

PRAYER: DOES IT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE

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Library Bible Study

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Does Prayer Change God, and Summing Up

- No prayer formula but routine helps; listen, change, plead, persist.
- The Bible's view, God is changeless but He listens. "lavish promises" – pg 133
- God acts in response to prayer. Human freedom is also central.
- Minor details have been left for actors to improvise.
- We can only get an inkling as to how prayer really works. - TIMELESS COMPLEXITY PG 137

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PART 2: UNRAVELING THE MYSTERIES

devout Jonathan Edwards questioned petitionary prayer. He wrote, "It is not to be thought that God is properly moved or made willing by our prayers"; instead, God bestows mercy "as though he were prevailed upon by prayer." (John Calvin himself, I should note, had no such doubts about prayer. He urged people to pray and included a chapter on it in the *Institutes* next to his chapter on predestination. About his more extreme followers he said, "It is very absurd, therefore, to dissuade men from prayer, by pretending that Divine Providence, which is always watching over the government of the universe, is in vain importuned by our supplications.")

As discoveries in science explained away phenomena that people had always considered part of providence, sons and daughters of the Enlightenment saw less reason for prayer. The natural cycle of storms and droughts became more predictable, apparently less subject to the whims of God or those who prayed to God. Thomas Hardy described God as "the dreaming, dark, dumb Thing that turns the handle of this idle Show." In the modern novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* Kurt Vonnegut mocks prayer in a scene where the main character, Billy Pilgrim, puzzles over the well-known Serenity Prayer:

GOD GRANT ME THE SERENITY TO ACCEPT
THE THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE,
COURAGE TO CHANGE THE THINGS I CAN,
AND WISDOM ALWAYS TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE.

Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future.

Vonnegut had no need to point out the obvious conclusion: What good is prayer in such a predetermined world?

The Bible's View

Turn to the Bible's view of history, however, and you see a picture of God as a personal Being who alertly listens to prayers and then responds. Jesus filled in that portrait, and the disciples took up praying right where Jesus left off, making specific and personal requests for God to act.

10. DOES PRAYER CHANGE GOD?

And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for *your Father knows what you need before you ask him*. This, then, is how you should pray . . .

Some see God's omniscience as a disincentive to prayer: Why pray if God already knows? In contrast, Jesus treated God's knowledge not as a deterrent but as a positive motivation to pray. We do not have to work to gain God's attention through long words and ostentatious displays. We don't have to convince God of our sincerity or our needs. We already have the Father's ear, as it were. God knows everything about us and still listens. We can get right to the point.

"Prayer holds together the shattered fragments of the creation. It makes history possible," wrote Jacques Ellul, a modern French thinker who could not avoid the Bible's direct statements that God acts in response to prayer. Indeed, the great events of the Old Testament—Abraham's family, Joseph's rebound in Egypt, the exodus, the wilderness wanderings, the victories of Joshua and King David, deliverance from Assyria and Babylon, the rebuilding of the temple, the coming of Messiah—took place only after God's people had cried out in prayer.

Throughout, the Bible depicts God as being deeply affected by people both positively and negatively. God "delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love." Yet, as the prophets tell, at times God also feels wearied by disobedience and eventually God's patience reaches an endpoint: "For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant."

The New Testament presses home that our prayers make a difference to God and to the world:

Ask and it will be given to you.

And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. . . .

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer.

You do not have, because you do not ask God.

infertility; Daniel praying in a den of lions even as his three friends had prayed in the midst of fire. When God sent the prophet Isaiah, the most God-connected person of his day, to inform King Hezekiah of his imminent death, Hezekiah prayed for more time. Before Isaiah had left the palace grounds, God changed his mind, granting Hezekiah fifteen more years of life.

In a sort of negative proof of the power of prayer, three times God commanded Jeremiah to *stop* praying; God wanted no alteration in his plans to punish a rebellious nation. Prayer had, after all, softened God's resolve before. "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned," the prophet Jonah proclaimed to a heathen city, but "when God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened." Four times the Old Testament reports that God "relented" or "changed his mind" in response to a request, and each shift forestalled a promised punishment.

A Work in Process

How do we reconcile the changeless God described in the Bible with the responsive God also described in the Bible? The revivalist Charles Finney, who moved away from the strict Calvinism of his youth, grounded his belief in the power of prayer, ironically, in God's unchanging character: "If you ask why he ever answers prayer at all, the answer must be, Because he is unchangeable." To give an example, a God bound by unchanging qualities of love and mercy must forgive a sinner who prays repentantly. God changes course in response to the sinner's change in course, and does so because of those eternal qualities.

The contemporary theologian Clark Pinnock follows a similar line of logic. Since God's nature is love, he says, God must be impressionable and sympathetic: "Because God's love *never* changes, God's experience *must* change." Pinnock contrasts two models of God's sovereignty. We can picture God as an aloof monarch, removed from the details of the world. Or we can picture God as a caring parent with traits of love, generosity, and sensitivity—an infinite Being who personally interacts with and responds to creation. Accordingly, God considers prayers much as a wise parent might consider requests from a child.

