

# Seven Ways God Answers Prayer

3/12/2017

## Introduction

As a rule, the blogs by GES are thoroughly enjoyable. However, a blog by Shawn Lazar on February 13, 2017, entitled, “Pray Without Doubting,” raised some concerns.<sup>1</sup> Lazar relates an event where a pastor’s son was dying. Surgery had been planned but had not taken place. In a state of emergency, the pastor called for some of the local elders to come pray for his son and claim the promise of James 5:14-15: “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.”

Lazar had an opportunity to confirm that miraculous healing had ensued without the need of surgery. Consequently, while reflecting on James 1:5-8, Lazar concluded that for prayer to be answered, it must be prayed in faith without any doubting. After all, the passage states, “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.” Lazar then shared a personal testimony of his own struggle in this area:

Frankly, my prayers are often mixed with doubts, especially when I’m praying for relatively “big” things, miraculous things. For example, my wife was diagnosed with Hashimoto’s disease. I pray for God to heal her. But I can’t say my prayers are not without doubt. I think I qualify as a “double-minded man” in that case. I believe, and yet I don’t. In which case, according to James, I should not expect to “receive anything from the Lord.”

He then shares “four types of doubt that can prevent you from praying the prayer of faith,” thus preventing you from having your prayers answered. He seeks to eliminate these doubts to conclude: “Here’s the answer—*study the promises of God*. That’s how you can know God’s will. If God has promised to do something, and that’s what you’re praying for, then you can be fully persuaded that it’s His will to answer your prayer” (emphasis his). So let us ask the rather obvious question, “Is the healing of Lazar’s wife God’s will?” If we are to base our answer solely on the impression conveyed by Lazar in the blog, then the answer would seem to be a resounding, “Yes!” Physical healing is always God’s will. Just call for the elders of the church and have them pray for such healing. This seems to be Lazar’s premise based on this Jacobian promise read in isolation from the rest of Scripture. All Lazar should have to do is call for the local elders to pray for her healing, and he should be able to have 100% confidence that the prayer will be answered because Jam 5:14-15 promises this will be the case. Is this a psychologically healthy conclusion? Is this a biblically reasonable conclusion?

## Points of Concern

The ugly inverse of this conclusion is that if Lazar calls for the elders of the church to pray for her and the healing does not ensue, then he can be 100% confident that the reason is because the elders could not muster up enough faith to get God to act. Obviously, this conclusion has some very serious implications. My own wife has just had to have a mastectomy this past year, plus radiation and chemo, because of her stage-three breast cancer. Should we conclude that the reason she had to have this surgery, radiation, and chemo was because all the prayers offered for her fell short of being prayed in faith? Lazar apparently assumes this to be the case. When I challenged his blog, he responded: “If God has promised something, conditioned on our faith, and that something does not come about, it [would] seem the first thing we should consider is whether or not we are actually praying in unbelief.” I object.

Should I have just told my wife that we were going to forgo having the surgery, radiation, and chemo and just trust God to heal her? Is that what trusting God 100% would look like? Is that what is necessary to get God to act? During this same time period, I learned that a pastor acquaintance of mine had apparently done just that—he did not take the treatment—and now he is eaten up with cancer. If Lazar is advocating a trust-God-not-medicine interpretation, then his false dichotomy can be quite deadly. To add insult to injury, given Lazar’s premise about God’s promise, we should presume that the reason this pastor is dying is because he and his elders do not have enough faith to cause God to act. Indeed, some people take that approach and assume that if your child or spouse is dying because of an illness, then it is your fault for not having had enough faith to move God to heal. If they die, their blood is on your hands, and you must

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://faithalone.org/blog/pray-without-doubt>.

live with the consequences of your failure. Lazar's approach can be psychologically damaging and physically deadly.

