

## HOW LONG MUST I WAIT?

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**“Results not typical.”** How often have you seen or heard those words written in fine print or spoken quietly at the end of an advertisement? Usually they are associated with a product designed to improve one’s physical or emotional well-being, such as weight loss products, aids to reducing the craving for tobacco, or release from depression. It makes you wonder what results are typical for the particular product being promoted.

But as sceptical as this disclaimer may make us regarding the efficacy of a particular product, they should serve as a warning to us in our prayer life. As part of their testimony we often hear people refer to a dramatic answer to prayer that came suddenly and effectively to deliver them from a particularly troubling, stressful, or recurring situation. If we are honest, we may admit that such testimonies arouse a touch of envy in us because we seldom if ever experience such dramatic results ourselves. Such sudden incursions of the divine into the human condition, of God into an individual life, seem most often to occur to someone else, not to us.

In our fast food society such stories fall on eager ears. On the surface at least they are so much more satisfying than the experience of Abraham and Sarah, who would have to wait twenty-four years before God would fulfil His promise to provide them with a son. To have to wait beyond a nano-second for an answer to prayer seems an unnecessarily long time, particularly when the Source of answers can do whatever He pleases. After

all, most of us get frustrated if our computer takes more than a second or two to download a large document complete with multiple graphics. That's why it's so important to remember the disclaimer used in other circumstances – “results not typical.”

How long must I wait for an answer to prayer? Is it a few seconds, a day, a week, a month, or – horror of horrors! – more than a month? If it's going to take that long, shouldn't I just take matters into my own hands and do it myself? Or forget the prospect of anything ever happening to change the things I'm praying about?

Psalm 6 reflects something of our impatience:

*Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint;  
O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony.  
My soul is in anguish.  
How long, O LORD, how long?  
I am worn out from groaning;  
all night long I flood my bed with weeping  
and drench my couch with tears.*

But then, inexplicably, with no clue given to the reader as to what has happened, the psalmist makes a bold proclamation:

*The LORD has heard my cry for mercy;  
the LORD accepts my prayer.*

Just what the answer was, or how long it took, is not revealed to us. It is enough for the psalmist that God had heard, accepted, and answered his prayer.

Psalm 74 was written after Jerusalem was destroyed and the southern kingdom, Judah, had been defeated by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The land lay desolate; thousands had

been killed; and only a handful survived in exile, hundreds of miles from their beloved land.

*We are given no miraculous signs;  
no prophets are left,  
and none of us knows how long this will be.*

It would be 70 years before they would return, an example of the long years of faithfulness that are required before some prayers are answered.

Yet there are other passages in the Bible where prayer is answered suddenly and dramatically. A centurion came to Jesus pleading on behalf of his paralyzed servant – “just say the word, and my servant will be healed.’ ... And his servant was healed at that very hour.” (Matthew 8:5 – 13)

So how long must I wait for an answer to prayer?

The answer is, of course, as long as God takes. There are no “typical” results in our prayer life. God works according to His timetable, to achieve His purposes, to His glory. Jesus provides us with a clue as to the nature of God, though not His timing, when it comes to prayer. Suppose you had a friend, said Jesus, who came to you after you’d gone to bed, asking for bread to feed a newly-arrived house guest. You might not get up out of friendship, but you would get up because of his persistence. Or consider the self-absorbed judge who cared nothing for God or for people. Even he gave in in the face of the widow who kept coming back time after time, concerned that she would eventually wear him down if he didn’t.

The point, said Jesus, is not that God is indifferent to our prayers and needs to be worn down by persistence. The point is, that if people, who are so un-God like, can be persuaded to respond to human need, how much more can God be counted on when the faithful call on Him.

It's just a matter of time.