

The methods God uses to work out his purposes

The purpose of this paper is to show the biblical backing for truths that we perhaps already know, that God often works out his purposes through disappointments, (sometimes very threatening) hindrances and human failings. He often allows good people, who are doing his will, to face bad experiences. He sometimes allows things apparently to go wrong after remarkable answers to prayer. These experiences are not unusual or apparently unfair exceptions inflicted on a few people. They are a fairly normal way in which God works out his purposes. Most important, however difficult to understand, in no way do they imply a lack of love, compassion and faithfulness on God's part.

God allows temporary, even long-term, hindrances to his purposes

These hindrances may be through natural events

The Lord said to Abram that he would lead him to the Promised Land. But when he got there famine broke out and he moved to Egypt (Gen 12:1-3, 10).

As the Israelites proceeded on the way to the Promised Land the Lord allowed them to face various problems but he solved them miraculously: the bitter water at Marah (Ex 15); lack of food (Ex 16; Num 11); lack of water (Ex 17; Num 20);

These hindrances may be through human weakness

Quarrelling broke out between Abram's and Lot's herdsmen (Gen 13:7). The four kings captured Lot (Gen 14:11-16).

Having called Moses to the huge task of leading the people to the Promised Land, the Lord allowed Miriam and Aaron to rebel against him (Num 12), the spies to speak against entering the Promised Land (Num 13) stirring up opposition from the people (Num 14) leading to the whole generation wandering in the desert and never reaching the Promised Land. He also allowed Korah's rebellion (Num 16) and the grumbling of the people (Num 16:41).

David, whom God had chosen to be the most important king of Israel, second to the Messiah, was anointed as king (1 Sam 16) but had to wait some 15 turbulent years before he became king of Judah and 22 years before he became king over Israel as well (2 Sam 5:4-5). He endured attacks from Saul (1 Sam 18:10-11; 19:1, 9-10; 23:7-8, 26; 24:1-2; 26:1-2) and was effectively exiled for years. After David became king he had to face conflict with the house of Saul (2 Sam 2:8-10) for a long time (2 Sam 3). About 10 years later he had to face the rebellion of Absalom and to flee from Jerusalem (2 Sam 15). After the death of Absalom David returned to Jerusalem but then Sheba rebelled and the men of Israel deserted David (2 Sam 20:1-2).

These hindrances may suggest God's purpose will fail

God promised great blessing to Abram's descendants but Sarai was barren (Gen 15:2-3). God had promised Abram his offspring would inherit the land (Gen 12:7; 15:4-5) but some ten years later (and some time, probably years, after God had made the promise of a son in Gen 15:4), when Abram was 85, he still had no son. So Sarah decided to 'help God out' by telling Abram to have a child by Hagar (Gen 16:2 - which only resulted in the creation of the Ishmaelites). Ishmael arrived about a year later when Abram was 86 (Gen 16:16). But Isaac was born 14 years later (Gen 17:17), about 25 years after Abram had come to the Promised Land and some 15 or more years after God promised him a son (Gen 15:4). (Also Lot's daughters tried to "help God out" because they had no husbands but this only succeeded in creating the Moabites and Ammonites who became bitter enemies of Abraham - Gen 19:30-38).

These hindrances may happen after God's purpose appears to have worked out

God the called Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his precious, long-awaited son, when he was 14, according to NIV calculations (Gen 22).

After Pharaoh had let the Israelites go so that God could lead them to the Promised Land, the Lord allowed Pharaoh to change his mind and pursue them, terrifying them (Ex 14:10) before the Lord judged the Egyptians (Ex 14:26-28).

The Lord promised that all the residents of the Promised Land would be driven out but he allowed the Gibeonites to deceive the Israelites (Dt 9).

God had chosen Solomon to succeed David but Adonijah tried to take over from David (1 Kgs 1). Because of Solomon falling into pagan worship due to the influence of his foreign wives, the Lord sent rebels against him (Hadad and Rezon 1 Kings 11) and eventually decided to remove ten of the tribes from Solomon's family (1 Kgs 11:31) leaving one tribe Judah (with the Simeonites included in their territory Josh 19:9) to the family. So God's long promised dwelling in the Promised Land was fulfilled with a very divided chosen people. The ten tribes soon fell into paganism (1 Kgs 12), resulting in defeat by the Assyrians, as did Judah (1 Kgs 14), resulting in the exile to Babylon.