Elsewhere, thankfully, Lazar will refute this God-only mentality. In a 2015 review of Mark Lenz's book, *God's Providence*, he notes that Lenz believes "that God rarely intervenes in a direct and miraculous way. The classic case would be an illness. If we get ill, it would be wrong to expect to be instantly healed by God without availing ourselves of physicians and medicines."<sup>2</sup> Lazar recommended the book. In that same issue of JOTGES, Lazar also gave a review of Gene Edward's book, *God at Work*. Once again, Lazar comments: "There are many religious groups who consider it a lack of faith to take someone to see a doctor. They want God to heal, and they understand God's healing solely in miraculous terms." But he points out that this could be "tantamount to superstition." In any event, he says that we should "see modern medicine as part of God's providential care for the world." He "highly recommended" this book.<sup>3</sup> To use the terminology Lazar used back in 2015, these books, and his judgment then, should be used to balance the *superstitious* approach he takes in his 2017 blog.

In this blog, Lazar thinks that he should not expect for his wife to be healed because his prayers are not offered in faith without any doubting. If I agreed with his discussion, which I do not, then I would have to conclude the same thing concerning my wife. I had no right to expect God to heal my wife. Yet, far to the contrary, the reality was I expected God to heal my wife! I had hoped and prayed that He would do so without her having to undergo the treatment. But the tests showed that He had not. So we had to make a decision as to whether to proceed with the medical treatment. We proceeded. Once again, my wife and I, among many others, prayed that the treatment would be successful. The result? Her MRI last month has pronounced her to be cancer free. God answered our prayers for healing via the medical treatment. Did I have a right to expect God to do so? Yes, per Lazar's 2015 book reviews. But no, per Lazar's 2017 blog. Because I did not pray with 100% certainty that God would grant the healing for which we prayed, I had no right to expect God to hear our prayers according to the blog. We were prepared to trust God with the results if the healing we requested did not occur, even if it resulted in her death. According to Lazar's new superstitious approach, however, such prayers are not examples of faith but of doubt. Per the blog, we did not receive anything from God. All praise goes to the doctors, I suppose, for the healing. God had nothing to do with it, according to the blog. For be it from me, however, to draw such a conclusion from Jam 1:5-8 and 5:14-15. Better conclusions are available. But to get to them, we need to work our way, thoughtfully, through Lazar's underlying assumptions.

#### Four Types of Doubt

As mentioned above, Lazar states in the blog that four types of doubt can prevent our prayers from being answered. The first type of doubt he poses is that we might doubt that God *hears* our prayers. Lazar wrongly concludes that this doubt has no basis in reality since, according to him, "If you are a believer, God hears every word you say." Supposedly, we can draw near to God in prayer, confident that He will hear us, just because we are believers. To the contrary, in well-known passages, the Bible comes to a different conclusion: "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear; but certainly God has heard; He has given heed to the voice of my prayer" (Ps 66:18-19). "But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear" (Is 59:2). The Lord will not hear believers if they hold on to sin in their hearts. In defense of Jesus, the blind man whom the Lord healed argued: "We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing, and does His will, He hears him" (Jn 9:31). Pretty good argument for a blind man! James would concur. For this reason, he urges: "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed" (Jam 5:16). Accordingly, one of the very verses that Lazar cites in this section refutes his notion that God always hears the prayers of believers with an inclination to answer them just because they are believers. To the contrary, God's listening to our prayers is conditioned on our dealing with sin in our lives. Therefore, the presumption cannot be made that just because you ask in faith without any doubting that your prayer will be answered. The very context of passage Lazar cites indicates that sin could keep God from hearing us, in the sense of answering our prayer. No matter if you pray in faith, your prayer could still not be answered if unconfessed sin remains hidden. Peter likewise says, "For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears attend to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil" (1Pet 3:12). Contrary to Lazar, even if you pray in faith with 100% confidence that the Lord is going to answer your prayer, then your prayer may fall on deaf ears if you harbor sin in your heart. For that matter, Peter also warns husbands: "Live with your wives in an understanding way, as with a weaker vessel, since she is a woman; and grant her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered" (1Pet 3:7). John is also clear that being a believer is not sufficient grounds for us to know that God will hear us. For we must pray according to His will: "And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him" (1Jn 5:14-15). As believers we must live in God's will and pray in His will to have legitimate confidence that He will answer our prayers.