Written Proof

GAIL

If I ever doubt that God hears and responds to our prayers, I pull out my prayer journal. These days my "altar" is a computer desk. I sit there each day with an open Bible and record my spiritual journal on the computer. I need that kind of focus to help me meditate.

I ask God what I should do that day, and one by one names pop into mind. By the end of the time, I usually have three or four hours of work ahead of me, because I believe God often relies on us to help answer the very requests we make of him.

Each day I print out my journal and refer back to it, reminding myself of what I learned. Then, once a year I condense and compile the entire thing. I divide my notes into categories: insights, poetry, family highlights, repentance, fun times, sorrows—and answers to prayer. The synthesis of last year's journal took up fifty-six pages in a footnote-sized type. Reading it over, I'm simply amazed at how God worked in response to my prayers. I see a softening in my niece's husband, an agnostic. I see transformation in the members of my small group, and spiritual awakenings in my neighbors. I see growth in my own marriage.

I used to think that if I worked hard to be good enough, God would answer my prayers in the way that I wanted. Now I've learned to bow low. I'm just a steward, a pawn, with no real concept of what's best for me. The hard times I've gone through—and there are many—have taught me that God can use anything for his purposes. Sometimes my husband and I have longed for a particular result, only to realize later that it would have been disastrous for us. I've learned humility in prayer. God is the boss, not me. Whatever makes me bow lower is good for me because it seems God takes great delight in raising us up.

I'm blessed to have a husband who prays with me. Why is it so many men have difficulty praying with their wives (and vice versa) when they may well participate in prayer groups with near strangers? Perhaps it's because we can

have done." Murray points to the Trinity for a clue into how God's mind might change. We have **seen how** Jesus on earth relied on prayer to commune with the Father and **to make** requests—some of which, notably, were not granted. Now Jesus as our advocate represents human interests within the Godhead. The apostle Paul affirms that the Holy Spirit also has an intimate role in prayer: "We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself **intercedes** for us with groans that words **cannot express**." In one of the few **verses that** mention all persons of the Trinity, Paul brings the three together: "For through him [Christ] we both have access to the Father by one Spirit." The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit conduct a kind of inner conversation, showing that God welcomes debate and counsel.

C. S. Lewis seemed fascinated by the questions posed by prayer, especially how a sovereign God might listen and respond to our prayers. As a young Christian in England, he had felt embarrassed about praying for his brother Warren overseas when he heard of a Japanese attack on Shanghai. What difference might one puny prayer make against the inevitability of fate or providence? He went on to explore the topic in several of his books and many of his essays and letters.

Lewis once presented the problem in the voice of a skeptic akin to Kurt Vonnegut:

I don't think it at all likely that God requires the ill-informed (and contradictory) advice of us humans as to how to run the world. If He is all-wise, as you say He is, doesn't He know already what is best? And if He is all-good won't He do it whether we pray or not?

In reply, Lewis said that you could use the same argument against *any* human activity, not just prayer. "Why wash your hands? If God intends them to be clean, they'll come clean without your washing them.... Why ask for the salt? Why put on your boots? Why do anything?" God could have arranged things so that our bodies nourished themselves miraculously without food, knowledge entered our brains without studying, umbrellas magically appeared to protect us from rainstorms. God chose a different style of governing the world, a partnership which relies on human agency and choice. God granted the favored human species the "dignity of causality," to borrow a phrase from Pascal.

The skeptic, then, is objecting not merely to prayer but to the basic rules of creation. God created matter in such a way that we can manipulate it, by cutting down trees to build houses and damming rivers to form reservoirs.

God granted such an expanse of human freedom that we can oppress each other, rebel against our Creator, even murder God's own Son. Lewis suggests that we best imagine the world not as a state governed by a potentate but as a work of art, something like a play, in the process of being created. The playwright allows his characters to affect the play itself, then incorporates all their actions into the final result.

In this view, prayer as a means of advancing God's kingdom is no stranger than any other means. Go into all nations and preach the gospel, Jesus told his disciples, thus launching the missionary movement with its harrowing history; would not a large banner in the sky have served God's purpose just as well? Heal the sick, visit prisoners, feed the hungry, house strangers—Jesus also commanded these activities, delegating them into our hands rather than enlarging his own Galilean ministry to global scale. Consistently, God chooses the course of action in which human partners can contribute most.

Lewis sums up the drama of human history as one "in which the scene and the general outline of the story is fixed by the author, but certain minor details are left for the actors to improvise. It may be a mystery why He should have allowed us to cause real events at all; but it is no odder that He should allow us to cause them by praying than by any other method." Prayer is a designated instrument of God's power, as real and as "natural" as any other power God may use.

