
Praying for a Change

BY TODD EDMONDSON

Do petitionary and intercessory prayers bring about real change? We may not openly doubt their efficacy, but the adage “prayer doesn’t change things, it changes us” has become an easy escape to explain away mind-bending puzzles about prayer and to reconcile traditional Christian practice with contemporary rationality.

In *The Year of Living Biblically*, A. J. Jacobs chronicles his attempt to obey literally the principles of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures for a twelve-month period. While rigorous attention to diet, clothing, and facial hair prove to be somewhat difficult for the author, no area of his life is more radically challenged by his experiment than his attitude toward prayer. Jacobs commits to the discipline of praying three times a day, and throughout the book gives an honest account of what he perceives to be happening as he engages in this practice. On day 103 of his year, he says the following about Abraham’s prayer on behalf of Sodom, as it relates to the practice of intercession today:

It’s actually a noble, beautiful – if ultimately doomed – attempt to save the life of his fellow humans.

I’m not finished with my year, so I’m withholding judgment, but my rational side says that intercessory prayer today is no more effective than Abraham’s effort. I still can’t wrap my brain around the notion that God would change His mind because we ask Him to.

And yet, I still love these prayers. To me they’re moral weight training. Every night I pray for others for ten minutes – a friend about to undergo a cornea surgery, my great-aunt whose sweet husband died in their swimming pool, the guy I met in a Bible study class whose head was dented in a subway accident. It’s ten minutes where it’s impossible to be self-centered....

The Bible says not to boast, so I'm not going to say that I've turned into Albert Schweitzer or Angelina Jolie. But I do feel myself becoming a slightly more compassionate person.¹

A pragmatic, psychological, even therapeutic approach to the practice of intercession is what readers might expect of a writer approaching the Judeo-Christian tradition from within the mainstream of Western culture. What may be more alarming is the inescapable reality that in just three months, a self-professed, lifelong agnostic like Jacobs has arrived at a perspective on prayer that is not markedly different from that held by many longtime Christians. We have an enormous amount of trouble coming to terms with how petitionary and intercessory prayers might bring about real change. We may not openly admit to skepticism about the efficacy of prayer, but the adage "prayer doesn't change things, it changes us" has become an easy escape to explain away some of the mind-bending obstacles to our understanding of prayer and to reconcile traditional Christian practice with contemporary rationality.

When we think about the place that prayer has occupied in the Christian imagination for two millennia, however, and especially when we open the pages of Scripture, we cannot help but conclude that such a perspective, however neat and tidy it might be, is profoundly unsatisfying and contradictory to what the Church has long held to be true. The story of Abraham's pleading for Sodom is not only a story about Abraham's compassion, but also about God's willingness to listen to his servant and take his request seriously. On reading the biblical accounts of Hannah praying fervently for a son (1 Samuel 1) or of Samson pleading with God that his strength might be returned (Judges 16), we are drawn by these stories to affirm not just that these characters were somehow changed, but that events actually happened in the world as a result of their petitions.

New Testament perspectives on prayer are no less challenging to our modern sensibilities. Jesus' prayer for his followers, "I ask you to protect them from the evil one" (John 17:15b), and Peter's prayer over the lifeless body of Tabitha (Acts 9:36-42) were intended to have real consequences, external to the intercessors' psyches. Later, Paul urges the Ephesians to take their stand against the wiles of the devil, encouraging them to "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication" (Ephesians 6:18a). This exhortation is presumably designed not just to make them feel better about the struggle in which they are engaged, but to help them win that struggle. For the heroes of faith who populate the pages of Scripture, prayer was neither a therapeutic method of self-realization nor an arcane superstition useful only for propping up the traditions of the past. It was solid and real – perhaps the most solid, most real thing that they knew. So when the author of James encourages his readers to be steadfast in prayer because "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (James 5:16), the

effects he is talking about are not merely inward stirrings of the soul, but rather what we might call the “real-world” effects of prayer.

