

The Power of Petitionary Prayer



St Valentine Parish Wed 3rd April 2019

Introduction

In the Christian life a pre-eminent way of expressing trust in God is by having childlike confidence in the power of the prayer of supplication. It can take two forms.

- **Firstly**, there is the prayer of **petition** whereby people pray for their own personal needs.
- **Secondly**, the prayer of **intercession** where they pray for the needs of others.

One could argue that supplication is the fundamental religious act. In the beatitudes Jesus said: "**Blessed are the poor in Spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**" In other words, blessed are those who acknowledge their need for God and God's help in prayer.

Closely related to this feeling of dependence is a trusting reliance on the providence of God (cf. Jer 29:11).

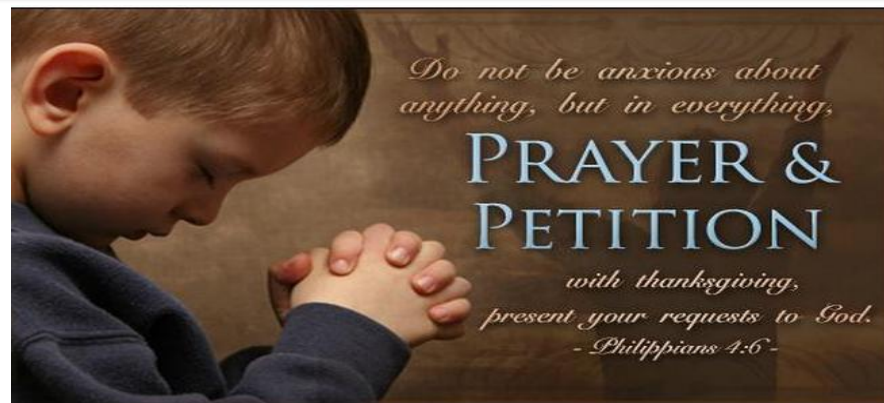
1. It is an acknowledgement that God has a benevolent plan for our lives.
2. It also believes that God provides for us in a non-magical way, so that we can fulfill the divine plan.



"I KNOW THE
PLANS I HAVE FOR
YOU," SAYS THE
LORD. "THEY ARE
PLANS FOR GOOD
AND NOT FOR
DISASTER, TO GIVE
YOU A FUTURE
AND A HOPE."

JEREMIAH 29:11 [NLT]

It is also clear from the gospels that petition played a central role in Jesus' teaching on prayer. It is a striking fact that he said more about the prayer of supplication than any other form. It would be a mistake, therefore, to think that petitionary prayer focuses primarily on human need and only in a secondary way upon the Lord. Instead of looking at God from the point of view of human needs, authentic Christian petition looks at human needs from the point of view of trusting relationship with a loving, provident God.



Disappointment in Prayer

Most people ask God for graces and favours. Some do so with great intensity and sincerity. Yet they often experience disappointment.

- The ailing child eventually dies.
- The unemployed relative fails to get a job.
- The woman enduring arthritic pain continues to suffer.
- The terrible war continues year after year.

Not surprisingly the question is asked: "**Why doesn't God respond to our requests?**" Ultimately only the Lord knows. That said, Jesus repeatedly promises in the gospels that our petitions will be answered.



To come to terms with this problem we need firstly to look at what the bible has to say about the promises of God in general and those to do with petitionary prayer in particular. Promises are usually associated with specified conditions, e.g., "If you make a down payment of \$20,000 by Friday next, and a further payment of \$400,000 by the 10th of May next year, then I promise to sell you my house to you even if I get a better offer in the meantime."

