

Does God Always Grant our Requests?

Introduction

One of the rather astounding – and potentially confusing – passages in Scripture is contained in John chapter 14. The context of this passage is that Jesus is speaking with the 11 faithful disciples, after the last supper. Basically, Jesus is giving the disciples information about the things that he will do, after he is crucified and resurrected. Then, Jesus makes these statements:

John 14:13-14 (ESV):

¹³ Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

Notice the wording of the above verses – “whatever you ask ... this I will do”; and “If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it”.

Jesus made some relatively similar statements, near the end of the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 7:7-11 (ESV):

⁷ “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ⁹ Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Again, notice the wording in the above passage. For example: “everyone who asks receives”.

Finally, consider this passage, which Jesus told to his followers:

John 10:9-10 (ESV):

⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

In the above passage, Jesus states that not only will his followers have life, but they will have it “abundantly” – i.e., *more* than just the “minimum requirements” for life.

So, can any conclusions be drawn, from the three passages listed above?

From my experience, some Christian groups believe that all of the above passages (and some similar ones) tell us the following:

“God will **always** grant requests from Christians – as long as the Christian *prays* for the request, in **Jesus’** name.”

In fact, some Christian groups have an official *doctrine* regarding this overall belief – they call it the “Name it and Claim it” doctrine. Basically, this doctrine holds that due to passages like the ones above, God will **automatically** grant all requests from Christians. In other words, all we need to do is to *ask* God for whatever we want; and *believe* that God will give it to us. As long as we do that, we are guaranteed to receive **exactly** what we requested.

Of course, it is always necessary to determine if any given doctrine is supported by the **entire** body of Scripture. So, let’s examine Scripture, to discover if there are *any* cases in which believers’ requests will not be granted.

Asking for the wrong reasons

First, Scripture warns us about making requests for the wrong reasons. For example, consider the following passage from James:

James 4:1-3 (ESV):

1 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

Notice verse 3 – “You ask and do not receive”. This is the exact *opposite* of Matthew 7:8, in which Jesus says “everyone who asks receives”.

So, we are certainly *not* guaranteed to have our prayers answered, if we make a selfish – or sinful – request. For example, let’s say that a man prays that he will win the lottery – and the sole reason *why* he wants to win the lottery is so that he can spend the money on an immoral lifestyle (similar to the “prodigal son” parable).

In this example, the man should *not* expect to have his request granted – because he made his request to “spend it on his passions”.

Asking with an unrighteous heart

Scripture also indicates that the prayers of unrighteous people will *not* be heard by God. Consider the following passages:

Proverbs 21:2,13 (ESV):

² Every way of a man is right in his own eyes,
but the Lord weighs the heart.

¹³ Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor
will himself call out and not be answered.

Psalm 66:18-19 (ESV):

¹⁸ If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened.
¹⁹ But truly God has listened;
he has attended to the voice of my prayer.

In the above passages, Solomon and David state that if we purposely harbor unrighteousness in our hearts, then God will not listen to our prayers. That is, if a person is **not** righteous, then his prayers will **not** be effective.

The apostle James tells us that the inverse is *also* true:

James 5:16 (NIV):

¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

In other words, if a person **is** righteous, then his prayers **will** be effective.

In any case, the bottom line is that if a person is not even *attempting* to follow God – i.e., if he is *rejoicing* in sin – then he should not expect his prayers to be answered by God. This is true even if his requests, themselves, are *not* selfish or sinful. In other words, a person with an unrighteous heart might not even have his *good* requests granted (let alone his sinful requests).

Facing authorized trials

The above two sections discussed sinful requests; and requests that are made by unrighteous people. So, the next item to consider is: what about **good** requests, which are made by **righteous** people? In other words, if a *sincere* follower of Christ makes a *valid* request, then is that request *guaranteed* to be granted?

One example of this type of scenario is contained in the passage below, from the apostle Paul:

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (ESV):

⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

In the above passage, Paul tells us that he was given a "thorn in his flesh" – i.e., something that caused *difficulties* for him. We are not told exactly what this "thorn" is; but it may have been a *person* who caused problems for him; or it may have been some sort of *physical* ailment, perhaps with his eyes.

In any case, Paul then tells us that he prayed – three times – for this thorn to be taken away from him. In other words, he *explicitly* requested to be **healed** from this "thorn in his flesh".

This request certainly appears to be a *valid* one – he was simply requesting healing; rather than requesting money or power. Also, Paul was certainly a *righteous* person – he was an extraordinarily dedicated follower of Christ.

As a result, one might certainly expect that Paul’s request would be granted. However, it was not granted – the thorn still remained with Paul.

Evidently, this “thorn” was *authorized* by Jesus (and God). In that passage, Jesus stated that he will not take away the thorn, because “his power is made perfect in weakness”. This presumably means that people who are facing difficult trials are *more likely* to turn to God – and that, in turn, will allow God’s Holy Spirit to *lead* people more effectively.

In any case, the overall point is that a righteous person (Paul) made a valid request (for healing) – but God did not grant that request. The reason why is that Paul was facing a trial that was *authorized* by God – and therefore, God did not grant Paul’s request to be freed from that trial.

So, even if a righteous person makes a valid request, it is **not** guaranteed that that request will be granted.

Human free will

So far, we have seen examples of the following:

- Requests that are sinful not being granted;
- Requests from unrighteous people not being granted;
- Requests to be freed from authorized trials not being granted.

