

Desperately Believing God by Pastor Marty

If you have attended any church or been around any Christians for more than a few weeks in your life, you have probably heard someone say something like “God is never late” or “God is always on time” or “God’s timing is not our timing” in what He does. It is a commonly-heard statement. There is an obvious reason for this: there are times when we look around and wonder why things are not working out as we expect they should. We often want God to answer immediately when we ask Him to do something, and many times, we even have our own ideas about how He should answer. The above responses are indicative of well-meaning brothers and sisters reminding us that God does not always follow our timetable and work according to the plans we have imagined. When we are feeling pressure in our lives, it can be easy for us to think that God has forgotten us or that He is not really concerned with our situation. It is in between the asking and the answering that temptations become the worst.

It is between the “asking” and the “answering” that temptations become much worse.

We live in a world of temptation. Even before Adam and Eve fell, there was temptation because an evil entity had entered the picture. The serpent came into a perfect world and used God’s provision for Adam and Eve to suggest that He did not really care about them. In a situation where the man and woman had absolutely nothing to worry about in the world, the tempter suggested that God was not only withholding something that would benefit them but also was acting from ulterior motives. He had elicited a sense of insufficiency along with a fear of the future where there was actually nothing to fear. It is important that we realize that God’s command was not intended to create the temptation; it was meant to protect them from harm. If God had simply commanded the first couple to not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and provided no reason, we might think that it was intended solely as a test of their obedience. However, the passage says more than that. God, who cannot lie, stated a very specific reason why they should not eat from that tree: “for in the day you eat of it, you will surely die.” God’s commandments are never arbitrary; they are meant to keep us away from evil and destruction.

God’s commands are never arbitrary; He directs us in the path of life, health, and joy.

Some argue that this first command was a test of obedience. It is possible that the consequence (i.e., death) was solely a judgment for disobeying His command; however, I do not think so for a very specific reason: the nature of the other tree. There are two main options as we consider what God said about the first tree: (1) death was a result of eating the fruit because they were not able to eat it, or (2) death was judgment for their sin. If we are serious about interpreting this passage correctly, we need to look at the context of the whole passage. Immediately after God pronounced the consequences of their actions, He says, “the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever,” so they are exiled from Eden. The discussion of the two trees and their traits are in the *same passage*, so they must be viewed with the *same rules* of interpretation. One tree results in death while the other results in life eternal. If we decide that “death” from the first tree was God’s judgment, then the “eternal life” from the second tree would have to be seen as a gracious gift that God would bestow as He wills. However, the passage specifically states (1) eating it *would* grant them eternal life when (2) God did *not* want them to eat of it and live forever. If we argue that death was *solely* judgment for their actions, then we would also have to argue that He was *obligated* to grant eternal life if they ate from the tree of life.

If death was only judgment, God would not have been obligated to grant eternal life.

What this shows is that the fruit of the two trees—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life—work according to their natures. God clearly declares in this passage that the fruit of the tree of life would grant eternal life if they ate from it even though God did not want them to eat from it; this indicates that eternal life is the inherent property of the fruit of this tree. With this being the case, it strongly suggests that when God warned them that they would die if they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, He was explaining to them the inherent consequences of the fruit. His prohibition was not solely a test of obedience; it was a command intended to protect them from the disastrous result of consuming what they were not ready to consume. Adam and Eve were not able to consume that fruit. This suggests that if Adam and Eve had eaten of that fruit before God had told them not to eat it, it not only would have still given them knowledge of good and evil but also would have resulted in death entering their lives. We have to remember that the Hebrew word “knowledge” in those verses is not cognitive as we define it; it means the full experience of something. Just as the tree of life would impart eternal existence, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil imparted the full and complete experience of evil with all its pain, sorrow, and horror, and part of that horror was death.

Death is an inherent result of experiencing the full pain, sorrow, and horror of evil.

In reading the passage above, we also have to consider what Paul explained to the Romans—i.e., that the fruit of death is sin. Paul certainly was not wrong in what he was saying. Because the fruit of the tree of life would work irrespective of whether God wanted them to eat it, we have to consider a third option: that God was explaining clearly to Adam and Eve what would happen if they ate the fruit of the first tree *out of disobedience*. The act of disobeying God while eating from the fruit of the tree would impart an unfiltered experience of evil that would lead to death. This would suggest that eating of the fruit when it was not prohibited might provide knowledge without death. C. S. Lewis gives us a glimpse of this concept in “The Magician’s Nephew” where he contrasts the results of eating the fruit of the great tree illegally versus with permission: the former brought a cursed life; the latter brought healing. Again, we have to examine the context of both trees in this passage. In the book of Revelation, we see that the tree of life will be available for all to eat when everything gets restored. This suggests not only that the fruit of both trees work according to their natures but also that there are times when they are and when they are not allowed. Again, this helps us to recognize that God’s commandments are based upon truth and given for our benefit—not arbitrary tests or temptations coming from God.

