

TRICKY QUESTIONS ABOUT PRAYER, GOD'S WILL AND FAITH.



Prayer can be many things, but it is also the main way in which we can cooperate with God in the struggle to see His kingdom come. This kind of prayer is known as intercession (literally “standing between on behalf of others”).

GOD REPEATEDLY COMMANDS US TO PRAY

“...if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” (2 Chronicles 7:14)

God has set up the universe so that talking to him affects Him and affects what comes to pass. This is because if our relationship with God is to be real, actions and communication must genuinely impact both parties.

Yet prayer raises many questions which can undermine our confidence in thinking prayer matters and turn it into a duty done by rote.

If God wants to answer why do we need to be persistent? (Our children only have to ask for things once).

How does prayer make any real difference when God already knows everything?

If God always does the best thing because it's His nature, what difference can my praying really make?

Isn't God going to do what He wants anyway?



In addition, we are used to seeing the world in terms of cause and effect, yet intercession rarely works so directly. We know too that often our prayers seem to go unanswered.

DOES GOD ALWAYS GET WHAT HE WANTS? IF NOT, WHY NOT?

If a child is ill, and people pray, but the child dies, is this because it is God's will? Jesus never suggested that suffering was God's will, or even linked to people's sin.



Yet while God's complete victory over sin and death is sure, we remain in an “in-between” world in which, when we pray, there is more in play than just God's will. These factors can restrict (at least temporarily) God's perfect will and have an impact on our intercessions.



The laws of nature. God's ability to answer intercessory prayer may be affected by the need for a stable and predictable natural world. Miracles are (by definition) therefore possible, but exceptional. God has the power to do anything, but He has created a universe which needs to work in certain ways for loving and moral relationships to exist.



Human freedom. Out of love, God has also chosen to limit Himself by respecting human freedom. God speaks of “those who carry out plans that are not mine.” (Isaiah 30:1) This means that the people we pray for do not lose their free will. While God's love can influence us, He never controls us.

The spiritual battle we cannot see. The Bible lifts the veil on a spiritual landscape which both helps but also can hinder God's mission. Early Christians understood most of suffering to be the result of this hidden conflict.



God's bigger picture. Whatever our prayer for others and the world, seeking God's will is at the heart of it. While we can have confidence that God hears us praying, no one can claim to have complete understanding of what God wants or see every aspect of the universe in the way God does.

CAN FAITH AFFECT PRAYER?

According to Jesus, faith can, to a certain extent, also be a factor involved in prayer. Jesus heals a woman of bleeding, saying, "Take heart, daughter...your faith has healed you." He then heals two blind men: "Then he touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith let it be done to you"" (Matthew 9: 22 and 29).

But if we say when for example, prayers for healing go unanswered, "It must be to do with a lack of faith" we can end up making the victim feel blamed (even though we may not intend to).



What can help?

Knowing that while faith is important in prayer it is one of many factors involved. Jesus spoke of faith as being an important principle, but not a formula. Even Jesus, who presumably had perfect faith, was sometimes unable to heal because of factors beyond His control.

Having faith cannot mean that we need to generate absolute certainty in our minds about the prayer being answered in that moment.

Neither does it mean pretending that our prayer has been answered by "claiming it in faith." Jesus prayed for a blind man who at first receives his sight back only partially. Jesus' response isn't to blame the man or tell him to act as if he has been healed, but instead to continue praying until he is fully healed. (Mark 8)

Praying in faith can be more about how we set our hope in God and His promise to ultimately heal all things, and to trust that in that hope in our minds and hearts as fully as we are able.

All the heroes of faith listed in the passage had a conviction that they were moving towards a future promise, even though they did not see them come to pass (Hebrews 11:13). This created a conviction inside them that pulled them towards it.

As Greg Boyd says, "If I pray for a person in wheelchair with faith it doesn't mean I know they will get out, it means I have a picture and a hope that this will happen. I can see them concretely being healed and I know it's God's will. This creates a desire, a conviction, which I press towards. But I know that that person will eventually get it - there are no wheelchairs in God's future. But it will not necessarily happen now."



WHEN WE PRAY FOR OTHERS WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW?

All these factors mean that when we pray, we see "through a glass darkly" and cannot see intercession as a formula (the book of Job has this as its central idea).

Jesus reassures us that God's goodness cannot be outdone - He gives fish, not stones and eggs, not scorpions and Scripture encourages us that prayer is powerful and effective.

In the light of this complex picture, the Bible gives us several principles to help us pray:

Being persistent and expectant. Having driven out a demon the disciples asked Him why they had been unable to do it. He replied, "This only comes out through prayer and fasting." (Matthew 17: 19-21) The disciples may well have said, "Well, what do you think we were doing?" Jesus was demonstrating that sometimes there is a necessity for persistent, repeated prayer in seeing change happen. Jesus told stories in which a friend wakes up another friend late at night for bread with "shameless audacity" (Luke 11:8) and a persistent widow, "to show them that they should always pray and not give up." (Luke 18).

Praying with others. Asking others to pray with us is an instinct, but also rooted in Jesus' words, "Where two or three are gathered I am there with you." (Matthew 18:20)

Being specific and general: Jesus prayed particularly for Simon, "that your faith may not fail" (Luke 22:32) and Paul encouraged general intercession: "...for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions..." (1 Timothy 2: 1-2). To pray for others is to join with God in taking responsibility and to use what God has given you.



"To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world." Karl Barth