<sup>2</sup> Shawn Lazar, *JOTGES* 28:54 (Spring 2015), 89.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-94.

The second source of doubt that Lazar notes is that we could doubt God's *ability* to answer our prayer. However, in a note, he concedes that if we ask God to do something that is logically impossible, then praying in faith will not result in the prayer being answered. Also, as I discussed in my book, [4D Forgiveness](#), some things are morally impossible for God. Thus, if we ask Him to do these things, He cannot do them, no matter how much faith we have. Once again, the prayer of faith could be frustrated. Lazar contends that you cannot pray for something that is unbiblical and "be fully persuaded in your mind" that He will do so. Really? Why not? Disconnects between what the Bible says and what people believe happen all the time. They could believe that God has promised them something, like prosperity, and be fully persuaded that He will grant it, and yet be greatly mistaken.

The third source of doubt that Lazar lists is that we could doubt God's goodness to us *personally*. God might be good to others, but how can we be certain that He will be good to us? One passage Lazar cites to counter this doubt is Ps 35:27, where David tells us that God "*delights in the prosperity of His servant.*" Lazar advises: "Continually repeat out loud that God delights in the prosperity of His servant. Do that until that truth finally sinks in, and you become fully persuaded of it." Does this persuasion validate the prosperity gospel? I doubt it. Frankly, I do not believe that this verse is intended to be a blanket statement covering every situation so that we can fault any believer who is not experiencing prosperity as being a faith flunky. In fact, in the Hall of Faith, the writer of Hebrews praises God's servants who were destitute as a result of the persecution they endured (Heb 11:37). Far from being faith flunkies, they were faith heroes.

Fourth, according to Lazar, we could doubt that God *will* answer our prayer, which is where it really gets personal, as Lazar relates:

This is the big one for me, the one that I struggle with the most. I believe God *can* answer my prayer, if He wanted to. I'm just not sure that He wants to. In fact, I probably mostly doubt that He does. Is that your problem too? Do you doubt that God wants to answer your prayers? Then you and I need to know what God's will is. But how do we do that? (Emphasis his.)

Merely believing that God *can* answer your prayer is to doubt God's goodness, according to Lazar. Real faith is to believe that He *will* answer your prayer. I was interrupted at this point in my typing by my wife telling me that her mother's declining mind has gotten too bad for her mother to be able to cook reliably for herself. So what should we do? Call for the elders of the church to pray for her? Given Lazar's blog, one would think that the proper course of action would be for us not do anything practically to help her because this would be a lack of faith. We should just pray for her, and then let her fend for herself. Nonsense. The book reviews that Lazar provided back in 2015 give a much wiser course of action. We will call our local *meals on wheels* to see if they can help, and we will provide cooked food for her ourselves. As to James, I believe he would approve. Faith is expected to work (Jam 2:15-17). We are to be hands that God uses to answer our prayers for providing the healthcare her mother needs.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego believed that God was able to deliver them and that He would: "Our God whom we serve *is able* to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He *will* deliver us" (Dan 3:17). Nevertheless, they immediately go on to add: "But even *if He does not*, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up" (Dan 3:18). So which is it? Is this an example of doubt or of faith? The logical inference of the blog is that this a picture of doubt. They were 100% persuaded that God had the ability to save them, and they had the positive expectation that He would, but they were not 100% persuaded that He would. They left open the possibility that He might not, for reasons of His own. So what happened? Did God let them burn to teach us that merely being fully persuaded that He *can* answer our prayer gives us no right to expect that He *will* answer our prayer? No! God miraculously saved them in splendid fashion. They are heroes of faith, for whom God "quenched the power of fire" (Heb 11:34).

I think the attitude of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego is the attitude my wife and I had as we faced her cancer: (1) We knew without a doubt that God *could* heal her. And (2) we had the positive expectation that He *would* heal her. Nevertheless, we were not as fully persuaded of the latter as we were the former because we knew that there was biblical precedence for concluding that sometimes God chooses to deliver us through suffering rather than from suffering. Also, sometimes God chooses not to grant healing. Contrary to the false dichotomy that Lazar poses, this did not mean that we doubted God's goodness toward us personally.

