

Prayer and Its Answers — Jeremiah 42, Zechariah 7, and Gethsemane

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Jeremiah 42 — When the Answer Is No

Jeremiah 42 opens with a remnant of Judah — all the people from the least even unto the greatest — coming to Jeremiah and asking him to inquire of the Lord. Their words were exactly right: the Lord thy God may show us the way wherein we may walk, and the thing that we may do. And they promised obedience in advance: whether it be good or whether it be evil, we will obey the voice of the Lord our God.

Prayer is a conversation with God — our part, where we pray, and God's part, where He answers. God does not always say yes. Sometimes He says no. Sometimes He says wait. These are not easy answers to hear. And prayer is not like a vending machine: insert the right words, pull the right lever, receive what you want. That is not prayer; that is the will of the flesh acting without reference to the will of God, which is the essence of sin. True prayer is when the soul puts itself in alignment with the heart and mind of God — aimed in the same direction, in communion with Him, desiring His presence and confident He desires ours.

The answer the Lord gave this remnant was no. Do not go to Egypt. Know certainly that I have admonished you this day. And the answer to that no was telling: they accused Jeremiah of speaking falsely, blamed Baruch for the words, and went to Egypt anyway. They perished there, just as Jeremiah said they would. Which reveals what had been true from the beginning — they had already decided. Their will was already engaged. The prayer was asking for a rubber

stamp, not for direction. The greatest among them and the least among them had already determined what they were going to do. All they wanted was for God to say yes. When He said no, they said He had not spoken at all.

Not what I will, but what thou wilt. — Mark 14:36

Zechariah 7 — Going Through the Motions

Zechariah 7 gives a different case. Bethel sent men to ask the priests and prophets: should I weep in the fifth month, separating myself, as I have done now so many years? They had been fasting and mourning in the fifth and seventh months for seventy years. They were tired of it. Their souls were not getting anything from it. And they wanted to know if they still had to keep doing it.

The Lord's response was not yes or no but a question that went to the root: when you fasted and mourned in the fifth and in the seventh month, even those seventy years, did you really fast unto me? Even unto me? And when ye ate and drank, was it not for yourselves? They had been doing the right thing, externally, for seventy years. But it was a form. Their hearts were not in it. And the Lord's word to them through the former prophets had been: execute true judgment, show lovingkindness and mercies one to another. They had refused to hearken. They turned a rebellious shoulder. They made their ears heavy. When the Lord called, they would not hear. So He called, and He would not hear.

These two cases stand as warnings. The remnant of Judah had already decided what to do and were going through the prayer as a formality. The people of Zechariah's day had been going through a practice for seventy years whose form they retained but whose heart had long since gone cold. In both cases, prayer had become a ritual disconnected from real communion with God. The Lord loves to hear from us. He desires that we want to be with Him. He wants our hearts, not our forms. Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as for God.

Gethsemane — The Perfect Prayer and the Perfect Answer

Mark 14:35–36 gives the Lord's prayer in the garden: Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee. Take away this cup from me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but what thou wilt. Three things stand out against the background of Jeremiah 42 and Zechariah 7.

First: He prayed directly to the Father, without asking anyone to intercede for Him. The remnant of Judah wanted Jeremiah to pray for them; they did not come themselves. The Lord came Himself. Second: He had not decided in advance what He was going to do. His request was genuine — take away this cup from me. There was no hidden will that He was protecting while going through the form of prayer. He meant it. He did not want to be made sin. He did not want to be separated from communion with the Father. That holy, sinless, human reluctance was real.

Third: the answer was no. We do not know in what words or by what means the answer came, but we know what it amounted to: the cup would not pass. And the Lord's response to that no was the perfection of prayer: not what I will, but what thou wilt. He received the no. He accepted it. He went forward to the cross.

The remnant of Judah heard the no and said Jeremiah was lying. The Lord heard the no and said, thy will be done. That is the difference between the will of the flesh and the will of God. And that is the pattern for us when God's answer is not what we hoped to hear. His will is always best. Taste and see that the Lord is good — blessed is the man that trusteth in Him.
