



Romans 15:18-33

Many Christians don't pray because they are tired of not having their prayers answered. Even a slot machine pays out occasionally. That is the secret to slot machines and gambling in general. If the gambler never won, they would soon quit. The odds are always stacked in favor of the casino, but their evil strategy is to pay out *just* often enough to keep the suckers playing their game. So the gambler knows that if they sit there and feed money into it and pull the lever long enough, they will hear the familiar sound of clanging quarters or dollars. And that's how some Christians view prayer. To them, God is like a giant slot machine and you are supposed to pull the giant prayer lever. But the most cynical of Christians don't seem to get any reward when they pull the pull the lever so they eventually give up.

But even Christians who are less cynical than this struggle when God says no. The Bible seems to be filled with promises about God answering prayers so why does it seem that the answer is so often "No.?"

Nate Saint was one of five missionaries who were speared to death in Ecuador in January of 1956. Almost sixty years later it is one of the most compelling missionary stories ever told. If you have read the story or seen the movie, *The End of the Spear*, you know that Nate Saint was the Mission Aviation Fellowship pilot. But Nate had not planned to become a missionary. Ever since he took his first plane ride when he was seven years old, Nate dreamed of flying for a living. Nate was raised in a strong Christian family where he was taught the Bible and learned how to pray.

At age 18, he had learned to fly small planes and then he earned his mechanic's license. Elisabeth Elliot picks up the story from there.

The next step was to sign up for the Air Force pilot cadet program. “It looked as though the Eagle was about to lay the golden egg!” he said. “Twenty-five thousand dollars’ worth of pilot training!” By this time he had piloted a 40-horsepower light plane about eighty hours, but he had dreamed long of flying the big powerful planes of the military. The night before he was to report for his first military flying instruction he became aware of pain around his old osteomyelitis scar. Yanking up his trouser leg, he knew the truth. It was inflamed. All his boyhood ambitions of the past years, wrapped up and focused on this shining opportunity to get into big-time flying, suddenly collapsed. ¹

Nate Saint was a solid believer who prayed about his future and planned out his life. He wanted to become an air force pilot. I am sure he prayed about this plan but through circumstances beyond his control, God said no. Can you relate to this? Have you been disappointed by a no answer from God? Have your ambitions and plans been thrown a serious curve ball? There’s not a person in this room who hasn’t experienced this. What are we to do when God says no?

It is encouraging when we see characters in the Bible struggle with the exact same thing that we do. In Romans 15, Paul prayed a three part prayer that received mostly no answers from the Lord. Yes, misery does love company, but that’s not why these stories should be encouraging to us. We shouldn’t be happy just because someone else is suffering with us. These stories are encouraging because it means that believers who are further along spiritually than we are, have not only experienced our same disappointments, but have come out the other side so much better. Please allow the apostle Paul to teach you what to do when God says no.

18 For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, 19 by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; 20 and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, 21 but as it is written,

*“Those who have never been told of him will see,
and those who have never heard will understand.”*

22 This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. 23 But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, 24 I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. 25 At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. 26 For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. 27 For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. 28 When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. 29 I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. 30 I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, 31 that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, 32 so

that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. 33 May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

Pau's prayer came at the very end of the chapter. He asked for prayer starting in verse 30. *I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.* The prayer came in three parts and I have given each one a summary statement.

Safety—*that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea,*

Effectiveness—*and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,*

Fellowship—*so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company*

Safety, effectiveness and fellowship. Aren't these three topics in every missionary prayer letter you have ever received? Missionaries need these three things. Of course they want to be safe. Many are living in dangerous areas of the world. The hardest part about Kellyn's trip to Africa was the traveling. Her flights to Chicago, Brussels and the capital city of Kinshasa in the DR Congo were not the concern. The safety issue came into play when they had to take a Congolese airline from Kinshasa to the small city of Gemena. It's not like their planes routinely drop out of the skies but their safety and maintenance record is sketchy enough that the US government forbids that their employees fly on this airline.

Then while Kellyn and Chloe are traversing along jungle roads in the back of an old pick-up truck, we later learn that the truck almost flipped over and the three girls with it. This is the photo they shared with you a few weeks ago. So yes, we prayed for safety.

And of course, all missionaries pray for effective ministry. After all, that's why you go in the first place—to see spiritual fruit from your efforts. Listen to what Jesus taught his disciples about spiritual effectiveness. *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name* (John 15:16). This verse is especially tough because it not only seems to have a promise of fruitfulness—fruit that will last—but it also contains a promise of answered prayer.

