

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 52

KNOCK: IT SHALL BE OPENED

Sermon on the Mount Series

Matthew 7:7

by Maurice Barratt

“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Matthew 7:7).

As we come to the third part of Jesus’ statement on prayer, it’s important to remember that we may have confidence that “it shall be given” only if we are asking for “good gifts” (verse 11). We can’t just ask for anything and expect that we have the right to “claim” an answer. We must also remember that Jesus is giving us a progression here. “Ask”, “seek” and “knock” are not three different ways of saying the same thing. Asking is simple, straightforward petition; but seeking demands effort, action and perseverance. Now we come to the last one; and as seeking far exceeds asking, so knocking far exceeds seeking in its demands. Why? Because “knocking” is praying to a “closed door”. You can’t open it; you are entirely dependent on the person on the other side opening the door. It’s all down to God responding. With seeking, much of the initiative is with you, and there are many things you can do. But you can’t do anything at the closed door, except knock and keep knocking.

But more than that: a closed door is an obstacle. It means that God has made a decision, and closed the door. But you are knocking and asking him to open it again. In other words, you are asking him to change his mind. You may think that it is not possible to change God’s mind. But I want to bring some examples from scripture of how the persistent prayer of righteous men achieved just that.

Moses

The first example is Moses interceding for Israel. After the Golden Calf incident, God had determined to destroy Israel. He said to Moses, “Let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them” (Exodus 32:10). That was a “closed door”. God had made up his mind. But Moses started knocking at the closed door. He tried to change God’s mind. This was no ordinary prayer. Moses had been through 40 years training to get to this moment. He knew God in a real way. We cannot just copy Moses’ prayer. Moses was the right man, in the right place, at the right time. He appealed to God’s own character and his covenant (verses 11-13). Incredibly, Moses asked God to repent! “Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people” (v.12). But more amazing is that Moses’ plea was heard. “And the Lord repented” (v.14). The closed door was opened. God changed his mind.

But Moses was not satisfied. He had more knocking to do. But he went slowly, step by step, not presumptuously. After he had come down from the mountain, he said to the people, “I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I shall make an atonement for your sin” (v.30). So far, Moses had only prayed that God would not destroy Israel. Now he was praying for forgiveness for them. Again, it was no ordinary prayer. Moses offered his own life, and not just his earthly life, but his eternal future. “Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin—; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written” (v.32). Who would dare pray such a prayer? But Moses won God’s forgiveness for the people. His knocking had opened the door again.

The people were forgiven. But notice what God said next: “Nevertheless ... I will visit their sin upon them” (v.34). Though they had been forgiven, justice still had to be done. We often misunderstand this. We must not confuse pardon and justice, forgiveness and punishment. God forgave David when he confessed his adultery (2 Samuel 12:13), but David still had to bear his punishment: his child died, his son rebelled against him, and the sword never departed from his house. Forgiveness means that God doesn’t hold a grudge against us in his heart. In the dictionary, “forgive” means “cease to resent”. It is a matter of attitude. But sin still needs punishing. God is always righteous and perfectly fair. God forgave our sin, but Jesus still had to bear the punishment for it to satisfy God’s righteousness.

Moses was not finished yet. God had said he would send his angel with Israel. But that suggested that God would not go with them personally, and a few verses later he makes it clear that is the case: “I will not go up in the midst of thee” (Exodus 33:1-3). That door was closed. So Moses began knocking again, and he argued it through with God. He said to God, “You told me that I have found grace in your sight. So why will you not go with me?” “If thy presence go not up with me, carry us not up hence” (v.15). And God agreed again, he changed his mind again, and said to Moses, “I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken” (v.17). The closed door had opened once more. Three times Moses had prevailed with God. But he wanted more. “And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory” (v.18). He wanted to see God himself. And this reveals the secret behind Moses’ prayers and his success. Moses wasn’t just interested in “answers”. His goal was not just to save his people from destruction. His goal was God. He wanted to know him, to see him. Paul had the same prayer on his lips at the very end of his life: “... that I may know him ...” (Philippians 3:10). This is the ultimate goal, God himself. For so many Christians, the God that they know is a series of doctrines and attributes: grace, mercy, righteousness, and so on. Or the God that they know is the God who has delivered them and answered their prayers. They don’t yet know God himself, the person; but asking, seeking and knocking are all heading towards this: the revelation of God himself. “No man has seen God at any time”; that door is closed — but to Moses, it was opened.

Elijah

We all know about how Elijah brought down fire from heaven on Mount Carmel. Elijah prayed a simple, “asking” prayer, and it was immediately answered. There was no “closed door” here; Elijah merely stood up and asked God to prove that he had acted in obedience to him (1 Kings 18:36-38). But Elijah’s next prayer was for rain, and that demanded a totally different sort of prayer. Elijah “cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees” (1 Kings 18:42), and six times he

asked his servant to go and look for clouds, and there was nothing. But Elijah kept knocking, and the seventh time, he got his answer.

