

How We Think about Prayer

Will my prayer move God to do something?

Introduction

Many of us wonder about the usefulness of prayer. We may have been taught to pray and we may routinely pray in church and in our lives, but what actually happens when we pray? Does it matter that we pray? What difference will prayer make? Does God intervene in the world and bring about favorable results for us in our lives just based on our prayers?

Through the centuries, theologians have wrestled with these questions. What is the relationship between God and the world? Does God get involved in the world, direct the world? How do we understand ourselves as humans in relation to God? Can humans influence God or change God's mind? So like throwing a stone into a lake, the ripples from this question expand through a whole variety of theological topics.

It comes as no surprise that there are about as many answers as there are questions. When one makes a theological decision about one issue, it affects what one comes to believe about another issue. For example, if you believe that God is not involved in the world at all, that God created the world and then stepped back and let the world run on its own according to the laws of nature, then what use would there be to pray? If prayer included asking God to do something and if you believed God was not involved with the world, asking for this kind of help from God would be nonsense. God could not help because God does not get involved with the world. So a view about God and the nature of God's relationship with the world would affect the answer to this question: "What happens when we pray?" With this view of God, nothing!

Christians, however, do believe that God is involved in the world. And we believe that prayer changes things. Somehow. Here is where the different viewpoints emerge. These different views affect what one believes about what prayer is and what happens when we pray.

In this study we'll look at some of the different views of prayer that Christians hold and a sense of what happens when we pray according to these viewpoints. They can be divided into two main groups: views where prayer is seen to be focused on changes that happen within the individual who prays, and views where prayer is focused on changes that happen with God and affect God's actions.



If God is not actively involved with the world, prayer would be meaningless. But what is the role of prayer?

No doubt we have all wondered about each of these viewpoints and perhaps have changed our minds over time. You might use a pen and circle or underline ideas that resonate with your own experience.

Prayer Changes People

In these three views of prayer, despite their differences, the basic perception is that prayer changes people and people change things.

Prayer as inner union with God. Some believe that the purpose of prayer is to draw one into a deep spiritual union with God. One withdraws from the world in prayer and enters a spiritual stillness in the presence of God.

This view is attractive for those who want a sense of experiencing God in a very personal way because communion with God is a primary benefit of prayer. In this view, God is not affected by our prayers. We can gain spiritual strength, but prayer enhances us rather than changes things in the world.

Prayer as new self-understanding. One way to look at prayer is that it is of primary benefit to the one who prays. In prayer, we express our needs and hopes and thus come to understand ourselves more fully. This equips us better to deal with our problems.

This view is therapeutic in that it focuses on what the experience of prayer can teach us about who we are, what our needs are, and what courses of action might be possible for us. One does not change God's mind in prayer or affect God's actions. Prayer is focused on providing us with a new self-understanding.

Prayer as reflection on others and the world. For some, prayer serves as a way of looking beyond ourselves to reflect on others and on the needs of the world. The act of prayer is to orient us to a wider vision and lead us to look to human situations, both personally and in the world as a whole.

This way of viewing prayer prevents it from being a purely self-centered or selfish activity. It opens one to the needs of others and focuses on ways in which care and love and justice can be expressed. One does not pray to God to change anything. Rather, one's self is changed as the realities of the world around us make us realize changes we need to make as a human community.

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Prayer Changes God

In these two views of prayer, despite their differences, the basic perception is that through prayer, God is changed and God's actions are affected because of our prayers.

Prayer as gaining one's desires. For some, prayer is seen as a kind of transaction in which, if one goes through the motions of prayers and lets one's requests be made known to God, God must answer and give what is requested. There is a so-called Prosperity Gospel movement today that says God wants us to be successful and well off and prosperous. Prayer is a means of expressing one's will and desires to God and thus seeking God's blessings on one's efforts for success.

This approach to prayer appeals to those who believe God needs simply to be asked in order to tap into God's blessings, which are both spiritual and material. Well, Jesus said to ask and it will be given, didn't he? Prayers are usually focused on one's specific wants and desires, especially in the material realm. In this view, prayer is gauged to change God's mind by requesting blessings and things from God and laying hold of God's willingness to give all manner of blessings to those who ask in prayer.

Prayer as striving with God. Many Christians view prayer as the pouring out of one's heart and soul to God, seeking the divine will, petitioning God, and making one's needs and requests known to God.

This view emphasizes prayer as active pleading with God in relation to that which is being prayed for. Those following this view believe that prayer has a definite role to play in the carrying out of God's purposes in this world, and that God desires prayer to be the medium by which the needs of God's people are expressed. The emphasis here is both on seeking the will of God through prayer and on striving with God in prayer,

believing that God chooses to carry out God's purposes in cooperation with those who pray.

What Can We Expect in Prayer?

So what really happens when we pray? As we've seen, some Christians emphasize the effects of prayer on those who pray while others emphasize prayer as affecting a change in God and God's actions. Do we have to choose between these two main features?