Tell that to Adinoram Judson. William Carey told Judson not to go to Burma, that it was too dangerous. But he went anyway and took his wife with him. Judson suffered terribly. It was six years, two of which were spent in prison, before he saw his first convert. Most of his prayers received a no answer from God. Lord, spare my wife Ann. No. Lord, please spare my wife Sarah. No. Father, please spare my sick child. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. Two of his wives died and he buried seven of his children.

But twenty years later a revival broke out. Judson wrote,

Some come two or three months' journey, from the borders of Siam and China - 'Sir, we hear that there is an eternal hell. We are afraid of it. Do give us a writing that will tell us how to escape it.' Others, from the frontiers of Kathay, 100 miles north of Ava - 'Sir, we have seen a writing that tells about an eternal God. Are you the man that gives away such writings? If so, pray give us one, for we want to know the truth before we die.'²

Every missionary desires fruitfulness and effectiveness and if you aren't praying for it, you may as well stay home. So it was natural that Paul prayed for effective ministry. And Paul prayed for

sweet fellowship—*so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.* Being a missionary is a lonely job. You live in a foreign country with language and cultural barriers and often you have your children with you. The Alvidrez family from Albania who were with us in August asked for prayers for their daughter Katherine. She is a confident 16 year old girl who gets along with everyone she meets but she doesn’t really have any close friends in Albania. It’s tough when missionary parents themselves are lonely but it’s doubly difficult for them to see their own children have a lack of good fellowship.

So Paul knew that by the time he reached the church in Rome, he would need refreshing. He would need good fellowship to revive his Spirit. Not to mention the fact that he had wanted to see these believers for years. *But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, 24 I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.*

Let’s back up and get a bird’s eye view of Paul’s plans because you cannot understand his prayer unless you also understand his plans. Paul had one grand, holy ambition. *and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, 21 but as it is written, “Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.”*

This is still the driving force in mission’s work today. Dozens of missions’ agencies work cooperatively to take the gospel to the remaining 6,800 people groups all over the world.³

All of Paul’s plans were driven by this one ambition—to preach the gospel to those who has never heard. It was who he was. His heart beat passionately for this calling. All of his plans revolved around this one, holy ambition. He had wanted to go to Rome and see the believers there. He had never been to Rome. Some other Christians took the gospel to Rome before Paul could get there and started a vibrant church. He didn’t care about that. Paul was not jealous. Neither was he territorial. He was glad that the gospel has been carries as far as Rome without him, but he really wanted to spend time with the believers there. But his singular ambition had prevented him from going to see them. *Vesre22—This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you.* He wanted to go to Rome but this one ambition would not allow him. As long as there was preaching to do in Asia and Greece, he would do that first.

But now he was at a point where he could travel to Rome, because he had finished the work elsewhere. Verse 19—*so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ.*



If you recall, I showed you this map a few weeks ago. The green rectangle shows the area around which Paul had preached the gospel—from Jerusalem in the southeast to Illyricum in the northwest. So what was his next stop? It wasn't Rome. He could not stay and preach there because there was already a church there.

24 I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. Paul's ultimate goal was Spain. He had planned to take the gospel as far west as he could possibly go. Paul always went west from Jerusalem. His first journey was adventurous but relatively short. His second journey took him around Asia and all the way to Greece. His third trip was similar to the second but he got as far north as Illyricum. But the western adventure was not yet complete. Spain awaited Paul, which would literally fulfill Jesus' mandate in Acts 1—to take the gospel “to the ends of the earth.” I guess Paul could have taken the gospel to the pagan Vikings in Norway, but they would have to wait for someone else. His singular ambition was to preach the gospel where Christ had not been named. Spain itself was not the goal, do you see? Spain was just the next application of the driving ambition. All of the plans in Paul's life were centered around this one ambition. It affected everything he did.

Before we can even pray, you and I have two burning questions to ask.

1. What is my life ambition?

2. Have I planned my life around my one, holy ambition?

Too often we pray before we even have an idea of what God might want us to do. It's no wonder we get so many “NO” answers to our prayers because we pray for all of the wrong reasons. Here are several Biblical reasons why we receive no answers to our prayers.

1. Double-minded doubt

But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does (James 1:6-8). A lack of faith in God's ability to answer your prayer will result in double-mindedness. Your faith does not mean that the answer will be YES, but an absence of faith will result in unanswered prayer.

2. Selfish motives

You do not have, because you do not ask God. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (James 4:2-3). Much of our praying is selfish. Lots of prayers are foxhole prayers. We pray only when we are at our most desperate. But we need to realize that all prayers are desperate prayers. If we can do nothing apart from Christ, then every prayer is a prayer of desperation, not just when we are some kind of trouble.