[Timeless Complexity]

I envy, truly I envy, those people who pray in simple faith without fretting about how prayer works and how God governs this planet. For some reason I cannot avoid pondering these imponderables. At the same time, a little reading in modern physics and cosmology has convinced me that creatures bound by time and space may never gain more than an inkling of the rule upholding the universe.

For example, physicist Stephen Hawking cites with approval Augustine's notion that any God must exist outside of time. We humans are confined to a space-time universe that began at a moment of time, but God is not. Experiments on relativity have proved that, strange as it seems, time itself is no constant. As a person's velocity approaches the speed of light, time "slows down" for that person, so that an astronaut launched at high speed into space will return measurably younger than her twin brother left at home.

Cosmologists seriously speculate about a reverse arrow of time that might allow us to travel backwards in time; popular movies like *The Time Machine* and *Back to the Future* depict adventures the traveler might have, tempted to change the details of history even before they occur.

How does God's timelessness affect prayer? C. S. Lewis decided it altogether reasonable to pray at noon for a medical consultation that might have been conducted at ten o'clock as long as we do not know the final result before we pray. "The event certainly has been decided—in a sense it was decided 'before all worlds.' But one of the things taken into account in deciding it, and therefore one of the things that really cause it to happen, may be this very prayer that we are now offering." Lewis notes such a notion would be less shocking to modern scientists than to nonscientists.

Older models of physics also established a clear trail of cause and effect. One billiard ball strikes another, energy gets transferred, and both balls move along a predictable and determined path. New models, though, deal with complexity theory and information theory. In a complex system—such as a single cell in the human body, much less an entire body, much less a community comprising many persons all of whom exercise free will—simple rules of cause and effect do not apply. Each step up the ladder, from matter to mind to many minds, introduces staggering new levels of uncertainty and complexity. We need a model far more sophisticated and, yes, mysterious than anything Isaac Newton might have dreamed up to figure out why things happen and whether prayer might enter in.

Scientists insist that measuring the spin of one particle may affect the spin of another particle billions of miles away. Some even suggest, in a theory called "the butterfly effect," that the flapping of a single insect's wings may contribute to the great causal chain that eventuates in a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico or a tornado in Texas. Who can say with confidence what causes any single event, in nature or in a human being?*

What caused the hurricanes that ravaged Florida in 2004 and New Orleans in 2005? Or if a teenager decides to get drunk one weekend, what role do genes, brain chemistry, parental nurturing, and stubborn free will

play in the decision? What role does God play in natural events like weather anomalies and birth defects? Does prayer ever influence those events? Why must people suffer natural calamities? Why are pain and pleasure distributed so randomly and unfairly?

When the Old Testament character Job posed his anguished version of such questions, God erupted with a science lesson of his own. Poor Job repented in dust and ashes, shamed into silence by his ignorance in the face of God's own "complexity theory." (In an intriguing aside to the story, God informed Job's friends, who thought they had cause and effect all figured out, that he would deal with them not according to their "folly" but according to Job's *prayer* for them!)

At various times, according to the biblical record, God has indeed played a direct role in manipulating natural events: causing a drought or a plague of locusts, reversing the course of disease and disability, even restoring life to a corpse. Apart from these rare events called miracles, however, the Bible emphasizes an ongoing providence, of God's will being done through the common course of nature and ordinary human activity: rain falling and seeds sprouting, farmers planting and harvesting, the strong caring for the weak, the haves giving to the have-nots, the healthy ministering to the sick. We tend to place God's activity in a different category from natural or human activity; the Bible tends to draw them together. Somehow God works in all of creation, all of history, to bring about ultimate goals.

The act of prayer brings together Creator and creature, eternity and time, in all the fathomless mystery implied by that convergence. I can view prayer as a way of asking a timeless God to intervene more directly in our time-bound life on earth. (Indeed, I do so all the time, praying for the sick, for the victims of tragedy, for the safety of the persecuted church.) In a process I am only learning, I can also view prayer from the other side, as a way of entering into the rhythms of eternity and aligning myself with God's "view from above," a way to harmonize my own desires with God's and then to help effect, while on earth, what God has willed for all eternity.

In prayer I ask for, and gradually gain, trust in God's love and justice and mercy and holiness, despite all that might call those traits into question. I immerse myself in the changeless qualities of God and then return to do my part in acting out those qualities on earth: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

So many times I turn to prayer feeling besieged. The news from CNN reminds me of poverty and injustice, of human cruelty and terrorism and

*The conversations of modern cosmologists bring to mind arcane discussions from the Middle Ages. In the sixteenth century, in an attempt to reconcile sovereignty and free will, the Spanish Jesuit Luis de Molina proposed a "middle knowledge" of God: the ability to project in advance what every possible creature would do as well as how those free choices might affect each possible world. Stephen Hawking and several Nobel laureates endorse a many-worlds theory in which any choice I make may have an effect in some alternate universe, although I only perceive the one present to my consciousness. (String theory proposes at least eight additional dimensions of reality undetectable by us.)