Why did the prayer for rain take so long and so much effort, when the prayer for fire was answered so speedily? Because the fire was judgement, but the rain was blessing. The fire was to rid Israel of idolatrous worship, so God was pleased to do that. But the rain was to reverse God's own judgement of drought. To change God's mind and bring the blessing of rain took persistent knocking.

It is worth noting that when James is talking about prayer he uses the example of Elijah, and it is Elijah's prayer for rain, not for fire, which he is recommended for. "Earnest", "effectual", "fervent" are the words used (James 5:16-17). This is in the context of prayer for Christians: it often takes more persistent prayer to obtain answers among Christians than it does for the unsaved.

There is also another notable similarity between Moses and Elijah's prayers: both ended in a personal encounter with God himself — Moses on Mount Sinai, and Elijah on Mount Horeb, where God revealed himself not in the fire or the earthquake but in the "still small voice" of intimate communication — the true goal of prayer.

Parables of Persistence

Jesus told a parable to teach us "always to pray, and not to faint" (Luke 18:1). It concerned an unjust judge, who didn't want to hear a widow's plea. The judge's door was closed, his ears were deaf to her cries; but she kept knocking, and eventually he answered her simply because she was wearying him with her persistence. How much more, Jesus said, will God "avenge his own elect who cry day and night unto him" (Luke 18:7)? The judge's obstinate mind could be changed — how much more so God's mind?

Elsewhere Jesus told a parable of a man who went to his friend at midnight to ask for some bread, and finds, literally, a closed door: his friend answers, "Trouble me not: the door is now shut; and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee" (Luke 11:7). But again, Jesus stresses that even if he won't answer because he is his friend, if the man keeps persisting, he will eventually give him everything he asks (v.8). And as a conclusion to this parable in Luke, Jesus says, "And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you ..." (v.9). The message is clear. The door may be closed to you, but knock; it could be opened.

Getting an Answer

Prayer does not always bring the answer we want, but if we persist we will have some answer from God. Paul prayed three times that his "thorn in the flesh" would depart, but after three "knocks", God told him, "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:8-9). Jesus also prayed three times in Gethsemane, and he too did not receive the answer he wanted, but he did receive his answer. We have no right to demand that God answers our prayers, and we certainly have no right to demand that he answer them in the way we would wish. But we have no excuse not to pray, and keep praying, until we get an answer — to knock until the door is opened.

Persistence in prayer is not enough in itself. The secret of answered prayer is knowing God. Moses knew how to talk to God; he knew what to say and when to say it. Prayer at the wrong time and in the wrong way can be a clanging gong and a tinkling cymbal — it can just be an irritation to God. But if we strive to seek him, to know him for who he is, to come to him not just with petitions and problems, but to spend time getting to know him — then we are achieving the true purpose of prayer.

EXPERIENCES FROM LIFE

by Joanna Barratt

When God Shuts A Door, He Opens A Window ...

Funny, isn't it, how you always seem to think that God will get excited about your ideas of how you can bring glory to Him. You pray so hard that things will change, just to prove to everyone that because you are a Christian, God will hear and give you what you ask for. I remember when I was pregnant with my first child, Nathan. All the way through the pregnancy he was breech, but the midwives and other mums assured me that there was every reason to expect him to turn at the last minute ready for birth. Unfortunately, Nathan never did turn. In fact on 2 occasions a doctor, then a consultant, tried to physically turn him in my stomach (ouch!), but Nathan just sprang back to lie in the position he'd found most comfortable throughout his short life. I was being pressed by the hospital to book in for a caesarean delivery but wouldn't commit myself as I still expected God to do a miracle to show everyone just how powerful He was. Maybe if my name had been Daniel instead of Joanna, and I'd been someone important instead of a little ordinary wife, He would have stepped in, but He didn't ... and then the labour started. I went through 12 hours of labour only to be rushed to the operating theatre for an emergency section as Nathan was stuck in the birth canal and was in trouble. Deflated? Yes. Humbled? Yes. Grateful? Yes. Thank You Lord that I live in a day and age when the medical profession can save life, and that I live in a country where I can freely receive these benefits. God didn't answer my prayer for a miracle, but proved that 'His grace was sufficient'! Welcome to motherhood!

Exhaustion

I'd carried on in the ministry after Nathan's birth because I hadn't known what it entailed. My child was a seasoned traveller at the age of 5 months having already been a month in the USA and another in Holland, together with many trips to various venues in the UK but I felt on the verge of collapse as exhaustion took its toll on me. I reasoned it out and felt absolutely certain that God wanted me to stay put in England for at least a year until Nathan was settled and then take up my post with Maurice again, but Maurice was reluctant to accept this. I prayed that God would speak to him and tell him what I felt sure He had told me, before our proposed month tour of Scotland with

our small baby in tow. We had planned for a short holiday in between tours to give us a breather, and as we were visiting a church where we were not known, I asked God to speak to Maurice. But all throughout the service the Lord was talking to me, emphasising very strongly indeed that the circumstances were not important - THE CALL WAS! Knowing what I was in for I recommitted myself to God's service and begged Him to give me the strength to fulfil His call on my life.

