

## **DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYER?**

**Philippians 4:6-7**

### **Critical Searching Inquiries Series**

**October 14, 2012**

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It was the last day of our stay in the Kidamali Parish in Tanzania, Africa—the companion church my former congregation helped support. Pastor Kisoma who is pastor of that parish, along with the preaching point evangelists, had planned a closing prayer service to bless our group of adults and youth on our journey back to America.

As with every worship service we shared with these brothers and sisters in Christ they began with praise and glorious singing—literally dancing in the aisles. It is beautiful to hear how they sing in parts with harmony and they never look at notes on a page. They let the words and harmony simply spring forth from their hearts.

Then in this prayer service there were passages of Scripture that were read in both Swahili and English; followed by prayers in Swahili by Pastor Kisoma and one of the preaching point evangelists; and a prayer in English given by Alicia Davis our youth minister.

As the evangelist prayed in this language I couldn't understand I did notice that at one point his voice got very loud and his Swahili words seemed to get very strong, and fast. Even though I couldn't understand a word I could sense he was speaking with extra boldness and passion.

Following this service I asked someone who was able to interpret to tell me what this evangelist was praying for. This person said that he was praying against the powers of Satan and darkness; he was praying that we would be kept from the power of the evil one in our travels home; and he prayed for the ministry of our congregation at Shepherd of the Hills.

It was amazing for me to think that this evangelist, with barely a middle school and simple Bible school education, was praying with an amazing amount of boldness and faith in Jesus. He was truly interceding on our behalf with all the confidence that God not only answers prayer but that miracles happen, and evil spirits are defeated, when God is totally relied on.

This morning as we continue our series, “Critical Searching Inquiries,” we are focusing on the question, “Does God Answer Prayer?” The answer to this question, of course, is unequivocally “yes.” And yet this morning I will attempt to lift up how, and why, we in our country and churches are often missing the full power of prayer.

One of the realities that we saw in Africa, and which is being experienced in many third world countries, is that miracles and answers to prayer are happening all over the place. People are being prayed for in their sickness, and pain, and miracles of healing are evident in many.

The evangelists and elders are going to the homes of Muslims, to those practicing superstitious religions as well as those with no belief at all. They are witnessing to these people about Jesus, are praying diligently for them and the miracles of conversion, and large numbers of people are coming to faith in Jesus; new believers are multiplying by the thousands.

And in a place where they are willing to talk about the darkness and evil influences in our world; are willing to talk about the spiritual warfare that we face each day; they pray boldly against the evil spirits that seem to have a hold on many. They see miracles of people being set free from often deep darkness into the light of Christ.

It is obvious that as they see God's answers to prayer everyday, and as they see miracles they cannot explain happening all the time, they are certainly bolstered in their passion and belief in prayer. They truly trust that God's word is true and that God fulfills his promises through answering their prayers.

Now an interesting question that arises out of this is why there are so many miracles and answers to prayer happening in countries like Tanzania? Yet in the same way why aren't we often seeing this same power and answers to prayer in America, and in our American churches?

Why are thousands of lives being converted and people coming to a living faith in Jesus in these places while American Christianity is declining? Why are these people filled with so much joy in living for Jesus while we in America are often joyless and sad, even in our wealth.

Our youth minister for five years when I was at Shepherd, Alicia Davis, gave me a CD lecture to listen to before we went on this mission trip to Tanzania. It featured a pastor, Guy Chevreau, sharing about the mission work he is involved with in the African country of Mozambique.

As he reflects in his lecture on this question of why we often aren't seeing these same kinds of answers to prayer in America he shares the story of a missionary he works with in Africa by the name of Heidi. She is a very small and petite African woman, about 5'2" in height.

He tells how at a church conference for 3,000 people a very respected German theologian, who had worked with Heidi and her husband in their mission in Mozambique, was going to speak. This man had lots of schooling and degrees behind his name. He was one who presented himself with lots of prominence and sophistication.

Yet as he was ready to speak Heidi went up to him. She pointed at his head and said "Too big," and then pointed at his heart and said "Too small." She repeated over and over again by pointing to the head and then the heart, "Too big, too small... Too big, too small."

Finally this very knowledgeable theologian fell to the floor under the power and conviction of Heidi's words. As a result this man's life was changed. He realized that his head was often blocking the faith and passion he needed in his heart; often his rational mind prevented him from totally loving others with freedom and joy.

Does God answer prayer today? Yes he most certainly does. And yet for so many of us in our American church today our answers and reliance on prayer are often quite minimal because our minds are bigger than our hearts. We pretty regularly rationalize in our minds what we think God can or cannot do.

We easily allow medical reports to keep us from praying boldly for a miracle. We routinely use our intellectual theology to decide that we don't think that God can work in a certain way. We make the determination that certain people's lives are unable to be changed so it won't do any good to witness to or pray for them.

Yet one of the worst ways we use our minds is to claim that a certain kind of worship is the only real pure or right way—that the Holy Spirit only works in pure theology or in perfect liturgical words. It is amazing how many invest lots of time defending these kinds of things.

As a result there are some with big minds today who actually question what the Holy Spirit is doing in certain people's lives; they actually question the miraculous things that are happening in certain churches. They flippantly put these people down by saying things like these churches are “dumbing down” in their message and worship—as if their sophisticated minds make them superior in faith.

Yet if we rely completely on our minds, on pure rationalism and on intellectual theories we can easily lose the power of prayer. We can easily make prayer simply into a confined ritual, into a pretty poem or into something that only educated pastors, or trained pray-ers, can do.

Yet if the Holy Spirit touches our hearts; if we invite Jesus to fill our hearts with his presence and love; if we allow the witness and miracles that are happening in so many places to assure us of God's supernatural power we too can pray with hearts filled with passion and trust.

Jesus said in Matthew 7:7-8, *“Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; those who seek find; and those who knock, the door will be opened.”*

To believe these words, my friends, takes faith. It doesn't take perfect words. It doesn't take someone with a seminary degree or who has passed certain classes in prayer technique. Rather, it simply takes someone willing to pray from their hearts.

This is why in places like Tanzania with often marginally literate and school-educated evangelists, and church elders, that miracles upon miracles are happening. For a simple uncomplicated heart filled with faith in Jesus is what is most important.

Now in closing some of your minds this morning may be questioning—but not everyone is healed miraculously if they are prayed for. Not everyone who is witnessed to and prayed for is converted. Not every church that prays is exploding in growth. What about these prayers?

Now that is certainly true. God doesn't always answer our prayers the way we want him to. Yet I want you to remember this today: More people get healed, more lives get changed and more miracles happen in the church when you pray than when you don't.

More people feel the love and care of others, and more churches are more filled with love and hope if they truly commit in prayer for others. No we can't promise healing and miracles but a praying church will always see more answers than those who don't. The more people we pray for the more people are healed and come to know Christ.

My friends, what is bigger in you today—your head or your heart? Be assured today that Jesus wants to grow, and expand, your heart of faith and love. He wants you to ask and tell him whatever is on your heart. He wants you to have your eyes, and heart, open to all the ways he truly answers prayer today.

As Jesus says in Luke 6:44, *“For out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.”*