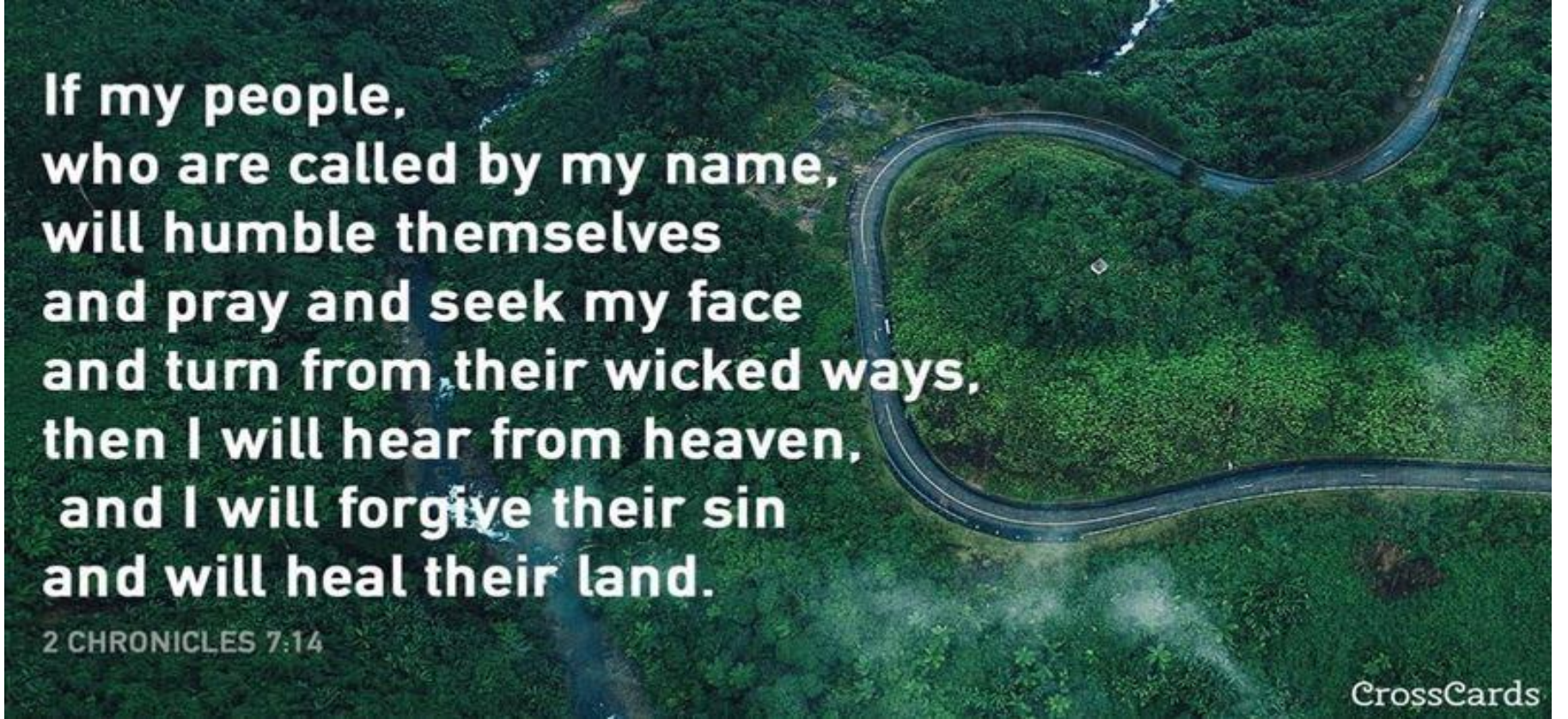


There are two main reasons why promises are not kept.

1. On the one hand, either the person who made the promise had no intention of carrying it out, or he or she was unable to do so.
2. On the other hand the person to whom the promise was made, may have been either unwilling or unable to meet the stated conditions



When God makes a promise, God is both willing and able to fulfil it. As Heb 10:23 reminds us: "**He who has promised is faithful.**" But like, human promises, those God makes are usually associated with conditions. For example, in 2 Chron 7:14 we read this reassuring promise:

An aerial photograph of a winding asphalt road that curves through a dense, vibrant green forest. The road is dark and contrasts with the bright green foliage. The perspective is from above, looking down on the road as it snakes through the trees.

**If my people,
who are called by my name,
will humble themselves
and pray and seek my face
and turn from their wicked ways,
then I will hear from heaven,
and I will forgive their sin
and will heal their land.**

2 CHRONICLES 7:14

In this verse the Lord undertakes to fulfil **three** promises if, and when the people, for their part, fulfil **four** designated conditions.

It is my firm belief that one of the principal reasons why we experience disappointment in petitionary prayer is the fact that, while we hear what God promises to do in response to our prayers, we often fail to either notice or to fulfil the associated conditions. In the New Testament many overlapping conditions are connected with God's repeated promises to answer prayers of supplication.

Gods Love is unconditional.

His promises are not.