Within a matter of days someone offered to come in our touring caravan to Scotland with us as a nanny, to look after Nathan each evening we were out ministering so that he had some stability and security. The repercussions from my decision astounded me. God didn't answer my prayer to be relieved of my calling for a while, He provided a whole new set of circumstances to emphasise yet again that 'His grace was sufficient'!

"Quiet time??!"

Life was never the same once our child was born. The routine and regularity of my childless life was shattered. Quiet time? What's that?! This bundle made so many demands at all sorts of ridiculous hours and had to be tended ... immediately. I loved my baby, but I resented not being able to spend the hours with God that I was used to, you know, first thing in the morning, before you start your labours. Time to come round from your sleep, a quiet cup of coffee to wake you up. No fear, Nathan knew how to wake me up, not only in the morning, but 4 or 5 times every single night until He went to school at the age of 3. I was constantly worn out. It irritated me immensely that Maurice was able to go about his own routines quite normally. He couldn't breast feed so slept whilst I got up with the baby, and had his regular quiet time with God because the child needed me. I got so frustrated that I almost demanded we took it in turns to have some time with God in the mornings, but this just didn't work out as I'd hear Nathan crying and couldn't concentrate. Eventually I gave up the fight and told God that I really would come under my husbands covering, and asked him to give Maurice enough strength for both of us. When I submitted and stopped struggling and condemning myself, things got much easier. Here again God showed me that 'His grace was sufficient', I just had to fall on His grace, I couldn't help myself.

When Nathan was 2 years old to the very day I bled during my 2nd pregnancy. Being assured by the hospital that I was probably rushing around too much and needed a rest away from home for a few days, I went to be checked over. I was devastated to find that the child I'd been carrying had been dead in my womb for 4 weeks and needed to be removed. Not being a young mum, I feared that my chances for another pregnancy were very slim and begged God to heal my dear little foetus. But Maurice talked with me, helping me to face reality, and so the child was removed. God gives, God takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord. I accepted His decision and 'His grace was sufficient'.

Doors Open ...

When I returned from hospital I began to pray fervently that God would be kind to me and open my womb so that Nathan wouldn't be on his own. I begged and begged, it became a real issue with me. But then one day God opened my eyes to the fact that I was putting pressure on Him and not allowing Him to have a free will. Immediately I repented, realising that I had accepted God's decision

but had resented it. To show my change of heart I gave away all the baby items I had tenderly kept and told God that I wanted His will whatever that meant.

The very same week that I had cleared out everything to do with the baby I was sick. Maurice immediately informed me that I was pregnant, but fearing to have my hopes dashed I dismissed it until he shared his secret with me. The Lord had recently woken him up to tell him that he was going to be blessed with another son. Wow! Now I wasn't only pregnant, but I was carrying a son, and this was what God desired for me. A week later God gave me a dream and told me to call this child Izaac, and I hadn't even had my pregnancy confirmed by a doctor! Sure enough, Izaac was born in the normal way, and is my little laughing boy. When I accepted God's wisdom in my miscarriage from His left hand, He blessed me with His right hand. He had shut the door, but whilst I was walking away, had opened a window.

Girl Friday

Years ago, when I was a single working girl, I was employed as a 'Girl Friday' by a very large property company opening up a branch work and only just recruiting staff. The job was really satisfying until a full compliment had been recruited and everyone was given their job specification. I was positioned as Personal Secretary to the Chief Surveyor who managed the very building we were using, and suddenly jealousies and rivalries appeared. The Secretary who had been sent with her boss to get this branch up and running began to dislike me intensely and made my life unbearable. She was extremely vocal and at one point got everyone to totally ignore me for quite a period, during which time only my boss and the Manager communicated with me. It got to be so hard that I'd cry in my prayer times and beg God to either get rid of her or find me a new job. But God kept reminding me that He had given me the job in the first place, and that this was my training ground. I tried my best to love my enemies, bless those who cursed me and do good to those who spitefully used me, but I was very frayed and constantly had to ask God for His strength. Because I had been 'sent to Coventry' and ignored by my peers, I threw myself into my work and became very focused. My boss, realising the pressure being put upon me and fearing that I might leave the firm, removed me from the general office with all the other Secretaries and put my desk in his own office so that I didn't have to come into contact with them. It was totally unheard of and certainly showed preferential treatment which incensed this woman even more, but he was determined to keep me. I became the most protected Secretary in the company and in time the problem Secretary left.

Another Open Door

As I was in the ministry I used all my holidays, about 5 or 6 weeks a year, to tour for the Lord, but this became too few as more offers for ministry came. I shared my problem with my boss and the firm respected me so much that they paid me when I took extra time off to fulfil my engagements for whole months at a time. However, there came a day when I felt embarrassed by all the concessions the firm were prepared to allow me. I had to leave, not because I wanted to, the situation had vastly changed and I loved my job and had some great relationships in the company. But it was now God's time for me to go. Being sent from the firm with their blessing, I was told that if

I was ever in need of employment in the future they would always have an open door. God really did turn the whole thing around.

I've decided now not to suggest or tell God how to answer my prayers. I just keep on knocking and letting Him know I have a difficult problem to solve. He can dream up the most fantastic answers, so why deprive myself of a breathtaking rescue?