The Lord brought about, through King Cyrus, the return of Jewish exiles to the Promised Land in order to rebuild the temple, which was a remarkable fulfilment of his purpose for Israel (Ezra 1). But the rebuilders faced strong opposition which ultimately led to the rebuilding being stopped for ten years (Ezra 4:23-24).

Artaxerxes sent Nehemiah back to the Promised Land to rebuild Jerusalem and he faced strong and potentially violent opposition (Neh 4).

God fulfils his purposes through, sometimes sinful, human behaviour

The Lord told Rebekah that Esau, her older son, would serve Jacob, her younger son - contrary to ancient law (Gen 25:21-23). This was clearly God's purpose. But this prophecy was fulfilled through deceitful behaviour on Jacob's part (Gen 25:29-34; 27:1-40).

God promised Jacob many descendants whom he would bless in the Promised Land (Gen 28:10-15) but this was mainly achieved through the deceitful way in which Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Leah (Gen 29:23-27). She was the mother of Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah (Gen 29:31-35), Issachar and Zebulun (Gen 30:17, 19). Leah's servant Bilhah had Dan and Naphtali (Gen 30:1-7). Rachel's servant Zilpah had Gad and Asher (Gen 30:9-12). Of the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel only one was born to Rachel, the wife he freely chose – Joseph (Gen 30:23-24).

Joseph said to his brothers *“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives”* (Gen 50:20).

Judges 14:1-4 *“Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman. When he returned, he said to his father and mother, ‘I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife.’ His father and mother replied, ‘Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?’ But Samson said to his father, ‘Get her for me. She's the right one for me.’ (His parents did not know that this was from the LORD, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines; for at that time they were ruling over Israel.)”* NIV on Jdg 14:4: *“The Lord uses even the sinful weaknesses of men to accomplish his purposes and bring praise to his name.”*

Acts 4:27-28 *“Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.”*

God fulfils his purposes through negative events

The Lord brought about the setting for the Passover – which was, of course, fundamental to Israel's faith - partly through Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery (Gen 37:17-28). In Egypt he was wrongly accused and imprisoned (Gen 39). The other factor the Lord used was the famine which caused Joseph's brothers to go down to Egypt, unwittingly to meet their long-lost brother, now in an exalted position in Egypt (Gen 42-48). Although God had said he would bring the Israelites into the Promised Land he did so via a 430 year stay in Egypt (Ex 12:40)!

Also the Lord brought about the setting for the Passover through the Israelites being enslaved by the Egyptians (Ex 1). Another factor in bringing it about was Moses' intervention which initially made things worse for the Israelites (Ex 5:6-21).

God works out his beneficial purposes through delayed answer to prayer

We are all aware that often there are delays in prayers being answered. Sometimes the delay is difficult to deal with. However, we need to remember that God, in his absolute love and faithfulness, uses such delays in his purposes. This is clear in Scripture as the following examples show.

The delay in the Exodus

God did not lead the Israelites along the shortest route from Israel to the Promised Land because they were likely to be confronted by the aggressive Philistines which could have caused them to return to Egypt (Ex 13:17). He led them south to Mt Sinai. However the length of this indirect route was still only some 55 days of walking.

Instead of leading them so quickly into the greatly desired Promised Land, the Lord led them on what was intended to be an 18 month journey. This was because he wanted to teach them many important lessons. For example, he taught them lessons through Moses about the majesty of God and about the law of God.

God also tested their obedience. He tested them at the waters of Meribah after they had grumbled at the lack of water. He said *“If you listen carefully to the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you.”* (Ex 15:24-26 cf Psa 81:7).

Then they grumbled at the lack of meat and God promised to give them manna. *“The LORD said to Moses, ‘I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions’* (Ex 16:3-5).

At Mt Sinai the Israelites *“saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, ‘Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not let God speak to us or we will die.’ Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.’”* (Ex 20: 18-20).

However, because the people failed the test of trusting God could overcome the hostile tribes seen by the spies, the 18 months turned into 40 years, time to allow the Exodus generation to die out. But this was also another period of testing. Moses said to them: *“Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD”* (Dt 8:2-3 cf v 16).

The delay in taking full control of the Promised Land

The Israelites are thought to have eventually entered the Promised Land in 1406BC but it was not until 400 years later, under David, that the greatest (even then not total) possession of the land took place. This was because of the frequent disobedience of the people. However God did not give up on them. He sought to use the suffering of the delay to bring them to obedience. He used the remaining Canaanite nations to test the Israelites.