Here is a list of conditions in the New Testament which are associated with God's promises to answer prayers of supplication

- 1) Praying in the Name of Jesus (Jn 14:13)
- 2) Abiding in union with Christ (Jn 15:7)
- 3) Praying without resentment (Mk 11:5)
- 4) Praying in harmony with others (Mt 18:19)
- 5) Praying with a good conscience (1 Jn 3:21)
- 6) Praying in accordance with God's will. (1 Jn 5:14)
- 7) Praying in a spirit of humility (1 Pt 5:5)
- 8) Praying in a persevering way (Mt 7:7-8)
- 9) Praying in a spirit of thanksgiving (Phil 4:6).

I will focus on just one of them, namely praying in the name of Jesus.

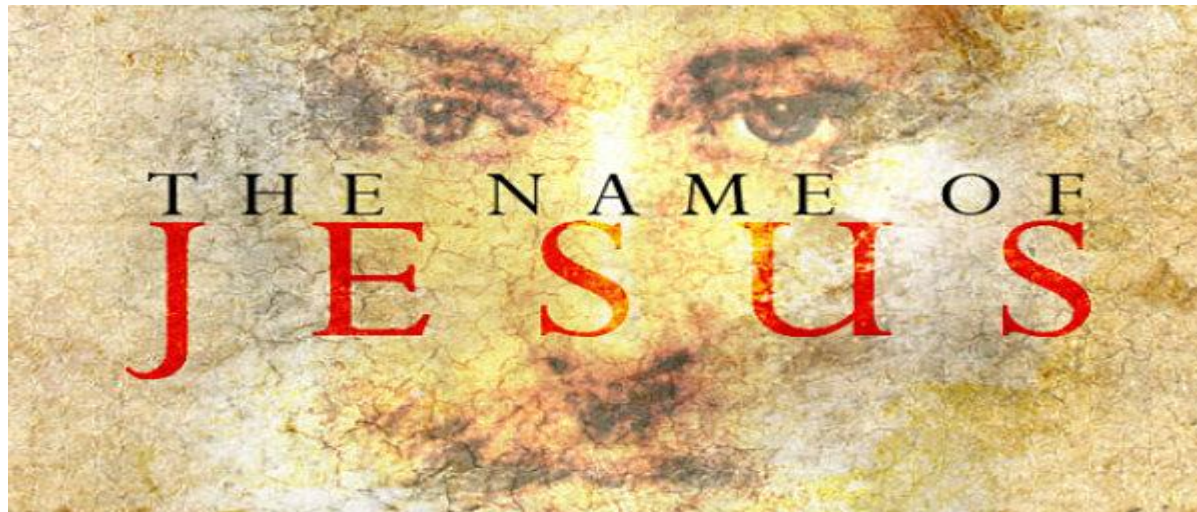


Praying in the Name of Jesus

Jesus made it clear that prayers of petition had to be offered in his name. In Jn 14:13 we read: "I will do whatever you ask **in my name**, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If **in my name** you ask me for anything, I will do it." Again in Jn 16:23 we read: "In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you **ask in my name**. Until now you have not asked for anything **in my name**. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be **complete**." A question arises. What exactly did Jesus mean when he said that we should pray in his name?

THE NAME
OF
JESUS

A person can only pray in the name of Jesus when he or she does so in the light of a heartfelt awareness of the unconditional mercy and love of God. This realization can occur as a result of a religious awakening. This kind of religious experience inaugurates a new and decisive awareness of the loving presence and activity of God in one's life. It is then, and only then, that one can truly pray in the name of Jesus.



What Jesus said about petitionary prayer was informed by a vivid awareness of the benevolence and generosity of God the Father. Those who, like Jesus, know the Father's love, are consciously aware that **the Lord wants what is best for us**. This powerful intuition, which is the key to an understanding of Christian petition, is expressed in a number of texts. In Lk 15:31 the Prodigal Father says to his elder son: "**You are with me always, all I have is yours.**" In other words, "if you related to me your loving father in a really trusting way, you would realize that there is no good gift he would withhold from you."



