

When God Doesn't Listen to Your Prayer

There's a difference between hearing and listening.

- I can sit in a crowded airport terminal surrounded by a din of noise, but I can be laser-focused on the book I am reading. I'm hearing the noise, but I'm not listening to it.
- In a crowded room with multiple conversations, I can pick out my wife's voice. In spite of all I'm hearing, I'm listening for her voice.

There's a difference between hearing and listening when it comes to our prayers. God hears our prayers, but He doesn't always listen. Before you question my understanding of God, let's have a quick Hebrew lesson.

The Hebrew word *shama* means to hear, listen, and even obey. The word means what we think it means—to hear with our ears—but there are some nuances to how the Hebrew language used it. *Shama* can mean to gain knowledge. It's more than hearing words; we want to gain information. For example, we listen to a podcast, and in so doing, we gain knowledge.

But the context in Scripture often shows that hearing/listening carries with it action. We hear something, and we act upon what we hear. When the psalmist said, "I will listen to what God will say" (Ps. 85:8), it implies that he would obey what he heard.

Parents understand this. If you've ever had to say firmly to a child (or a 30-year-old living in the basement), "This room needs to be clean"—and then added with a dramatic pause—"Do you hear what I'm saying?" you understand the Hebrew! You're not just passing on information, you expect something to be done with that information. *Clean this room—now!*

It's with that same understanding that I say God hears our prayers, but He doesn't always listen. Yes, we can say with assurance that God hears our prayers. There is nothing God does not hear. But in the Hebrew sense of hearing—acting upon what is heard—God is under no compulsion to respond.

There are some wonderful promises in Scripture—words from Jesus Himself—that tell us that He responds to our prayers.

- "Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened" (Matt. 7:7-8).
- "If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it" (John 14:14).

But God is not your celestial vending machine. There is a condition. "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Ps. 66:18).

We can't expect God to do for us while ignoring our sin. Yes, God does love us, and He wants to respond to our requests, but His response is conditioned on the nature of our hearts, our humility before Him, and our attitude toward our own sin.

- "Anyone who turns his ear away from hearing the law—even his prayer is detestable" (Prov. 28:9).
- "But your iniquities are separating you from your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not listen" (Isa. 59:2).

Before laying my requests before God, my practice is to begin with praise—getting focused on the One to whom I am praying—followed by confession. I ask Him to make me aware of any unconfessed sin so that I can turn from it. And I attempt to make confession and repentance a habit throughout the day. The moment I am convicted and realize I've sinned, I want to deal with it.

Go ahead and be bold in talking to God. But before you give Him your requests, give Him your sin. In doing so, you can say as the psalmist said:

"If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and has heard my prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!" (Ps. 66:18-20).