

Answers to Prayers

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“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Matthew 7:7,8).

We need to learn about the Lord’s way of answering prayers, for no one can sincerely pray who does not believe in an answer to prayer. Learning something about the answer to prayer will deliver us from uncertainty and doubt.

His Will

Virtually everyone knows what is called “the serenity prayer.” It’s about things we can change and things we can’t change, a prayer ending with the request for wisdom “to know the difference.” Since we may not always be wise in what we ask, it is good to conclude our petition with the prayer that God’s will shall be done and not our own. Here is the way this is put by the theologian Emanuel Swedenborg in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church:

In prayer, when inspired by God, there is always the thought and belief that the Lord alone knows whether what is sought would be beneficial or not. Therefore the one who prays leaves the Lord to decide whether to listen to what he asks for, then accordingly pleads that the Lord’s will may be done, not his own, in keeping with the Lord’s words uttered in Gethsemane—Not my will, but yours (Arcana Coelestia 8179).

We may pray to be spared an illness or a time of trouble. Perhaps the Lord does not grant this, but instead He may give us the strength to endure our sickness and give us comfort in time of trouble. The Lord can answer our prayer in a wiser way than we know. This is why our petitions are to be followed with the prayer that not our will but *His* shall be done (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8179).

Our Evils

There is one kind of prayer which I understand is always granted—a prayer for help in overcoming our own shortcomings and evils. That prayer resonates with the will of God. We ask for help, and “this is not denied to anyone, but is granted to all; for the Lord is in the continual effort, from His Divine love, to reform and regenerate a person, and so to purify him from evils. And when the person also wills and intends it, this perpetual effort of the Lord becomes an act” (*Doctrine of Charity* 203).

Here is a way to start. Try saying, “Lord, help me to....” Say those words slowly and see what sincere things come from your heart and into your prayer, things far better than selfish ambitions. They may have to do with changes you wish to make in your life and character. God has the

power. If you really want something, and are willing to do your small part, then ask and keep asking. As the Word says, pray and do not lose heart.

Communication

The answer the Lord always gives to sincere prayers (and the answer we should seek) is a state of communication with Himself (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3285). As an “answer” there is then “a certain opening of a person’s interiors toward God,” and sometimes this can be felt in our affections as “hope, consolation and a certain inward joy” (*Arcana Coelestia* 2535).

For example, we may pray to the Lord to guide us in what we should believe and what we should do. What kind of answer might we look for? We should not expect or wish for a voice to tell us in words what we should do or what we should believe. Nor should we wait for a decision to be made for us by a sudden influx (see *Divine Providence* 321).

If we pray to Him, the Lord will flow imperceptibly into our own efforts to see what is right. He will arrange the truths we learn on the subject and apply them to the object of our prayer. As a result, our understanding of the matter will be elevated in an orderly way. Instead of being told what we must believe or do in a certain situation, we are free to make a conclusion and to act upon it.

Unexpected Ways

From the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church we learn that prayer may be answered in hidden ways. The Lord answers prayers in such a way that we will never be forced to acknowledge that He is answering them. Open miracles would compel us to believe, especially if they happened immediately after we prayed.

The answer to a prayer can come in an unexpected way, because the Lord looks at the heart of a person who prays, rather than his words (*Arcana Coelestia* 10143). When we pray for something it is because of a craving in our hearts. The Lord sees that craving and can satisfy our hearts with something other than what we specifically prayed for.

The Lord also answers our prayers when He sees it is best and in the way that He sees it is best. One way, the Lord may answer a prayer is by secretly touching the hearts of other people. For the Lord works through people (see *Divine Providence* 187; *True Christian Religion* 457:3). In the Heavenly Doctrine we read, “The Lord does good to every one chiefly through others, but yet in such a manner that a person scarcely knows but that it is from himself” (*Charity* 8). We may receive help in such normal ways, from other people, that we do not realize that it is the doing of the Lord in answer to a prayer.