Once we decide to abandon the notion that prayer only changes us in favor of a more radical, robust, and biblical view of prayer, how do we bear witness through our words and deeds to the power of prayer? How do we keep this practice at the center of the Christian life, even in the midst of a culture that is defined by its skepticism toward what it does not understand? Addressing these questions will not be easy, for after thousands of years of faithful practice and reflection, prayer is still very much a mystery to us. Explaining away the mystery would be impossible, and probably undesirable. But we should pursue some understanding of how we believe prayer works. To do so, it may be necessary for us to reconsider how we customarily think about prayer and to recover perspectives that have been lost over the years.

HOW PRAYER AFFECTS GOD

To embrace prayer as a force for change, we must stop thinking of it as just a human action. For when we envision prayer solely as something we do, as a work of human agency, it is almost impossible not to see it as a ritual designed for our benefit, as an incantation in which only the most superstitious or simple-minded people believe. Instead, it is helpful to re-envision prayer as a relationship involving God, the world God has created, and the Church. In this way it becomes possible to see prayer as neither therapy nor superstition, but as a very powerful process through which God accomplishes his purposes and transforms reality.

The profound difficulty that looms over and shapes any serious discussion on prayer is the same one that A. J. Jacobs confronted — whether “God would change his mind just because we ask him to.”

It is imperative that we wrestle with the notion of

how prayer affects God, but we must proceed with caution. We want to avoid what C. S. Lewis calls an “agent-patient” relationship, in which God is the patient and our prayers act to manipulate or otherwise coerce God’s work.² At the same time we want to steer clear of the rationalistic extreme that posits an indifferent God who is not in any way moved by the petitions or intercessions we lay at the altar of prayer, or a system in which human

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reliance upon divine intervention, or even divine concern, is a bit of out-moded naivety.

Within the pages of Scripture we encounter a certain level of tension on the issue of how the prayers of men and women might affect God. This is probably not a surprise. On the one hand, there is Baalam's second oracle, which states "God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind" (Numbers 23:19). Or consider Samuel's rebuke to a disobedient King Saul: "Moreover the Glory of Israel [God] will not recant or change his mind; for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind" (1 Samuel 15:29). Even as Saul seeks to win back God's favor, God's resolve to reject the king still stands. This doctrine of divine immovability is challenged, however, by the story of King Hezekiah's illness. On receiving the news that he will soon die, Hezekiah prays to the Lord, and God provides a direct answer within moments through the prophet Isaiah: "I have heard your prayer. I have seen your tears; indeed, I will heal you" (2 Kings 20:5). In this story, as in others scattered throughout the Bible, we encounter a God who is not inattentive to the prayers of those he loves, but rather hears and responds when his children cry out to him.

Much of Jesus' teaching on prayer illustrates God's willingness not only to listen to the intercessions of his people, but to answer them as well. In the Sermon on the Mount when he tells us to ask, seek, and knock, we are promised that these actions will have real results (Matthew 7:7-8). When Jesus compares God to a parent willing to give good gifts to his children (Matthew 7:9-11), or contrasts God with an unjust judge who responds begrudgingly to a widow's persistent request (Luke 18:1-8), he wants us to understand that God is not indifferent to our requests. The God of Jesus' teaching does not strike us as impassible, at least not in the sense in which impassibility is commonly understood.

Certainly we do not change God with our prayers: the nature, character, and promises of God remain steadfast and eternal. However, if we see prayer not just as something we are doing, but instead pause to consider how the Triune God is involved in our prayers—the Son at the right hand of God constantly making intercession for us (Romans 8:34), the Spirit virtually praying through us "with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26)—it would seem remarkable if God the Father, by virtue of his eternal nature, foreknowledge, or providence, were somehow excluded from the process. Why should we imagine that God would be unmoved, not only by the prayers of his people, but also by the constant intercession of the Son at his right hand and the Spirit moving within his Church?

