

Prayer and the Difference It Makes

By Robert Velarde

"Hear my prayer, O LORD, listen to my cry for help." –Psalm 39:12 (NIV)[i]

"Lord, teach us to pray." –Luke 11:1

"After Jesus said this, He looked toward heaven and prayed." –John 17:1

"They all joined together constantly in prayer." –Acts 1:14

*"And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests." –
Ephesians 6:18*

"Pray continually." -1 Thessalonians 5:17

Throughout the Bible, believers are called to pray. But what is prayer? What does it mean to "pray without ceasing?" And does prayer really make a difference? Before delving too deeply into the topic of prayer, it will be beneficial to first define the term, as well as the focus of our prayers—God.

Prayer and God's Nature

Let's start with the second part. In order to develop a clear idea of prayer, we must first have a clear idea of God. Biblically speaking, God is a personal being. This is critical to prayer because it means that God is a person we can interact with, that He has a will and that we are able to relate to Him on a meaningful level. If He were impersonal, then prayer would not be meaningful. If He were personal, but uncaring and distant, prayer wouldn't serve a purpose.

Not only is God personal, He is also loving (1 John 4:8, 16; John 3:16). This is also important in relation to prayer. If God were personal, but uncaring or unkind, then prayer might do us more harm than good! But God is not only loving, He is all loving (omnibenevolent). In relation to prayer, this means that God always desires the best for us because He loves us.

God is also all powerful (omnipotent), meaning that no prayer is beyond His ability to answer, "For nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). If God were less than all powerful, then we would have no assurance that He could answer or even hear our prayers.

The fact that God is all-knowing (omniscient) is also significant to the concept of prayer. If God were limited, then He would not know all that is happening in His creation. If this were the case, He might overlook our prayers because they might be beyond His knowledge. Fortunately, the Bible is clear that God knows everything (see, for instance, Psalm 139:2-4; 147: 4-5; Isaiah 46:10). In relation to God's omniscience, Jesus said, "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:8).

God is also wise and holy. He knows what is best for us, as well as what will lead us to holiness rather than sin. He is also immanent, meaning that God is active in His creation in a personal way, not only directing greater matters of history, but also involved in the life of everyone. This means that no prayer is too great for Him, but also that no prayer is too small for Him.

While we cannot explore all of God's attributes here, one final one to note, of utmost importance to prayer is God's sovereignty. God is supremely in charge of everything that happens in His universe. Nothing takes Him by surprise and nothing happens in our lives without the knowledge of God, even though we may not always understand His actions: "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the LORD. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'" (Isaiah 55:8-9).

In hearing and responding to our prayers, then, we are assured that God will do so on the basis of His many attributes. His personal nature, love, power, knowledge, wisdom, holiness, immanence and sovereignty all play a role in how we relate to God in prayer and how He relates to us.

What Prayer Is Not

Now that we have a clearer understanding of God's nature, it may be tempting to delve right into a definition of prayer. But first let's take a brief look at what prayer is not (this is by no means an exhaustive list):

- *Prayer is not magic.* We cannot summon God as though He were a genie, waiting to grant our wishes without regard for our circumstances or the consequences.
- *Prayer does not make demands.* While we can make requests of God in prayer, we dare not make demands. God is the Creator of the universe and does not take orders from us.

- *Prayer is for our benefit, not God's.* We need a relationship with God, available to us through Jesus Christ and engaged primarily through prayer, because we were made to function best when we are in a proper relationship with our Creator.
- *Prayer is not a guarantee against suffering.* "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33); "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:12-13).
- *Prayer is not an opportunity for us to show off.* "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men" (Matthew 6:5).

What is Prayer?

So what *is* prayer? Prayer is a relationship, wherein we humbly communicate, worship, and sincerely seek God's face, knowing that He hears us, loves us and will respond, though not always in a manner we may expect or desire. Prayer can encompass confession, praise, adoration, supplication, intercession and more.

In addition, our attitude in prayer is important. We must not be haughty, but humble (Ephesians 4:2; James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:6, etc.). Seen in this light, to "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17) means, in one sense, that we must always strive to have a prayerful attitude. Our prayers must come often and regularly, not from legalistic duty, but from a humble heart, realizing our dependence on God in every aspect of our lives.

The rest of the articles in this series will further explore prayer, as follows:

- "Prayer Has Its Reasons" addresses questions about why we pray.
- "The Availability of Prayer" explains how prayer is always available to us and, as such, is a wonderful spiritual resource we should turn to regularly, not just in times of crisis.
- "Learning from the Prayer Life of Jesus" explores the many prayers of Jesus, emphasizing the Lord's Prayer, as well as some of Christ's habits of prayer and how we can learn from his example.
- "Probing the Problems of Prayer" looks at some challenges and difficulties in relation to prayer, addressing questions such as, "Should we pray for our enemies?" and "If God is sovereign, why do we need to pray?"

As we journey together in understanding the nature and purpose of prayer, it is my prayer that God will bless these words and instill a joyful and fruitful prayer life in your life and mine. Prayer can make a profound difference in our world. But it is up to us to offer our prayers humbly and regularly.

The Availability of Prayer

"Prayer is an open door which none can shut," wrote Charles Spurgeon in "*Morning and Evening*." "Devils may surround you on all sides," he continued, "but the way upward is always open, and as long as that road is unobstructed, you will not fall into the enemy's hand."

Is there anywhere we can go where God is not present? Not according to the Bible. Psalm 139:7 asks, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?"^[1] In Jeremiah 23:23-24 we read, "'Am I only a God nearby,' declares the LORD, 'and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?' declares the LORD. 'Do not I fill heaven and earth?' declares the LORD (NIV)."