### **Problematic Texts for Faulty-Faith Premise**

Lazar's presumption was that faith texts, which promise that God will answer our prayers if we have faith, give us grounds for concluding that the lack of answer to our prayers would probably be attributed to our lack of faith rather to God's will. I raised objections from several passages that make his conclusion problematic:

1. Paul prayed that the thorn in his flesh might be removed, which is frequently thought to include some form of physical problem. Should he have called for the elders of the church to pray for him with the

assurance that this meant that his prayer would be answered. Or, considering Jesus' promise in a passage like Mk 11:24, should we conclude that Paul's faith must have been deficient since his prayer was not answered?

2. Why did Paul leave Trophimus sick in Miletus (2Tim 4:20) if the prayers of elders or individuals offered in faith are supposed to be a 100% grantee of answered prayer?

3. Why did Paul tell Timothy to drink a little wine for the sake of his stomach and frequent sickness in 1Tim 5:23? Was it because Paul and Timothy and their elders did not have enough faith to pray in faith so that God would heal him?

4. Why was Paul so fearful that the Thessalonians might be upset in their faith in 1Thess 3:1-5? Was it because he did not have the faith to believe that God would answer his prayers that their faith would stand firm?

In response, Jim Poulos responded: "Paul's prayer was not answered not because of lack of faith but *because the Lord had purposes in Paul's life* he was not able [to] see until the Lord revealed it to him." But that response concedes the argument. Contrary to Lazar, the reason Paul's prayer was not answered was because of God's will, not because of Paul's lack of faith. I pointed out that Poulos response "proves my point splendidly. Sometimes our prayers are not answered the way we had hoped, and it is not because of our lack of faith. We should be sensitive to the Spirit as to what to pray and why our prayers may not be answered as we had hoped. God may have other purposes at play."

I went on to ask, "Does a passage such as James 5:14-15 mean that if prayer by elders for physical healing is not answered with physical healing, then those expressing the prayer are to be faulted with lack of faith?" Lazar's blog indicates that faulty faith is presumably the problem if the prayer for healing is not granted. I am not so quick to assume that faulty faith is the problem. Lazar seems to limit God's answer to our prayers to *yes* or *no*, with faith being the deciding factor. I would contend instead that frequently other viable factors may determine the answer and that the answers are not always a simple *yes* or *no*. I perceive at least seven ways in which God answers our prayers.

### Seven Ways that God Answers Prayer

#### 1. *No*

To be sure, God may answer our prayers with a "no." However, His negative response may not be due to our lack of faith but to our lack of faithfulness. As already noted, unconfessed sin could be the cause. Alternatively, confessed sin can be caused. David confessed his sin. The Lord forgave him (2Sam 12:13). Nevertheless, the Lord said that his child would die as a result of his sin. David thought that the Lord might be gracious anyway and spare his child if he fasted and prayed: "Who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live" (2Sam 12:22). If David had more faith and had thought instead, "The Lord will be gracious to me so that the child will live," would his prayer for healing have been granted? No. The reason his prayer was not answered was not his lack of faith, but God's will to the contrary. Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given to you" (Mt 7:7). Is that an unqualified promise? In that context, it seems to be. Indeed, James says, "You do not have because you do not ask" (Jam 4:2). But he immediately goes on to add: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures" (Jam 4:3). So who are we to believe: Jesus or James? Both, obviously. Nevertheless, Jesus did not add any qualifier to His statement but James does. In like manner, the fact that James does not list any other qualifications other than faith in Jam 5:14-15 does not mean that no other qualifications exist. For one thing, the previous context in Jam 4:2-3 makes it clear that proper motives are certainly a factor. Moreover, the very passage in Jam 5:14-15 implies that confessing one's sin is also a potential prerequisite for the prayer to be answered with a "yes." One might add that forgiving the sins of others also appears to be a requirement (Mk 11:25).