Even as it has striven to affirm the doctrines of eternal providence and the unwavering nature of God, the Church has also vigorously defended its conviction that God does respond to the prayers of the faithful, in accordance with his nature and with his promises to do so. As Augustine says, "Prayers are useful in obtaining these favors which he foresaw he would

bestow on those who should pray for them.”³ To say that God answers prayer, then, or even to say that God does specific things as a result of our prayers, is not to question God’s foreknowledge, restrict God’s freedom, or place God at the mercy of our manipulation. It is rather to say that God acts as God has promised to act – that he will hear the prayers of his people and will bestow favor upon those who ask. John Calvin, in the same manner, exhorts his readers not to use God’s foreknowledge or providence as an excuse for neglecting prayer: “Both are true: ‘that the keeper of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps’ and yet that he is inactive, as if forgetting us, when he sees us idle and mute.”⁴ Prayer, therefore, does not coerce God, but rather creates space for him to act in our lives in a manner according with his purposes.

Kelly S. Johnson helpfully compares the practices of intercessory and petitionary prayer to requesting an encore after a popular music performance:

At the end of the concert, people clap and stomp and yell for more, expecting that the best songs have been saved for the end.... The audience knows that the band hopes for this outcry. They even plan for it. Nevertheless, they wait for the audience to ask.... The cheers of the audience, which the band has worked to create, now become the cause of the band’s doing just what it wants to do, with renewed vigor – playing the best-loved piece of their repertoire.⁵

After we have encountered in Scripture and in the life of the Christian community the awesome work of God, we are moved to ask for more. And God, like a performer who rightly takes great joy in his magnificent work, is more than happy to grant our request.

When God responds to our requests by continuing his performance, this is manifest in the world around us. As God’s love is revealed, and as God delights in showing his favor to those who ask for it, the realities of the creation in which we live will inevitably be caught up in this process. Our asking for daily bread, our intercession on behalf of a dying loved one, or our pleading for the cessation of violence and injustice in this world are sanctified within the context of prayer so that they become far more than mere human requests. The prayer of petition “lifts earthly needs into the light and the love of God,” Karl Rahner observes; “these things are pulled into that movement that carries everything.”⁶ This sanctification of our burdens is a mysterious work, just as our own sanctification in Christ is a mysterious work. That God would move to act against the bodily sickness of one individual, to bring reconciliation within one wounded marriage, or to protect one of his servants facing a dangerous trial is in many ways unfathomable to us.

But if receiving the answers we seek is hard for us to understand, failing to receive those answers is even more so. The conundrum of so-called

“unanswered prayer” is among the most vexing problems that any Christian will ever have to deal with. It led C. S. Lewis to remark that “Every war, every famine or plague, almost every deathbed, is a monument to a petition not granted.”⁷ Each of these crushing disappointments, and many more besides, threatens to harden God’s people against prayer, and to bolster the rationalistic suspicion that prayer does not really change things anyway. But in the end, these disappointments do not tell us that prayer is ineffective in the “real world” anymore than Jesus’ pleading in Gethsemane or his cry from the cross proves his relationship to the heavenly Father was somehow lacking. Instead, the problem of unanswered prayer reminds us of what we already know: that like anything else worth our time, prayer is a difficult business. This is why so many of the scriptural exhortations to prayer come to us in the language of the battlefield. This is why preachers and teachers and writers on the faith from the first century to the twenty-first remind us that it is not with the weapons of this world, but with prayer, that we will overcome the principalities and powers who seek to make this world in their image.

That our prayers to God would bring the realities of this world into contact with divine purposes, or that God would join us in our this-worldly struggles, should not strike us as odd or irrational, because it is exactly what God has been doing for thousands of years. The witness of Scripture and the testimonies of many Christians assure us God has acted in amazing and wonderful ways in this world already, often in response to the requests of his people. Indeed, other methods of affecting change and other recipients of our trust—from politics to technology to military might—would seem to be far less proved than prayer, if our memories were not so short and our imaginations so easily manipulated by the kingdoms of this world.