After Joshua died, Israel disobeyed the Lord frequently. *“Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and said, ‘Because this nation has violated the covenant I ordained for their ancestors and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD and walk in it as their ancestors did.’ The LORD had allowed those nations to remain; he did not drive them out at once by giving them into the hands of Joshua”* (Judg 2:20-23).

“These are the nations the LORD left to test all those Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan (he did this only to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience): the five rulers of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites living in the Lebanon mountains from Mount Baal Hermon to Lebo Hamath. They were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the LORD’s commands, which he had given their ancestors through Moses” (Judg 3:1-4).

The delay in the end of the Exile in Babylon

Doubtless many Israelites prayed for the exile to end and for a return to the Promised Land. But God allowed the Exile to last for 70 years because he wanted to refine them through this suffering. He said through Jeremiah: “*See, I will refine and test them, for what else can I do because of the sin of my people?*” (Jer 9:7). He also spoke through Ezekiel that the exile would come and interrupt the Davidic kingship “*Testing will surely come. And what if even the sceptre, which the sword despises, does not continue?*’ declares the Sovereign Lord.” (Ezk 21:13).

So the Lord will use delays in answers to prayer to:

- Teach us important lessons (as he did to Israel about the Law in the first 18 months after the Exodus).
- Do some unexpected things (as he did in the miracles after the Exodus).
- Test our faith and obedience (as he did after the entry into the Promised Land and during the Exile).

God allows good people to face bad experiences

He sometimes allowed the good kings to have bad experiences. Asa experienced war with Israel and had a severe illness (1 Kgs 15:23). Joash and Amaziah were assassinated (2 Kgs 12; 13). Azariah caught leprosy (2 Kgs 15). Hezekiah faced invasion by Sennacherib (2 Kgs 18). Josiah was killed in battle with Pharaoh Neco (2 Kgs 23).

Elijah, a great prophet of God suffered life-threatening opposition from Jezebel soon after experiencing a major miraculous victory over the pagans (1 Kgs 19).

Jeremiah, a great prophet, faced death threats (Jer 11:18-21; 26:7-8; 38:4). He was beaten and put in stocks (Jer 20:1-3). He was imprisoned (Jer 37).

The apostles were persecuted, being put in prison (Acts 4:1-3; 5:18; 12:1-5). Stephen and James were martyred (Acts 6-7; 12:2). The church was persecuted (Acts 8:1-3; 13:50)

Paul was persecuted (Acts 16:19; 2 Tim 4:14) imprisoned and flogged (Acts 16:22-23; 21:33). He faced death threats (Acts 9:23, 29; 14:5; 21:30-31; 23:12-22) and was stoned (Acts 14:19). He listed his own sufferings: “*I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked*” (2 Cor 11:23-27).

He also writes: “*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you ... as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything*” (2 Cor 4:8-12; 6:4-10).

How do we respond to all this?

We need to understand the issues

Some might be tempted to think that it shows God often doesn’t answer prayer. But we need to examine the context of these incidents. Delays in answers to prayer can be difficult but ultimately the prayers are answered. The fact that God

uses human behaviour and sometimes sinful behaviour, and negative events in his purposes doesn't alter the fact that he still answers prayer through this behaviour and these events.

Then there are situations when God allows good people to face bad experiences. The assassination of Joash and Amaziah is in a similar category to martyrdom, which can happen to anyone in a sinful world. Hezekiah faced invasion from Sennacherib but was delivered from it. Josiah was killed in battle with Pharaoh Neco but this was a normal war situation. Also it may be that Josiah was unwise because he didn't need to confront Neco, since he wasn't coming to attack Judah. Elijah was threatened by Jezebel but survived. Jeremiah suffered persecution and threats but survived. There were martyrs in the New Testament but Jesus predicted such things would happen. So, of the incidents mentioned above, the issue of inexplicable unanswered prayer is raised only by Asa having a disease of his feet in old age and Azariah catching leprosy.

Unanswered prayer over sickness is a challenge to faith. But long delays in answers to prayer can also challenge faith. Persecution and martyrdom are, of course, very difficult, and people pray against them happening. But God promised they would sometimes happen so they are not in the category of inexplicable unanswered prayer.

We need to respond in faith

The writer to the Hebrews commends the Old Testament saints for their remarkable faith, not least because they didn't have the knowledge that we have now following the teaching of the New Testament. In Hebrews 11 we read:

Abraham obeyed God in faith leaving for the promised land "even though he did not know where he was going" (v. 8). "By faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore" (vv 11-12).

"By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death" (vv 17-19).