#### 2. *No...But*

The implication of Mt 7:9-11 is that God will not give His children negative things. So if a child asks for something that could be harmful, God could answer the prayer by saying, "No, but I will give you something else." Frequently, we are surprised by the way God answers our prayers. We do not get exactly what we asked for, or God does not answer our prayers in the way we expected. God may answer our prayers negatively in not giving us exactly what we ask for but positively in still giving something related, and perhaps even better, even "exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask" (Eph 3:20).

#### 3. *Yes*

On the other hand, the most straightforward way for God to answer our prayers in Mt 7:9-11 is to give us the good thing we ask for in just the way we ask it.

#### 4. *Yes...But*

Inversely related to the *no-but* answer, God may answer our prayers with a *yes...but*. God threatened to wipe out

Israel for their sin. But Moses prayed that the Lord would forgive them. “So the Lord said, ‘I have pardoned them according to your word; *but*...surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs, which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it” (Num 14:20-23). God answered his prayer positively but added some negative caveats.

#### 5. *Yes...And*

Inversely related to the latter half of the *yes-but* response, God may answer our prayers with a *yes...and*: “And God said to Solomon, ‘Because you had this in mind, and did not ask for riches, wealth, or honor, or the life of those who hate you, nor have you even asked for long life, but you have asked for yourself wisdom and knowledge, that you may rule My people, over whom I have made you king, wisdom and knowledge have been granted to you. *And* I will give you riches and wealth and honor, such as none of the kings who were before you has possessed, nor those who will come after you” (2Chron 1:11-12).

#### 6. *Yes...If*

Sometimes God answers our prayers contingently: “Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart” (Lk 18:1). Like Jacob who said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Gen 32:26), sometimes we have to persevere in believing prayer if we are to get what we ask for. Consequently, we have to wait. Einstein gave the definition of insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. Well, if that is the case, then this is a crazy faith. You keep praying over and over again, despite the Lord’s not granting your request, in the belief that He will answer your prayer if you keep asking. In fact, some would counsel that once you have made your request, you should stop asking and start thanking—thanking God for having granted your request.

#### 7. *Yes...eventually*

Some would abbreviate this discussion by saying that God answers prayers in three ways: no, yes, and wait. But we miss some of the nuances by limiting ourselves to just three responses. Sometimes God answers our prayers eventually but not contingently. For example, my father, Al Cauley, is a retired Southern Baptist minister. I called him to discuss this article while I was writing it because he has had many instances of answered prayer. During the course of his ministry, he has seen miraculous answers to his prayers many times when he claimed Mt 18:19-20 (or Jam 5:14-15). For example, he and a prayer partner claimed Mt 18:19-20 on behalf of a young woman whom the doctors said would never walk again. A week later she walked out of the hospital. Sometimes the answers to his prayers involved God using medical means; sometimes the answers to his prayers came without God using medical means. Sometimes how God used medical means was miraculous. For instance, ten years ago, he was scheduled to have surgery for five aneurysms. He went to have the surgery, but the surgeon declined to perform the surgery, explaining that my dad was going to die either way. That surgeon would not perform the surgery, but God intervened and another surgical team did so, performing a medical miracle.

Many times my father has seen miraculous answers. But twice he and a prayer partner have claimed Mt 18:19-20 and prayed for physical healing of a believer and that healing was not granted? Why? On various occasions, he has made it clear that, when claiming Mt 18:19-20, the prayer of faith he is exercising is dependent solely upon his faith and the faith of his prayer partner, not upon the faith of the one for whom they are praying. Were these two exceptions attributable to his lack of faith and that of his prayer partner? We don’t believe so. The first occasion was that of a very godly woman who was dying of cancer. Despite the prayer of faith offered on her behalf, she died a few days later. When she died, my dad recalled something she had said previously: “Whether or not the Lord heals me, I have perfect healing.”<sup>4</sup> Afterwards, it occurred to him that, in dying, she had obtained perfect healing, that is, a healing that does not take place in this life, but in the life to come. Those having near death experiences have described seeing the healing that takes place when someone reaches Heaven. The health and youth of those who have died are restored when they reach Heaven. This healing is not contingent upon the believer’s prayer. It is guaranteed to all believers. Perfect healing will be granted to all believers...eventually.