So, here is yet another item to consider: Suppose that a *righteous* person makes a *valid* request – **and** that the request does not involve an authorized trial. So, what will happen in that case? Will God *automatically* grant that type of request?

For example, let’s say the following situation occurs: A *sincere* follower of Jesus – named “Tom Smith” – ends up needing to walk through a very dangerous area of a city, in the middle of the night. So, Tom prays that God will allow him to get through that area safely. Also, God is *not* putting Tom through any sort of “authorized trial”.

So, in the above scenario, is there a 100% **guarantee** that Tom Smith will make it through the dangerous area safely? In other words, will God *automatically* ensure that no harm comes to Tom, as he walks through the dangerous area?

Just for the sake of the argument, let’s assume that God will automatically grant Tom’s request – i.e., that God will *ensure* that Tom will make it through the dangerous area safely. If that is the case, there are some ramifications to consider.

First, God would have to ensure that no “natural disasters” harm Tom – i.e., that no tornadoes, earthquakes, etc. will arise in that area. In addition, God would need to ensure that no “accidents” occur there – i.e., that no *buildings* collapse near Tom; that no *car accidents* occur nearby, etc.

However, the most important item to note is that in order for God to *ensure* that Tom makes it through the area safely, He would need to prevent any other humans from harming Tom. In other words, God would need to explicitly prevent other **people** from accosting Tom, as he walks through the area.

The reason why this is important is because God has given people *free will*. In other words, God allows people to choose their own actions – so that people can decide to do good or evil. (There are many passages in Scripture that demonstrate this “free will” concept; some of the most famous examples are contained in Deuteronomy 30, Jeremiah 18, Matthew 25 and 2 Peter 1.)

So, in order for God to *ensure* that Tom Smith will make it through the dangerous area safely, He would need to override people’s free will – i.e., He would need to **prevent** people from attacking Tom, even if that is what people *wanted* to do.

Of course, in numerous places, Scripture shows us that *sincere* followers of God were severely persecuted – and even murdered. For example, in the Old Testament, many of the prophets of God were mistreated and killed – and Jesus referred to those actions as grievous sins *against* God. Similarly, in the New Testament, many of the apostles were imprisoned, beaten, and martyred. In fact, historical accounts tell us that all of the original apostles – except John – were executed.

As a result, it is clear from Scripture that God generally does **not** override people’s free will – even when people decide to murder His chosen representatives. (There are a *minority* of cases in which God *has* intervened – e.g., Daniel in the lion’s den – but those cases are evidently the *exceptions*, rather than the *rule*.)

So, from all of the above information, it appears that God usually will not “override” people’s free will decisions to do evil. Therefore, in the example above, Tom Smith is **not** *guaranteed* to make it through the dangerous area safely – even though he explicitly **asked** God for that – because other people might choose to attack him, while he is in that area.

Unintended consequences

There is one final item to consider, about God granting our requests. Basically, in some cases, a believer can make a request which – by itself – is a *positive* item; but if God grants that request, then some other – very *negative* – items will end up occurring.

In other words, a person might *ask* for something **good** – but if God *grants* that request, then something *else* very **bad** will end up occurring. I call this the “unintended consequences” scenario.

The easiest way to explain this scenario is with an example. So, let’s go back to the believer from the last section – the man called “Tom Smith”. Let’s say that Tom is getting married; and the ceremony is being held in an outdoor venue – in a park. So, naturally Tom prays for *good weather* to occur on his wedding day – so that the ceremony will go smoothly.

However, *halfway through* the wedding ceremony, a severe thunderstorm suddenly occurs. This causes the entire wedding party – and all of the guests – to have to (hastily) move to an indoor venue several miles away.

So, Tom is quite disappointed that his prayer was not answered. Certainly, having nice weather at his wedding is a good thing – so Tom is confused as to why God did *not* grant his request, and allowed the

thunderstorm to occur. (After all, everyone was looking forward to having the wedding ceremony at that specific park.)

As it turns out, a terrorist group had planted *bombs* in that park – because they wanted to *murder* the guests at Tom’s wedding. However, the sudden thunderstorm caused the wedding to be moved to a *different* location – and as a result, when the bombs exploded, no one was present in the park. In other words, the occurrence of the thunderstorm *prevented* anyone from being killed by the terrorist attack.

Needless to say, the above example is rather “severe”; but it demonstrates the concept of a person asking for something *good* – but if God grants the request, then something quite *bad* will end up occurring. (The country song called “Unanswered Prayers” also deals with this exact issue of unintended consequences.)

I have no way of verifying this, of course, but I suspect that this type of “unintended consequences” scenario has arisen many, **many** times throughout human history...

Conclusion

Scripture is abundantly clear that prayer is extremely **important**. For example, the apostle Paul told us that we should pray to God, about *anything* that is troubling us:

Phillipians 4:6-7 (NIV):

⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

So, it is definitely to our *benefit* to pray – and certainly, in at least **some** cases, our prayers will be *answered*. They may not be answered immediately, or in exactly the way that we requested; but our prayers evidently can “make a difference” – given the fact that Scripture explicitly tells us to pray.

The main item to be aware of is the fact that some Christian groups have a rather “extreme” belief about prayer. Essentially, some groups believe that we have a “100% guarantee” of having all of our requests granted – as long as we *pray* for those requests, and *believe* that God will give them to us. From all of the information above, it appears to me that that belief is not supported by the *entire* body of Scripture.