God’s commandments are based on truth and given for our benefit—not arbitrary tests.

Once we understand that God’s commands are based on truth and given for our benefit, we are able to recognize that He is not arbitrary in what He does and does not do. This becomes important for us when we are facing temptations, tests, trials, or choices in our lives. Our lack of trust in the midst of uncomfortable situations is almost always based upon one of three opinions we have about God: First, we may believe that God is unable to provide the answer to our need. Recognizing this option requires a great deal of honesty on our part because our mental affirmations often disagree with our emotional beliefs. We know on one level that “all things are possible with God,” but we believe on another level that He cannot actually get the answer to us because of lack of faith, unbelief, sin, hard-heartedness of those around us, spiritual warfare, etc. These are all very real things that should not be dismissed out of hand because the Bible contains numerous instances where these became issues hindering God’s grace from being manifested, such as 2 Samuel 12, Daniel 10, Matthew 13-14, any many, many more.

It is naïve to claim human limitations cannot hinder God’s grace—at least temporarily.

There is a second opinion we hold toward God when it comes to not trusting, and this one is at least as common as the first: we believe that God is unwilling to provide the answer to our need. This can be because we are wondering if He may want something better for us. This can be a problem if it prevents us from ever having faith in any answer. The Bible tells us that faith requires that we believe His promises are “yes” in Jesus; if every prayer is surrounded with “whether or not” questions, we will never be able to have the faith that “moves mountains” in our paths. This requires us to recognize that there is a very big difference between the *what* of our prayer and the *how* of the answer, and we are responsible for seeking His face until we know His will for us. If we continually decide His will based on what eventually happens in our lives, we are letting our circumstances inform our theology, which is a very bad practice. However, when it comes to our lack of trust, we are often dealing with a much more pernicious belief—that God is unmoved by our pain and distress. If we think that God is unaffected by our anxiety, fear, and pain as we seek our answers, we are actually ascribing darkness to God’s nature. We may know better than to believe that “God hates us,” but if we accept the Gnostic idea that God is entirely unemotional, operating only on reason and knowledge, we have missed the core of the gospel.

The gospel tells us that God is emotionally moved by our situation and wants to answer.

I mentioned that there was a third option when it comes to our difficulty in trusting God. This is when we do not doubt God’s willingness or ability to answer our prayer, but we do not place ourselves in a position to receive the answer. Sometimes, we can be so focused on the situation that we forget to look to God. This is what happened to Peter when He took his eyes off Jesus and put them on the wind and the waves ... and promptly sank. In that situation, we can become more aware of the problem we are facing than of God’s Presence with us. Jesus had not gone anywhere when Peter started to sink; he simply became more conscious of other issues. The good news is that the moment Peter remembered and called out to Him for help, Jesus grabbed his hand ... and they walked back to the boat *together*. In another situation, Peter and his friends had spent all night fishing with no success. They had done all they knew to do to get what they needed. After they had given up, Jesus told them to throw the net off the side of the boat. When they did, they got a full load of fish. This actually happened on more than one occasion. Often, it is only when we have completely exhausted our own attempts to get our needs met that we hear what God is directing us to do. Of course, God does not want us to be apathetic and not do anything until He speaks to us about every single thing in our lives, but most of us fail in the other direction: we keep trying and begging God to do something without stopping to ask for direction.

Many of us keep trying on our own and begging God to answer but never stop to listen.

Stopping to listen to God is one of the most important things we can do when we are waiting for God to answer. However, we also need to make sure that our attitude is right. Doing the right thing is only part of the equation if our heart is not where it should be. Often, the delay may be because God is waiting on us. When Elijah was waiting in the cave, there was a wind, an earthquake, and a fire. He was waiting, but the answer did not come. It was when there was a gentle blowing that Elijah wrapped the mantle around his neck and went to see what was going on outside. Something changed in him so that he had an expectation that had not been there before, and he acted upon that expectation. Often, it is only when we have done everything that we could do with no success that we finally give up and accept that God is the only one who can provide the answer we need. When we reach that place, we make ourselves ready, willing, and able to receive what He is giving us. It is entirely up to us to decide how long it will take us to get to the place where we are not only stopping to listen but also placing all our reliance upon God to meet our needs. The sooner we do that, the less our timing differs from His.