Nevertheless, some prayers that may not be answered until we reach heaven can be contingent upon our faithfulness. Piper tells the story of a missionary who prayed that God would send her a husband, who never came:

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<sup>4</sup> The same would be true of the other exception to the rule that God has answered my dad’s prayers of faith when prayed jointly according to Mt 18:19-29. The woman died, but she was a believer; hence, she received perfect healing rather than the requested physical healing.

Miss Aylward talked to the Lord about her singleness. She was a no-nonsense woman in very direct and straightforward ways and she asked God to call a man from England, send him straight out to China, straight to where she was, and have him propose to me.” I can’t forget the next line. Elisabeth Elliot said, “With a look of even deeper intensity, she shook her little bony finger in my face and said, ‘Elisabeth, I believe God answers prayer. And he called him.’” And here there was a brief pause of intense whisper. She said, “He called him, and he never came.”<sup>5</sup>

Are the prayers of such missionaries not answered because they do not have sufficient faith? I am highly skeptical that that is the case. This particular response by Aylward affirms free will. The man whom God called had the free will to resist the call, and he exercised that free will to do so. Before we appeal to middle knowledge to suppose that God can always manipulate our circumstances to get what He wants, let us be reminded that, as already pointed out, there are some things that God cannot do because they are logically or morally impossible. If God were to override free will, would it still be free will? The plain fact of the matter is that God does not always use middle knowledge to circumvent freewill responses to give all His faithful believing servants a spouse in this life. Does this mean that their prayers will remain eternally unanswered? No! My contention in [Monogamous Sex in Heaven](#) is that believers who are faithful will have a heavenly soulmate. The perfect soulmate will be granted to faithful believers...eventually. The answer to their prayers will be “exceeding abundantly beyond” what they asked for...eventually (Eph 3:20).

### Toward Reconciliation

So how do we reconcile Jam 1:5-8 and 5:14-15? Lazar’s approach is to assume that the prayer for healing must be offered in faith that God *will* heal presently, not merely eventually in eternity. The requirement is 100% certainty, not mere positive expectancy. To merely believe that God can heal or is positively inclined to heal in response to our prayers is a form of doubt, not faith. Another blogger, Tim Challies, sees the matter differently:

Our prayers cannot be separated from our faith. If we are to ask God, we must ask with expectancy, believing in our heart of hearts that God can and will give what we desire, provided that what we desire is really what we need and what will bring glory to Him! We are to ask with confidence and expectancy, praying out of the faith He has given us.<sup>6</sup>

Challies’ explanation is much closer to mark in describing the type of faith my wife and I had as we prayed for her healing and, I might add, a very good description of the type of faith evidenced by Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Positive expectancy that God would grant the requests, rather than absolute certainty, was all that was necessary for God to act on these occasions. Notwithstanding, for reasons given above, we cannot assume that such positive expectancy is a guarantee that God will always grant our requests, especially in the time or manner anticipated. For this reason, prayers of faith frequently fall short of 100% certainty. Unfortunately, some in GES box themselves into thinking that anything short of 100% certainty is an example of doubt, not faith. Others in the GES, such as myself, believe that faith can exist in degrees. Positive expectancy might be considered a high degree of certainty that falls short of 100% certainty.

Sometimes God clearly responds positively to such faith, even when it falls way short 100% certainty. For instance, my dad and a prayer partner claimed Mt 18:19-20 on behalf of a man who was dying of leukemia. The man only had six months to live and was literally about to go crazy. Nevertheless, my dad and his prayer partner prayed for the man to be saved. When he went to visit him, God opened the way and had him in his right mind. The man trusted Christ for free gift of eternal life. Then my dad told him that baptism was not required, but *if* God were to heal him, he should follow up in baptism. Two months later he had left the hospital healed. They did not pray for his healing. They did not necessarily believe the Lord would heal him; they were just open to the possibility. Yet the Lord responded positively to that grain of faith.