A balanced approach to understanding what happens when we pray and what we can expect can include both dimensions of the two groups above. In prayer, we can believe that both those who pray and also God are changed. There is a reciprocity here. Prayer has an impact on the one who prays, and in prayer, something also happens with God.

An important place where we see both dimensions is in the account of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42). Here, on the eve of his crucifixion and just hours before his death, Jesus withdrew from his disciples in order to pray. The record in the Gospel of Mark is that "he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want'" (14:35-36).

Here we see Jesus struggling with his situation. He is facing death. As a truly human person, he was experiencing all the emotions any of us would feel at a time like this. So Jesus prayed. He turned to God, and in the deepest honesty he let his thoughts and feelings be made known to the One he called, "Abba, Father." Jesus prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He believed God *could* enable him to escape this coming death. He affirmed this when he said to God that "for you all things are possible." Jesus believed the God to whom he prayed was involved in this world, that God acts in the world, and that God can affect the world. Jesus knew that *all things* are possible for God.

But Jesus didn't end there. After asking God to "remove this cup from me," he went on to pray, "yet, not what I want, but what you want." Jesus bent his will to the will of God, seeking with all that was in him to follow God's will—even when it meant he would die a gruesome death. Jesus himself was affected by his prayer in that he acknowledged that above all else, he was seeking God's will and not his own.

The idea that all things are possible with God means God's will or plan or purposes for this world can be combined with our prayers to God, which, we can believe, do have an effect both on us and on the God to whom we pray. God can incorporate our prayers and our actions into God's own will so that God can be affected by the prayers we offer, and we ourselves can be changed by our experience of praying. How



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us, seeking to do God's will and petitioning God with those things that are very significant to us. Our prayers may become the means by which God's will is carried out, either directly within us or by other ways.

What difference will prayer make? If God desires our prayers and uses our prayers, we never know in what ways this might take shape in our lives. We never know the people, events, or relationships that might become the means God uses to guide and direct us and to answer our prayers. Our prayers to God are not transactions to gain God's automatic favor or blessing—"We pray/God blesses." They are our open, honest expression of our concerns before God and the expression of our desire to do God's will. These prayers can make a tremendous difference in our lives since they orient us toward carrying out the will of God. So prayer does make a difference. It can change us and change God. Through prayer we find ourselves watching for the ways in which God is at work within us and in our lives everyday.

Does prayer change things? Yes, prayer changes things. Prayer is a mystery. We cannot fully understand what happens in prayer since we do not know the mind of God or even understand ourselves completely. As we've seen though, prayer is important and has a key role to play in our Christian lives since prayer changes us and changes God. So in very real ways, prayer does change things. "All things are possible" with God, said Jesus (Mark 10:27). The relationship between the divine and the human, between God and us, is also a mystery. It is also constantly changing as we live our lives. The old advice about prayer is still helpful: "Pray as if everything depends on God. Live as if everything depends on you." As we entrust ourselves to God through our prayers and then seek in all things in life to carry out the will of God as we understand it, we will find that our prayers will be answered. They may not be answered in the ways we expect, but our experience in prayer enables us to see what we might not have seen before. Prayer enables us to see ways in which God is at work in our world and in our lives. And in seeing God's work, prayer helps us find new ways of being a part of God's purposes.

can this be? We cannot explain it, perhaps, but this is where faith comes in. It is something we trust. As Jesus said of God, "For you all things are possible" (Mark 14:36).

There are a number of examples in the Bible where prayer is said to exert an influence on God. The prophet Jonah was sent to the city of Nineveh to warn its inhabitants of impending judgment. But when the Ninevites cried to God, repented of their sins, and sought God's mercy, "God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it" (Jonah 3:10).

Through the intercession of Moses on behalf of the people of Israel, God turned away from wrath and did not destroy the nation (Ps. 106:23). When the people were idolatrous, again, Phinehas "stood up and interceded, and the plague was stopped" (Ps. 106:30). When the prophet Amos begged the Lord in regard to the sinful people of his time, "the LORD relented concerning this" (Amos 7:6).

In these instances we see prayer as striving with God to change God's ways. We see a God active in this world but working in cooperation with those who pray. Prayer is a means through which God's purposes and work in this world are done. To use the theologian Karl Barth's words, God "does not will to be God without us, or to exist as such. God calls us to God's side. God summons us to make God's purposes and aims the object of our own desire."¹ This frees us to believe that prayer can *change* us, that prayer can *change* God, and that God's divine purposes can and will be done. God's will includes our prayers.

Does Prayer Change Things?

Perhaps now we can think about some of the questions about prayer posed earlier.

Does it matter that I pray? Yes, it does. If prayer changes us and prayer changes God, then sharing our joys and sorrows and requests in prayer is important. When we do, we are opening ourselves to God. We can find new ways that God may want us to act; and we are telling God what is most important to

About the Writer

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Publisher's Note

This study may also be accessed on The Thoughtful Christian Web site under the title "What Happens When We Pray?"

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 3:104.