our prayers being answered because the more likely we'll be to be praying for the right things. Now this isn't always the case. But I think the better you know God's heart and the more you are conformed to his heart, the more your prayers will reflect who he is and what he cares about.

And I think so if you aren't seeing your prayers being answered, maybe one thing you can do is spend more time learning about who God is, reading the Bible, letting him shape your heart so that you're asking for the right things. One thing that's gotten me through hard times where I've felt like God is far away and I'm tempted not to pray. There's a passage in Romans 4 that talks about Abraham and it says that as it is written, "A father of many nations have I made you," and oh he talks about Abraham being in the presence of him whom he believed, even God who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.

So here is Abraham who's been promised a child and he's closing in on a hundred, doesn't have a child and yet he still trusts God because he knows that God is the God who calls into being things that don't exist. And so that's one thing that I focus on this verse in chapter 4 because if we can focus on who God is and what he's capable of, that can get us through, that can encourage us to pray because we know he has the power to change things even if you don't see it happening. Now when you're not seeing it happening, there are, I think there are a couple reasons for that.

First of all, you might not have enough information to know what God's doing. You might not, you just might not be seeing it, you don't know what he's doing. But secondly, you might have lesser goals in mind, and this goes back to what I was saying about knowing God and letting that influence your prayers.

We might have lesser goals in mind when we're praying whereas God, he's always working for his glory and for our good. He does both things at once through the same actions that he does. And so if we're praying for our comfort, God has a greater goal in mind.

And so we might not be praying for the right things that he has in mind. So all we can hang on, I think, when these things happen are God's ability to change our situation and his sovereignty. He calls things into existence that don't exist and he loves us and he loves us personally because I think if we can keep those things in mind and we can shape our hearts that we're praying for the right things and we can remember who he is and we can remember that he's working things even in not answering our prayers that are more important than our prayers.

I think all of these things I think about when I get discouraged. Let me offer a final word

here and that is that I take comfort from David in the Psalms because he's quite candid about his own anguish. In fact, last night I recited Psalm 13, which I've done many times before.

And here's what Psalm 13, it's a short one. How long, oh Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall I take counsel and my soul having sorrow in my heart all the day? How long will my enemy be exalted over me? Let her in answer me, oh Lord my God, enlighten my eyes or I will sleep the sleep of death and my enemy will say I have overcome him and my adversaries will rejoice when I am say shaken. Now in my Bible I turn the page for the next two verses which start, but I have trusted in your loving kindness, my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bound to flee with me. Now David could be completely candid with God about his sense of desperation and being ignored and left behind and abandoned. Yet at the same time he acknowledges God's goodness in the process.

And I think it's a good formula for us when we're discouraged. And Greg, I just want to make sure we answer this last part. Do you think he won't hear prayers or God will be less likely to answer prayers because he's doubting that God will answer those prayers? Well it's clear in Scripture that faith that is confidence in God's ability does make a difference with God.

Weak faith doesn't mean God won't act. Jesus encountered a demon possessed man. Boy whose father said, "I believe help thou my unbelief." Another one who, and so Jesus responded to what faith he was able to offer.

And in another case there was a blind man who said, "Jesus said, 'What do you want?' He said, 'If you're willing, you can make me clean or make me see.' He acknowledged the ability of Jesus but also acknowledged that it was up to him to decide if you're willing." And sometimes this is what I fall back on, if you're willing. I don't know. Some things I don't have a lot of strong faith for.

But nevertheless I still will pray. And oftentimes God has done exceedingly abundantly beyond what we can ask or even think. So I do think that there's a relationship there.

But in moments of weak faith keep pressing forward. Don't forget. And Peter was in jail and the angel let him go because the people were all there praying for him.

They didn't believe it when he showed up at the door. The servant girl said, "Peter's, he's out. He's at the door." No, he isn't.

That's a ghost. So they weren't praying with much faith but yet God still responded to their faithful prayers. Funny enough, Peter didn't even believe it.

I think he was saying, I didn't even know it was not a vision until it outside the prison. So let me just throw out one last thing, the idea of needing faith. Focus on having faith in God, not faith that he will give you what you want.

I think that's the kind of faith that we need for prayer. You need to have faith that God can do it, that he's able to do it, not faith that he's going to give you what you want. Because I don't think that's, I don't know how we could know that.

I don't know how that faith could be grounded necessarily. So I would say, yes, work on having faith but have faith in who God is and his love for you and his desire to bring about your good and to make you like Christ. Have faith in that when you pray, knowing that he'll make the right decision.

I don't think we can muster up faith that he will give us everything that we ask for. I don't think that's... Some people seem to be able to do that but they have maybe a gift in that area that you and I don't have, Amy, but I think that's good counsel. I will say that there have been a couple times in my life when I have known that God... It's hard to explain but I've known that God was going to give what I asked before I asked it.

That has only happened like a couple of times and they were pretty big things. And I feel like those times God did inspire that faith in the particular answer but that's only happened to me a couple of times. All right.

Well, thank you, Jason and Katnip. We appreciate hearing from you. We went a little bit long today and hopefully this has been helpful to all of you and we look forward to having you listen again.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Cockel for Stand to Reason.

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