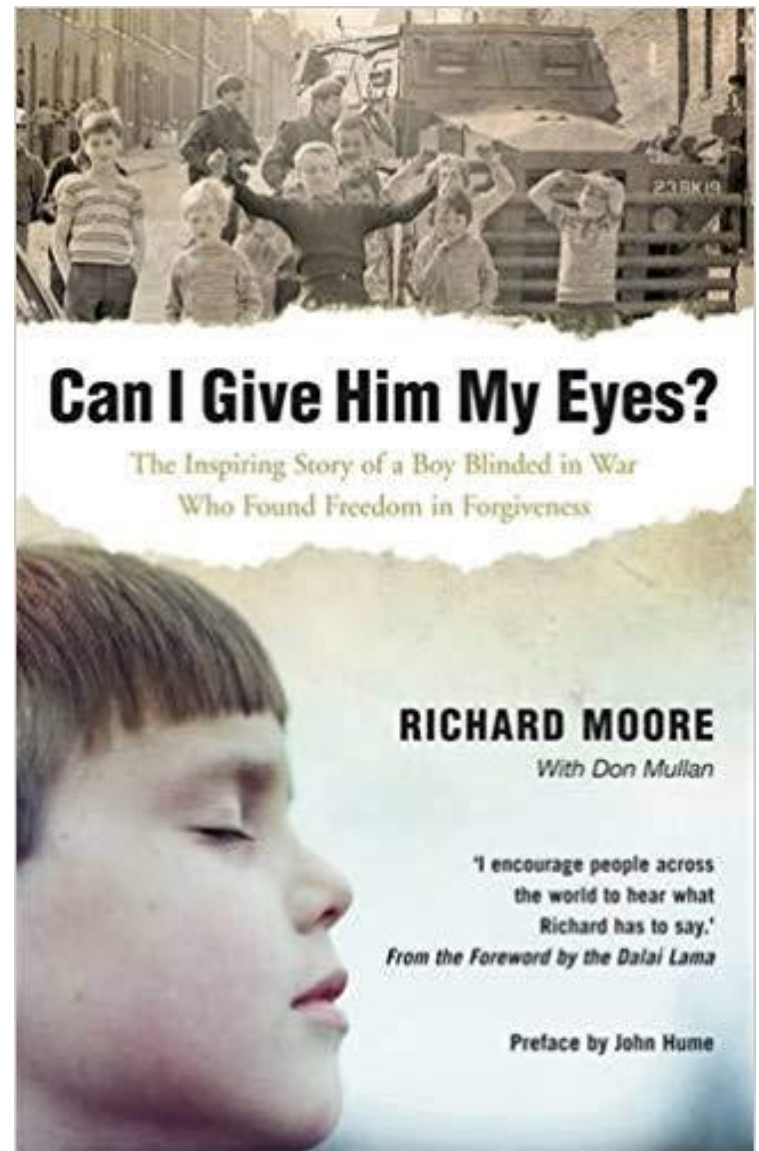
Because God the Father is benevolent, he wants what is best for whomsoever we pray. Jesus referred to this benevolence of God, when he said to parents, “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Mt 7:11).

I heard a moving story on radio which illustrated this point. A man described, how as a boy in Derry, he had been hit on the bridge of his nose by a rubber bullet. It blinded him in both eyes. When he was brought to Altnagelvin area hospital, he heard his father ask a doctor, “Can you save my son’s eyes?” to which he replied, “I’m afraid we cannot, the damage is too great.”

Then the boy heard his father say, “could you not take my eyes and give them to my son?” to which the doctor responded, “Unfortunately, that will not be possible either.” St. Paul echoed that point when he said, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?” (Rm 8:32). In other words if, in his unimaginable goodness, God the Father has given us as his greatest gift, why would he withhold any lesser gifts? If that imperfect father in Northern Ireland, wanted what was best for his son, surely our perfect Father in heaven wants even more what is best for his adopted sons and daughters.

Benevolence

Taking Care of God's Family



A Personal Testimony



Many years ago I attended a retreat in London. During one of the talks I was told that there a phone call for me. When I lifted the phone my younger brother was on the other end. "Pat" he said, "I have sad news for you, mammy died suddenly and unexpectedly a short time ago. By the way it presents us with a problem, our brother John and his family are on a camping holiday in Europe and we have no way of contacting him to tell him about mammy's death."

When I put the phone down, I headed straight to the chapel. I knelt down in front of the blessed sacrament and prayed. Almost immediately a scripture text from that day's Divine Office came to mind, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:2). I had an immediate sense that I should not cling to my mother. So in a very solemn way I said to God the Father, "Lord you gave my mother to me as a gift. I thank you for all the ways in which she blessed my life. Now I solemnly offer her back to you. May you have mercy upon her and bring her into your kingdom. From now on Lord you will be my only real parent."