HOW PRAYER CHANGES US

We must acknowledge that the practices of intercessory and petitionary prayer do, in fact, change those individuals who stand before God to present their requests. Nor should we diminish the significance of prayer’s effects on the Church in the fulfillment of God’s purposes in this world. If we truly believe that we are the body of Christ, and that the Holy Spirit works in us and through us, not just for our own individual benefit, but for the glory of God’s name and for the proclamation of God’s kingdom, if we accept that we have been called to be Christ’s witnesses to the ends of the earth, then it matters very much how we are transformed into worthy stewards of this vocation. Since the days when Christ first established his community of witnesses, prayer has been a necessary part of the equation. Among the tools that Christ committed to his earliest followers, prayer was the most important and effective.⁸ Jesus knew that these men and women, flawed as they were, had been commissioned to accomplish a work that they could never do on their own. If they were not constantly receiving

strength from another place and allowing that strength to flow through them and out of them, they would fail.

The congregation that desires to do the work of God in the world but fails to ground that work entirely in regular practices of prayer will find its work frustrated and ultimately fruitless. Experience tells us that work without prayer, no matter how noble or well-intentioned that work might be, is severely limited. We will be doomed to attempt only what is within the reach of our stunted imaginations and to achieve only what our meager capacities make possible. If, on the other hand, we allow those imaginations to be renewed like the man's withered hand, if we allow our capacities to be multiplied like the loaves and fishes of the Gospels, there is no end to what God might accomplish through us. Throughout Scripture and the history of the Church, the manner in which God's people have been fitted for the tasks before them has always been prayer.

But along with making us more effective workers, more equipped to do what looks like "real" work, the habit of prayer also makes us more effective at prayer. Just as with any skill, regular practice of prayer shapes us into bolder petitioners, more compassionate intercessors, more active participants in this three-fold relationship among God, the world, and the Church. As we pray, together and alone, God transforms us as believers and as communities of believers – not to feel better about our place in the world (this is not mere therapy), but to take on the mind and spirit of Christ, so that the light of God's glory can shine through us and change the world in profound and previously unimaginable ways. "When we have immersed ourselves long enough in the way of Christ," Richard Foster says, "we can smell gospel. So we ask and do as we know he would ask and do."⁹

Through the Spirit, God's presence in this world is revealed in us, and prayer is not incidental to this process.

This does not mean, of course, that any amount of prayer will make us perfectly faithful, or that any amount of time spent in earnest petition and intercession will take away our

skepticism completely. Our doubts may always plague us. One of the most humorous stories in Scripture describes an early Christian prayer meeting in the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, on the night of Peter's miraculous rescue from prison (Acts 12:6-17). When Peter shows up at the outer gate, those gathered for prayer inside immediately assume it cannot be Peter standing outside; after all, he was locked in prison! Only after he con-

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tinues to knock and then proceeds to tell them plainly what had happened do they believe that their prayers have been answered.

Even our mothers and fathers in the faith were capable, like us, of doubting that the things they prayed for might actually happen. But their doubts did not stop them from praying. They did not stop rehearsing the stories of how God answers prayer. They did not stop participating in the awesome exchange that takes place when God's people, burdened with the cares and concerns of the real world, lay their requests before their heavenly Father. For God, out of the love that is at the very center of his nature, responds.

NOTES

1 A. J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 128.

2 This is the topic of Letter IX in C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1963), 46-50.

3 Augustine, *City of God*, V.10 (New York: Image Books, 1958), 110.

4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.20.3, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), 853.

5 Kelly S. Johnson, "Praying: Poverty," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), 228.

6 Karl Rahner, *The Need and the Blessing of Prayer* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 57.

7 Lewis, 58.

8 O. Hallesby, *Prayer* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1994; original edition, 1931), 64.

9 Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1992), 195.



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