"By faith [Moses] left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel. By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned" (vv 27-29).

"And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawn in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and ill-treated – the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground" (vv 32-38).

"These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect" (vv 39-40).

We need to understand what faith is

It is easy to base our faith on what happens or doesn't happen, on whether prayers are answered or not answered. But we need to understand that faith is a relationship. It is a relationship of trust in a trustworthy God, whatever we don't understand about how he operates – delays, disappointments, suffering, persecution. We need to focus on God rather than events. God is not faithful because he answers prayer - he is faithful because he is God. He is not loving because he answers prayer - he is loving because he is love.

The problem is that we don't understand everything God does (or doesn't do) which is hardly surprising since we are mere mortals. He is love whatever we don't understand about him. It can't be otherwise.

This is where faith comes in and making us people of faith is a high priority in God's purposes. Faith is not a business relationship - knowing you can ask for things and receive them. It is a personal relationship. As Mother Basilea put it: "My Father, I do not understand you but I trust you." That is faith.

We need to understand the purpose of suffering

We also need to remember that there are some things God can only do in our lives through suffering. Paul wrote "*We ... glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope*" (Rom 5:3-4). James wrote: "*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything ... Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him*" (Jas 1:2-4, 12).

One thing is definite, God will strengthen us to face this suffering if we look to him in trust.

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28).

God wants us to pray in faith

We have seen how God can allow delays in answer to prayer, can answer prayer in ways we do not expect and sometimes allows us to have bad experiences. But we should not let all that undermine praying in faith. Quite a lot of Christians either explicitly or in their minds pray "if it be Thy will" prayers. This sounds humble and reverent but the New Testament doesn't teach that we should pray that sort of prayer. It encourages us on numerous occasions to pray in faith, expecting a positive answer, not including the "get out clause," namely the words "if it be Thy will."

Here are the Lord's promises to answer prayer:

"If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer" (Mt 21:22). "Everything is possible to the one who believes" (Mk 9:23).

"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you receive it and it will be yours" (Mk 11:24).

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened" (Mt 7:7).

"Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven" (Mt 18:19)

"You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (Jn 14:14).

"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (Jn 15:7).

So the first five conditions of definitely expecting our prayers to be answered are:

1. Faith (Mt 21:22; Mk 9:23).
2. "Receiving" the answer in faith (before you see it) – (Mk 11:24).
3. Persisting (asking, knocking, seeking) – (Mt 7:7).
4. Agreeing in prayer with at least one other person (Mt 18:19).
5. Praying in the name of Jesus (Jn 14:4).

There is, however, one more condition: "*If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you*" (Jn 15:7). The New Testament does not support a superficial "name it and claim it" approach to prayer. Jesus is saying we can claim the promises associated with the above five conditions and expect him to give us whatever we wish. But only if we are "remaining" in him and his word is "remaining" in us, in other words, as far as we know (after prayerful self-examination) we are right with the Lord, living a holy life in accordance with biblical teaching. If this is the case, and we are fulfilling the five conditions above, Jesus says we can ask whatever we wish and it will be done for us. That is not an "if it be Thy will" prayer, any more than it is a superficial "name it and claim it" prayer.

I need to add that, of course, we need to think prayerfully and carefully about whether what we are praying for is the right thing. That may include the factors we normally use in making important decisions: careful thought, weighing pros and cons, research, consultation, ascertaining it is biblical, etc. But if we conclude it is the right thing, and we

fulfil the above six conditions we can pray, not an “if it be thy will” prayer but a prayer in faith, confident that God will answer it positively. Yes, he may allow delays in answer to prayer or may answer prayer (positively) in ways we do not expect. But we can (of course) be confident he will keep his promises. His promises are absolute and he is utterly faithful to his promises. So we can pray in faith, not “if it be Thy will.”

John is referring to the above approach (checking we are right with the Lord and ascertaining that what we are asking for is right in itself), when he says: “*If we ask anything according to your will, you hear us. And if we know that you hear us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of you*” (1 Jn 5:14-15).

But what about Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane? “*Abba, Father,*” he said, “*everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I want, but what you will*” (Mark 14:36). On the face of it, this might seem to support “if it be Thy will” prayer. However we need to remember:

- This prayer is complex and has challenged scholars, leading them to different interpretations.
- It was prayed in extremely horrific circumstances.
- It was prayed by Jesus who *knew* he had to die bearing our sins on the cross.
- He made it very clear that he was willing to do so:
 - He said to the disciples earlier: “*Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour*” (Jn 14:27)
 - He rebuked Peter a short time later that evening, when he struck the high priest’s servant with his sword “*Jesus commanded Peter, ‘Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?’*” (John 18:10-11)

It would be unwise to use this prayer, prayed in such extreme and confusing circumstances, as a basis for justifying “if it be thy will” prayers. (See the Appendix for more on this point).