This is not to say that my dad’s prayers have always been answered affirmatively. Many of his personal prayers have been answered affirmatively; many have not been. He does not understand why. I do not consider this surprising: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known” (1Cor 13:12). Our present knowledge of how to rectify these discrepancies is only partial. One day we will have perfect knowledge and will be able to provide better answers than we can currently.

Even so, I will venture an explanation that might be at least partially helpful. My dad did not invoke Mt 18:19-20 willy-nilly. He depended upon the subjective leadership of the Spirit as when to invoke this prayer and when not to,

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/why-are-women-more-eager-missionaries>.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Challies, “Six Ways to Hinder Your Prayers” <http://www.challies.com/christian-living/six-ways-to-hinder-your-prayers>. Accessed 3/11/2017.

which is what the Bible refers to as being “led by the Spirit” (Rom 8:14; Gal 5:18). While I was reading Lazar’s blog, I was also reading a book entitled, “Who’s Afraid of the Holy Spirit?” The authors of this book criticize GES for limiting the leadership of the Spirit to the propositions of Scripture. They contend instead:

**The Holy Spirit’s guidance is still needed in discerning the will of God.** The rationalism in our circles makes decision-making a purely cognitive exercise. There is no place for prayer. There is no room for the Spirit. I believe there is a middle ground between expecting daily revelations, on the one hand, and basing decisions solely on logic and common sense on the other. I may not receive revelations, but I do believe that the Spirit often guides me with inarticulate impulses.<sup>7</sup> (Emphasis original.)

Thus, the inner witness of the Spirit is *supra*-logical, not sub-logical—like the peace from God that surpasses all understanding.<sup>8</sup> (Emphasis original.)

When in 1998, my late wife was diagnosed with liver cancer it turned our lives upside down. After being together for nearly forty years this was sobering to say the least. We had friends who were cessationists and friends who were charismatics. There were those praying for my late wife and me who were careful not to embarrass God by asking too much and putting him on the spot. We listened as others ordered God to help us as if somehow he were our opponent. We believed in healing and miracles. But we had no faith in miracle-workers and healers. We were praying for healing by any means God so desired. As time passed we learned so much more about the Lord through that experience. We were blessed by the witness of the Holy Spirit as we walked through that trial. He comforted us during our encounters with our human frailty. We were blessed by the enduring fellowship of the saints, an obvious work of the Holy Spirit. Another evidence for us of the Spirit’s presence was his ministry of laying upon other believers a prayer-burden for us. My late wife exhibited such a noticeable peace in spite of her serious medical condition that she was asked repeatedly about that peace as if there were something wrong with it. We believed that her peace came from the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

Rather than limit the witness and leadership of the Spirit to the propositions of Scripture, they would contend that subjective impressions are part of His ministry. In contrast, Lazar seemed to advocate relying solely upon the propositions of Scripture to determine God’s will. As noted in the introduction of this article, he exhorts: “*Study the promises of God.* That’s how you can know God’s will. If God has promised to do something, and that’s what you’re praying for, then you can be fully persuaded that it’s His will to answer your prayer” (emphasis his). I responded by asking,

1. Does this position mean that the prayer of faith is limited to those things that God has promised universally to give everyone so that there is no possibility for individualization for factoring in of circumstances?
2. Does this position mean that every time elders are summoned to pray for healing and the healing does not occur in this life that we can fault them with faulty faith?

Part of my concern was that Lazar was factoring out any subjective leadership of the Spirit as to when to pray for healing. Another part was that he was canceling any need for the wisdom talked about in Jam 1:5-8, in relation to Jam 5:14-15, as to when one could pray the prayer of faith for healing. I consider both presumptions presumptuous. In my opinion, a better recourse would be to say (1) that there are certain things that God expects us to “ask in faith without any doubting” (Jam 1:15), based exclusively on the promises of Scripture. (2) There are other things that Gods expects us to ask confidently, even when we cannot ask with 100% certainty, that He will answer in the manner and time we request. (3) In some of the latter types of requests, God may on occasion give us 100% assurance through the subjective leadership of the Spirit. James just might be talking about this type and level of assurance in Jam 5:15 when he refers to “the prayer of faith.” Writing from this perspective, GES commentator Zane Hodges wisely comments:

