

ABRAHAM: ONE NOMAD'S AMAZING JOURNEY OF FAITH

What Happens When We Pray?

Genesis 18:22–33

SEARCHING
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SCRIPTURES

STUDY



LET'S BEGIN HERE

We've all heard it said that we never stand taller than when we kneel before our God. But what happens when we offer our prayers and petitions to God? Does He change His mind? Can we alter His plan or reverse His course?

In this study, we'll zoom in on Abraham's passionate dialogue with the Lord about the fate of Sodom. By analyzing Abraham's prayer, we can understand the struggle that occurs between petition (*what* we ask for) and desire (*why* we ask) and gain insight into the important role prayer plays in our lives. As we do, we'll learn to pray with confidence before the throne of grace.



YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

Reread the conversation between Abraham and the Lord, recorded in Genesis 18:22–33, that we examined in the previous study. As you read, try to discern Abraham's motive. What prompted Abraham to ask the Lord to spare the city?

With each plea to spare the righteous, Abraham's heart must have pounded with concern for Lot and his family who surely would perish in Sodom's judgment fire. Anyone who has begged God for mercy on behalf of a loved one can identify with Abraham's passionate appeal. Our hearts brim with questions such as these:

- Does God hear my cries for my loved ones' rescue?
- What if my prayers are misguided? Will God still act on their behalf?
- How should I interpret God's silence?

Quotable

Prayer is one of the deepest subjects that can ever be studied. And if you don't think that, you haven't thought deeply enough about prayer.

— Charles R. Swindoll



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To answer these questions, we'll use the *Searching the Scriptures* method of *correlation* to dig deeper into the topic of prayer.



Searching the Scriptures: Correlation

Correlation is the process of comparing Scriptures to amplify the meaning of a text to gain a broader understanding. Correlating Scriptures guards us from building a doctrine on one verse and cultivates a reasonable and balanced faith. Helpful tools are a good study Bible that contains notes and cross-references. A concordance, such as *The Strongest NASB Exhaustive Concordance*, is useful. Searchable versions of the Bible are available at BibleGateway.com.

Two Major Ingredients in Prayer

All prayers include two major ingredients: *petition* and *desire*. *Petition* is the request that we present to the Lord, and *desire* refers to our motive—the deeper reason behind our requests.

What two reasons does James give to explain unanswered prayer (James 4:2–3)?

Our motives are just as important to the Lord as our requests. Often our motives are hidden, even to us; however, what does Hebrews 4:13 tell us about God's insight into the deepest parts of who we are?

We may try to hide our desires behind our fancy-worded prayers, but God sees the real *us*, with all our quirks, complexities, and secret wishes. Through the lens of these two ingredients, requests and desires, we can see four ways God responds to our prayers.



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Four Ways God Responds to Our Prayers

God's yes or no depends on His response to what we pray and why we pray.

First, *God might say yes to the petition and yes to the desire*. We find an example of God's yes-yes response in an episode from Elijah's life. Read Elijah's prayer recorded in 1 Kings 18:36–37. What was his petition? What was his desire?

What indication do you see in this passage that Elijah was acting according to God's revealed will?

Read 1 John 5:14–15. How does this passage affirm the prayer principle illustrated by God's response to Elijah?



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Second, *God might say no to the petition and no to the desire*. The Bible gives numerous examples of misguided requests made with wrong motives. According to each of the following verses, why does God refuse to answer some prayers?

Matthew 6:5–7

James 1:6–7

1 Peter 3:7

Sometimes God answers no because our request and motives don't line up with His will. Other times, He wants to teach us a divine lesson or, perhaps, He wants to use us as an object lesson to teach others. It's always a soul-searching time when God says no.

Third, *God might say yes to our petition but no to our desire*. An example of God's yes-no response occurs in His dealing with the Israelites in the wilderness. Read Numbers 11:4–6. Weary of eating only manna, the people begged the Lord for meat. Though the Lord was not pleased with their ingratitude (Numbers 11:10), He provided meat just as they requested.



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Read Numbers 11:31–35. What consequences did the Israelites endure when they received what they asked for with the wrong motives? Why do you think God responded as He did?

The old saying proved true for the Israelites that day: “Be careful what you ask for. You just might get it!”

Fourth, *God might say no to our petition but yes to the desire*. God’s *no-yes* response is precisely what Abraham received when he prayed for the preservation of Sodom. Abraham’s desire was pure when he asked the Lord to show mercy on the wicked city for the sake of ten righteous people (Genesis 18:27–33). We’ll see God’s answer in the next study of Genesis 19:1–26. God could not find even ten righteous people in the city, so He declined Abraham’s request and judged the city. However, God honored Abraham’s heartfelt desire by warning Lot and his family to flee.

Read Romans 8:26–28. How does this passage apply to God’s answering the right desire regardless of the petition?

Abraham’s life consisted of simple conversations with God—prayer at its purest. Through Abraham’s example, we learn that God often has something better for us even when He says no to our request.



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Application: Three Possible Answers to Any Prayer

As we conclude, let's examine three possible answers we may receive to any prayer.

- *God can (and often does) say yes!* These are magnificent moments, aren't they? Remember, though: God may go deeper than our surface-level requests and get to the heart of the matter, giving us what we really need rather than what we think we need. Can you recall a time when God answered your prayer as requested or even better than requested? Write down what happened, and express your trust in His wisdom.
- *God can (and often does) say no!* God's no is never motivated by cruelty, and He's never obligated to explain His reasons. Paul experienced God's no when he requested healing (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). However, he accepted God's answer and viewed this "thorn" as an opportunity to trust God's goodness and lean on His grace. Write down a case of God's no in your life, and, like Paul, express your trust and dependency on the Lord.
- *God can (and often does) say wait!* Abraham waited on God . . . for years! From our limited, horizontal perspective, we can't always understand why God delays blessings or postpones promises. Yet our waiting is one of God's most frequently used methods of growing us spiritually. Use the space below to record a current prayer to which God has answered, wait. Your request and motives may be right, but perhaps they don't fit into God's timing. Express your trust in God's perfect timing.



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Has this study helped you answer some questions about prayer? Record here any further questions you might have about prayer, and in the coming days seek the Lord through His Word. As you do, remember to keep trusting His wisdom, His goodness, and His timing.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, because You are my sovereign Lord, I lean on You and trust Your answers to my prayers, whether yes, no, or wait. Search my heart to know my motives, and reveal any self-seeking desires in me. May I always live in submission to Your will and way. And, Lord, please show mercy to my loved ones who need Your help. Rescue them. Draw them with Your arms of love, and lead them in Your everlasting way. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. This study was adapted from Michael J. Svingel, *Abraham: One Nomad's Amazing Journey of Faith Bible Companion* from the Bible-teaching ministry of Charles R. Swindoll (Frisco, Tex.: IFL Publishing House, 2014), 111–21.



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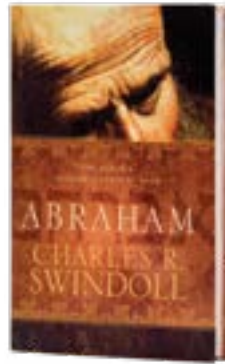
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For the 2017 broadcast, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by the Pastoral Ministries Department, based upon the original outlines, charts, and sermon transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.



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