This complex prayer does not alter the fact that Jesus made six promises to answer our prayers if we fulfil the conditions outlined above.

Appendix: Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane about the cup of suffering

Does Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane support “if it be thy will” prayers? Matt 26:39, 42 “*Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.’ ... He went away a second time and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.’*” (Cf Mk 14:35-36). We need to bear in mind various things in mind:

1. Scholars have struggled to understand what Jesus was meaning in this prayer and they disagree with one another.
2. Jesus knew he had to drink this cup of suffering – bearing the sin of the world. He is, after all, the second person of the Trinity. It is impossible to believe that he didn’t know he had to bear the sins of the world and the Father’s wrath against those sins. Jesus can’t have been doubting this was God’s will or thinking it might be done some other way.
3. Jesus was, of course, absolutely willing to obey God. In Jn 14:27, 30-31 he says to the disciples: “*Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour ... I will not say much more to you, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold over me, but he comes so that the world may learn that I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me.*” After praying about his cup of suffering he rebuked Peter a short time later, when Peter struck the high priest’s servant with his sword. He said to him, “*Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?*” (John 18:10-11). So, a very short time after Jesus’ prayer, he is rebuking Peter for trying to protect him from this cup of suffering.
4. This prayer was prayed in very special – horrific – circumstances and Jesus was clearly horrified at the prospect of bearing the wrath of God against all human sin. He “had to face death knowing that His Father would not be with Him, but against Him in wrath of judgment.”ⁱ He said: “*My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death*” (Matt 26:38). “By describing his sorrow as to the point of death (26:38), Jesus underlines the intensity of his grief: of itself the grief could kill him.”ⁱⁱ “It was no mere fear of the physical suffering of death, which drew [these words] from our Lord's lips. It was a sense of the enormous load of human guilt, ... a sense of the

unutterable weight of our sins and transgressions which were then specially laid upon Him. He was being 'made a curse for us.' He was bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows ... His holy nature felt acutely the hideous burden laid upon Him. These were the reasons of His extraordinary sorrow."ⁱⁱⁱ The intensity of the suffering of Jesus, even before he was actually crucified, is beyond our imagination.

One commentator writes: "It is impossible for him in his perfect humanity, not to experience a feeling of opposition to the idea of impending humiliation, suffering and death ... How dreadful, then, must the idea have been to Christ, who had from eternity lived in the most intimate and unbroken communion with His Father, that He would have to endure all this! How terrible the knowledge that He, who Himself was without sin, would on the accursed tree, sentenced like a condemned criminal, be laden with the sin of all mankind as the willing and sacrificial Lamb of God! No man will ever be capable of sounding the depths of what the Saviour experienced in Gethsemane when the full reality of His suffering in soul and body penetrated into His immaculate spirit."^{iv}

Another comments: "The immediate prospect of abandoning His life and of feeling in so doing the whole burden of human sin and the horror of evil in its most blatant form throws the soul of Jesus into turmoil. He knows not how to give expression to His feelings. He either prays, or is tempted to pray, *Father, save me from this hour* (27). A decisive judgment on this is difficult, for these words can be construed either as a prayer actually prayed, or as a contemplated prayer, 'Am I to say Father, save me from this hour?' In either case, it would seem that the expression *save me from this hour* means 'help me to come safely out of this hour' rather than 'enable me to avoid this hour altogether', as the preposition translated from is *ek* and not *apo*."^v

Jesus prayed '*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.*' In view of the complexity of this prayer, prayed in extremely horrific circumstances, by Jesus who knew he had to die bearing our sins on the cross, and which has challenged scholars, leading them to different interpretations, it would be unwise to use it as a basis for justifying "if it be thy will" prayers.

Also this complex prayer does not alter the fact that Jesus made six promises to answer our prayers if we fulfil the conditions (which we noted above). There is no "if it be thy will" aspect to these promises.

ⁱ Reformation Study Bible Commentary

ⁱⁱ IVP NT Commentary

ⁱⁱⁱ J C Ryle on Mark 14:36

^{iv} Geldenhuys on Lk 22:42

^v RVG Tasker on Jn 12:27