As soon as I said those words, I felt a deep down sense of spiritual peace, although at a more emotional level I still felt a great sense of loss and sadness. Then I thought about the problem of contacting my brother. As the eldest in the family, I was faced with a real dilemma. If we couldn't contact him and his wife should we wait until he returned from his holiday in about twelve days time, or should we go ahead with the funeral in the usual Irish way? At that moment I was feeling a powerful sense of connection with God the Father, so I told him about my dilemma and requested guidance. I asked myself, what my mother would have wanted. I felt that she would have desired for my brother to be at the funeral, not for her sake, but for his.

Instantly, I had a firm and clear inner sense that we were to go ahead with the funeral in the normal way, and that God would bring my brother home from wherever he was, even if it was because of some kind of providential mishap.

Provider

Matthew 7:11 (NIV)

¹¹ If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

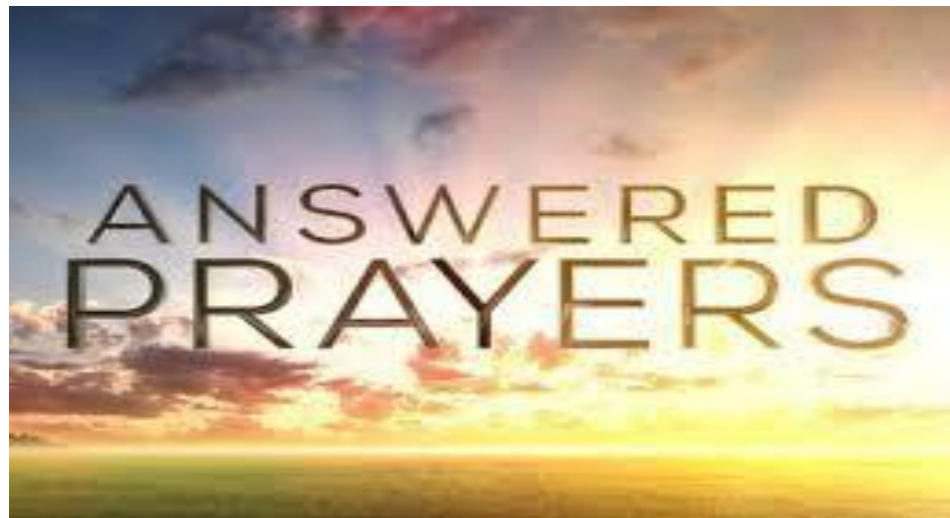
When I got back to Dublin, I told my brother and sister that we should proceed in the usual way with the funeral. I assured them that the Lord would see to it that our brother would be there. They agreed with the decision to go ahead with the funeral while being very sceptical about my prediction that our brother would be there. Of course we rang anyone who might know where he intended going, but no one had any contact information. By the time we brought our mother's remains to the church there was no news about our brother's whereabouts. Much later that evening we were chatting together, as bereaved family members tend to do, when the phone rang.



A friend of my brother's, a man we had contacted in London earlier that day, was on the other end. "You won't believe this" he said, "but your brother and his family arrived here a few hours ago. Apparently, your niece got into trouble in a swimming pool. Although she was rescued and is O.K. your sister in law was so upset that she insisted on returning to Ireland. I have told John about your mother's death and the funeral arrangements. He has already headed off for Holyhead in the hope that he will catch the ferry and get to the funeral."



When I put down the phone I just knew that he would be there as God had assured me. The following morning I processed on to the altar. There was no sign of my brother. I began the mass, and as soon as I did, a side door of the church opened and in walked my brother and sister in law to take their place beside our other relatives. My prayer of petition had been fulfilled to the letter.



Conclusion



Lord,
not my will,
but
Thy will
be done.

We can learn an important lesson about the prayer of supplication from the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane. While Jesus did ask the Father, to whom all things are possible, to remove the chalice of suffering from him, he ended his prayer by saying, “yet not my will, but thine be done” (Lk 22:42). The Ignatian Novena of Grace includes similar words, “if what I ask is not for the glory of God or for the good of my soul, obtain for me what is most conducive to both.” Amen to that.