

"Coincidence or God?"

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Most of you have heard the old joke about how God answers prayers and how we need be a tuned to the answer. It goes something like this. A guy is watching the weather channel and sees they are calling for severe flooding. Soon a bus comes by and they offer to take him to a shelter on higher ground. The man said no thanks God will take care of me. Later when the water is covering the streets a neighbor comes by in a boat and asks the man if wants to go with him to the shelter. Again the man says no, that God will take care of him. Hours later he is on his roof and a helicopter comes to rescue him and her refuses stating God will rescue him. As the house is being swept off it's foundation the man looks to sky and asks why God didn't save him. God said, "I sent you a bus, a boat and a helicopter!" Though the joke is pretty funny, I believe this happens to all of us quite often. A quote by an unknown person sums up the joke, "Give a man a fish, and you'll feed him for a day; give him a religion, and he'll starve to death while praying for a fish."

How many times have we wondered why God didn't answer a prayer? When I was young I thought that I didn't pray in the right way. And I must admit that thought hung with me for many years. Is there a proper way to pray? My mother told me of a young couple that had not grown up in a church and was attending so her children would be exposed to a faith. Guiltily she told my mom that she didn't have time to pray properly with so much going on in life. My mother asked her what she meant and the woman said she had a hard time finding an hour to an hour and a half to get on her knees and pray each day. I must admit I would also have difficulty finding the time and having the discipline to pray in that way.

Henri Nouwen said, "Prayer is first of all listening to God. It's openness. God is always speaking; God's always doing something. Prayer is to enter into that activity. ... Convert your thoughts into prayer.... The difference is not that prayer is thinking about other things, but that prayer is thinking in dialogue, ... a conversation with God." Each person prays in their own way. Personally I tend to agree with Henri Nouwen, and have more of a dialogue with God. It seems more personal to me. Linda has said that when she thinks of someone that can be a prayer for them. Victor Hugo said, "Certain thoughts are prayers. There are moments when, whatever be the attitude of the body, the soul is on its knees." How we pray is a personal choice. But what is constant is that God answers our prayers as Jesus states in our passage from the Message version, "Here's what I'm saying: Ask and you'll get; Seek and you'll find; Knock and the door will open."

Often when we pray we have a specific answer in mind. Something really important like...let the Colts win the Super Bowl this year. Should the Colts not win the Super Bowl this year, I'll let the theologians' ponder how God answers that prayer. Along that line, several years ago there was a TV show called Touched By An Angle. The show was about a group of angles that were on earth as humans and helping people as they went through different situations in life. In one episode someone asked one of the Angles why God didn't answer his prayer.

Her response was that God answers all prayers, but sometimes the answer is no. Now I am not sure that I agree with that statement in total, but it does raise an interesting thought. If God answers all prayers, how do we know what the answer is? Especially if it is not the answer we were looking for.

Does God talk to us? Well, in Jane Wagner's book *In Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* she writes, "When we talk to God, we're praying. When God talks to us, we're schizophrenic." This is also a very funny skit by Lilly Tomlin. I can't speak for you but God has never literally spoken to me. However, God speaks to us all of the time in more indirect ways. Yet sometimes Gods answers to our prayers are so obvious we might as well have heard a voice. I would guess that we have all this type of answer even though it is not what we specifically asked for.

A personal experience to God giving me an obvious answer and NOT the answer I wanted is this. My marriage was falling apart. I was trying to keep it together but it seemed that everything I tried failed to bring us closer. Finally one morning I was exasperated and said, "God, I can't seem to do it. I turn it over to you." The next day I was told the marriage was over. A couple days later I look to the sky in tears and said, "This is not what I had in mind!" Although, about a month later I realized that it was the best for both me and my wife. To be honest, I can look back and say that was the beginning of a big interpersonal growth period for me.

Yet God also answers our prayers is subtle ways. The trick is to be aware when the answer is presented to us. I believe many answers are presented to us in coincidences. In the book *The Celestine Prophecy* author James Redfield says that the coincidences in our lives are guided by a spiritual force, Gods love. And if we are connected we will ask why these coincidences have occurred. By questioning the why, we can see a path for us to travel. The former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple said, "When I pray, coincidences happen, and when I don't, they don't." When we ask God for direction, often doors are opened that were unexpected. Or we meet someone that can help us or explain how we can accomplish what we prayed for.

At times life will through us a curve ball and we have trouble making sense out of it. A sudden illness can be one of those "life whammies". As many of you know over two years ago I was thrown one of life's curves. Being diagnosed with a terminal illness is life altering. However, most every night after my pity party, I pray that God uses this for something good, whether it is to help me or someone else. I can't speak for others, but for me it has changed my overall outlook on life and God. I have become more introspective; I meditate and pray more often. And that in turn has allowed me to be more aware of life's coincidences which I believe is God giving me direction. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a psychiatrist and author, states, "Learn to get in touch with the silence within yourself, and know that everything in life has purpose. There are no mistakes, no coincidences, all events are blessings given to us to learn from."

There are many of us that have lost our job due the economy. I am one of you. I would guess you were just as devastate as I was. I searched and wracked my brain

trying to think of what to do while supporting my daughter in college. But being in construction there wasn't much out there. Once again, although I will admit somewhat gun shy, I told God I didn't know what to do and I turn it over. Within minutes I was overcome with this peace and assuredness that I was going to Purdue to get my PhD and teach. Since then coincidences have been happening that seem to be guiding me. It hasn't been easy but I know this is what God wants me to do.

My stories aren't unique. We have all experienced times of hardship and we have all needed guidance on which way to turn, to take that job or remain in a difficult relationship. And most, if not all can speak of how prayer has helped us. We can all remember times it didn't seem that God answered our prayers.

I guess what we need to ask ourselves is whether we are in tune with God enough to see the coincidences that are the answers to our prayers.

Closing:

An Unknown Author said, "...what you have to ask yourself is what kind of person are you? Are you the kind that sees signs, sees miracles? Or do you believe that people just get lucky? Or, look at the question this way: Is it possible that there are no coincidences?." Let's look at each coincidence and see if it is God's answer to a prayer or God guiding us.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.