3. Sin of all kinds

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil (1 Peter 3:12).

4. Hurtful relationships

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers (1 Peter 3:7).

5. An absence of one's life ambition.

What is my life ambition? Your ambition does not have to be Paul's ambition. Paul was specifically called to preach the gospel where Christ has never been named. We must answer this question before we answer the second: *Have I planned my life around my one, holy ambition?*

Whatever it is, your ambition must come from God's Word. This diagram may help you think it through. The first section is mission—what the world needs. The world definitely needs more people to take the gospel where Christ has never been named. If you give money to Grace Church, you are already part of that mission, but it doesn't mean that everyone is called to go.

The first area is that which the world needs, the mission. Again, the world needs Christians who, like Paul, will take the gospel to unreached parts of the globe. But the world also needs moms who are sold out to raising their children in the fear of the Lord. On Friday Ethan asked me what I wanted for my birthday. I said, "All I want is to have happy, obedient children who fear the Lord." That wasn't the answer he was expecting and I was half kidding but also half serious. What greater mission does a parent have? There is not just one thing the world needs. There is more than one type of mission but yours must come from God's word.



The second area is that which you love—your passion. When mission and passion overlap you have started to hit the sweet spot. But what happens when you have a clear mission but you don't enjoy it? For example, you know that you should enjoy sharing your faith but you don't. Well that's another matter for prayer. Do you think the Lord wants you to enjoy doing his work in his way? If you asked him, do you think he would say yes? I think so too.

The third area is your profession—what you are good at, the skills that you have. The calling of every believer is to use his or her skills to do God's mission. These are skills that you either have now or need to get trained to perform. And you can take almost any skill and use it for God's mission.

The final area is that which you can be paid for—your vocation. When these four areas overlap, you have hit the real sweet spot. But you might be thinking, "I don't get paid to do my mission?" With the exception of myself and all of our camp families, no one else is in vocational ministry. So you may not get paid to do your mission, but where you do get paid, can you work within your mission? Let me ask that question a different way. Are there people who you work with

who need what you have? Is there at least one person in your work environment who is not saved? And that goes for stay at home mothers as well? If so, then your work and your mission *do* overlap.

So to follow in Paul's footsteps, at least some of our praying should be directed at our mission, our life's ambition. But even with his one holy ambition, to preach the gospel where Christ has not been named, two of Paul's three prayers received a no answer. Do you remember the three parts to his prayer?

Safety—*that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea,*

Effectiveness—*and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,*

Fellowship—*so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company*

God said NO to two of these three. He wasn't rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and he didn't go to Rome on his way to Spain to fulfill his ambition. Paul asked. God said no.

Let me return to the Nate Saint story again. Nate had wanted to become a pilot in the Air Force, but God said no. And remember, this has happened the night before he was supposed to join the military. Here's what happened one year after he received this no answer with Elisabeth Elliot chiming in again.

“On this job he had time to burn and he used it for Bible reading, which he had neglected.” And now Nate Saint in his own words. “What was going on in the service wasn't important. I wasn't hearing anything with my ears, anyhow. I pleaded helplessly with my Heavenly Father for the answer that stood between me and the peace that Jesus had said should be ours... That night I saw things differently . . . BING . . . like that. Just as though a different Kodachrome slide had been tossed onto the screen between my ears. As soon as I could, I stepped out of the building and started out . . . just to get away from people. It was snowing and there was already a deep virgin snow on the ground, and the moan of city traffic had been muffled as it is when deep snow is around. A joy, such as I had never known since the night I accepted Jesus' forgiveness for my sins, seemed to leave me almost weak with gratitude. It was the first time that I had ever really heard that verse: 'Follow me, and I will make you to become fishers of men.' The old life of chasing things that are of a temporal sort seemed absolutely insane.”⁴

He has just decided to take a position with MAF as a missionary pilot. God has told him no to the military because he had a larger plan. Doesn't he always?

So God does give no answers to our prayers. Sometimes it's our own fault. Sometimes it's for a mysterious reason that is later revealed to us. Other times it's for a mysterious reason that we may never know. The question is , will you trust Him?

Rich Maurer
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¹ Elliot, Elisabeth, *Through Gates of Splendor* (Kindle Locations 725-729).

² Courtney Anderson, *To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), pp. 398-399.

³ <http://www.peoplegroups.org/>

⁴ Elliot, Elisabeth, *Through Gates of Splendor* (Kindle Locations 725-729).