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, M. James Sawyer, Richard E. Averbeck, Gerald Bray, J. I. Packer, Reg Grant, David Eckman, Jeff Louie, Donald K. Smith, *Who's Afraid of the Holy Spirit*, Kindle Edition (Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2005), KL 350-353). Some of the criticisms of GES by this book, however, are strawman arguments. For example, the authors criticize GES as promoting a soteriological faith in a proposition rather than in a person. Not true. We believe *in Jesus* for eternal life. Trust in the person and the proposition are interwoven.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, KL 1076-1077.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, KL 3531-3539.

Where God granted any, or all, of these men to pray a *prayer of faith*, that prayer would *save the sick* person from dying and the Lord would *raise him up*.

There is no real problem with this text so long as we allow it to mean what it says—and neither more or less than it says. There is nothing here at all about a gift of healing possessed by any of *the elders*. Rather, these church leaders function simply as intercessors on behalf of the one who is *sick*. Neither does James say that recovery *always* occurs. It *will* occur where there is a prayer of faith, but the absence of such a prayer does not mean that the elders are spiritually deficient. It might be, in any given case, that the elders would not be at all sure whether recovery would be for the best. In such cases, they might well pray (as our Lord prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane), “*Your will be done*” (Matt 26:39-42). The more biblically based and perceptive the elders of a church are, the more readily they will be able to evaluate the specific situation in a spiritual way and to pray accordingly.<sup>10</sup> (Emphasis his.)

Only one elder, not all, needs to be able to pray the prayer of faith for the answer to be absolutely assured. Otherwise, the recovery should not be assumed necessarily to occur. Indeed, the elders may not be sure that recovery is for the best. Their confidence in that case would be less than 100%. When they are not absolutely sure of God’s will, they leave the matter to God’s will while making their request. Perceptive elders will evaluate the specific circumstances with spiritual wisdom and through the leadership of the Spirit to discern which type of prayer is called for. Therefore, the prayer of faith is not merely being 100% persuaded that God will grant the request but also being in tune with God’s Spirit in deriving that degree of assurance.

### Conclusion

Three levels of faith seem to be involved in confidently asking God to answer our prayers. And the matter for which we praying might, at times, determine the level of faith required.

1. Somethings require absolute faith and are absolutely assured of being granted if the conditions are met.
2. Somethings require positive expectation but are not absolutely assured of being granted even if the normal conditions are met.
3. Sometimes matters in the latter category are absolutely assured of being granted when the Spirit gives absolute subjective assurance.

If the promise that God will heal in response to the prayer of faith in Jam 5:15 is an absolute, then it seems to be a reasonable deduction that this is a special occasion of faith when the Spirit grants 100% certainty. The third category applies in that case. If, however, the promise that God will heal is merely a positive expectation, then the second category applies. The approach adopted herein would allow for either possibility. Although my personal exegetical preference is for the former in the case of Jam 5:15, the latter is certainly applicable to other situations and faith texts.

Many times, probably even most the time, our requests will fall into category two. We pray confidently that God will give us the desires of our heart as we do our best, through the leadership and power of His Spirit, to walk in His word and pray in His will (Ps 37:4). Yet we know that our Heavenly Father may answer our childish prayers differently than we anticipated. Still, as His children, we trust Him and cast our cares upon Him, knowing that He cares for us (1Pet 5:7). We do not assume that sister like Joni Eareckson Tada is confined to a wheelchair because she cannot find someone who has enough faith to get her out. Rather, we rest assured that she will be well rewarded, eventually, for her persevering faith despite her current plight.

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<sup>10</sup> Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character Through Testing* (Irving, TX: GES, 1994), 116. Lenski likewise states: “All true prayer for earthly blessings is based on the condition ‘if the Lord wills’ ([Jam] 4:15)...That every patient for whom elders prayed would promptly recover, and that none would die, is certainly not the meaning of James....The elders are not prayer-healers such as we have today. Nor are they miracle-workers.” (*James*, 663-664.)