Prayer and God's Omnipresence

The fact that God is everywhere is known as *omnipresence*, meaning that He is present everywhere throughout His creation. This does not mean that God *is* creation, a worldview known as *pantheism*, but that God is ever-present in His creation. C.S. Lewis likened this relationship between God and His creation to that of a painter to a painting: "A painter is not a picture, and he does not die if his picture is destroyed. You may say, 'He's put a lot of himself into it,' but you only mean that all its beauty and interest has come out of his head. His skill is not in the picture in the same way that it is in his head, or even in his hands."^[2]

As a result of the reality of God's omnipresence, we are assured that no matter where we are, God will hear our prayers—even from the belly of a fish: "From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God" (Jonah 2:1 NIV). While not the most comfortable place to pray, we know that God heard the prayers of the prophet, even while Jonah was in the ocean depths.

But do we really believe that prayer is always available? If so, we must act on this truth. Nothing, then, can keep a believer from coming before God in prayer, except our own choices: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,

neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39 NIV). Prayer will always connect us to God.

Prayer Has No Barriers

In short, prayer has no barriers. Governments cannot stop it, our location cannot stop it and enemies in the spiritual realm cannot stop it.

As noted earlier, "Prayer is an open door which none can shut." But there is one way to shut it and that is when we choose disbelief over belief. Our own anxieties can stop the power of prayer, if we allow them to stifle the truth that prayer is always available to us. God is always ready to listen, no matter what our circumstances, but we must speak to Him in prayer.

In reference to the power of evangelism, the Apostle Paul wrote, "'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (Romans 10:13-15 NIV). Similarly, when we pray to God we will be heard. But how can God hear unless we pray? How can our prayers be received unless they are sent? How beautiful are the prayers of those who seek the Lord, despite their circumstances.

Prayer is always available to us, but far too often we turn to God in prayer as a last resort, not a first response.

God Wants to Hear Our Prayers

Is God too busy to hear our prayers? Is He occupied with weightier matters than our lives and troubles? Unlike the worldview of *deism*, which claims that God created and wound up the universe like a watchmaker winds a watch, leaving it to run on its own, God really cares not only about the larger scheme of the universe, but also for each person. He is not a deaf god like the god of deism, but a caring and active God. He transcends His creation, but is immanent—or active—in it. No prayer is too small for God to hear. Neither is any prayer too large for God to handle.

As Christ said, "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" (Matthew 6:26 NIV) The answer to the question asked by Jesus is that we are indeed "more valuable than they," for we are created in God's image (Genesis 1:26), "we are God's workmanship" (Ephesians 2:10), and He loves us.

An important step in receiving the blessings of prayer is to humbly and sincerely offer our prayers to God. Fortunately, we can do this anywhere and anytime, because prayer is always available to us. But we must take the initiative. If we do so, God is eager to hear us, comfort us, strengthen us, help us, and uphold us with His "righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10).

Prayer Has Its Reasons

Christian philosopher and scientist Blaise Pascal (1623-62) wrote, "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing ... " This article proposes that prayer has its reasons. Why we pray is important, as is prayer itself. What follows are twelve reasons to pray.

1. God's Word Calls Us to Pray

One key reason to pray is because God has commanded us to pray. If we are to be obedient to His will, then prayer must be part of our life in Him. Where does the Bible call us to prayer? Several passages are relevant:

- "Pray for those who persecute you" –Matthew 5:44 (NIV) [1]
- "And when you pray ..." –Matthew 6:5
- "This, then, is how you should pray ..." –Matthew 6:9
- "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." –Romans 12:12
- "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests." – Ephesians 6:18
- "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." –Philippians 4:6
- "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful." –Colossians 4:2
- "Pray continually" -1 Thessalonians 5:17
- "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone ..." -1 Timothy 2:1

Prayer is an act of obedience. God calls us to pray and we must respond.

2. Jesus Prayed Regularly

Why did Jesus pray? One reason he prayed was as an example so that we could learn from him. The Gospels are full of references to the prayers of Christ, including these examples:

- "After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray." –Matthew 14:23
- "Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.'" –Matthew 26:36
- "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." –Mark 1:35
- "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." –Luke 5:16
- "One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God." –Luke 6:12
- "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." –Luke 18:1
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3. Prayer is How We Communicate with God

Prayer allows us to worship and praise the Lord. It also allows us to offer confession of our sins, which should lead to our genuine repentance. Moreover, prayer grants us the opportunity to present our requests to God. All of these aspects of prayer involve communication with our Creator. He is personal, cares for us, and wants to commune with us through prayer.

- " ... 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 will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." -2 Chronicles 7:14
- Isaiah wrote, "He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40:29-31).

- Hebrews 4:15-16 reads, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Prayer is not just about asking for God's blessings – though we are welcome to do so – but it is about communication with the living God. Without communication, relationships fall apart. So, too, our relationship with God suffers when we do not communicate with Him.

4. Prayer Allows us to Participate in God's Works

Does God need our help? No. He is all powerful and in control of everything in His creation. Why do we need to pray? Because prayer is the means God has ordained for some things to happen. Prayer, for instance, helps others know the love of Jesus. Prayer can clear human obstacles out of the way in order for God to work. It is not that God can't work without our prayers, but that He has established prayer as part of His plan for accomplishing His will in this world.

5. Prayer Gives us Power Over Evil

Can physical strength help us overcome obstacles and challenges in the spiritual realm? No, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). But in prayer even the physically weak can become strong in the spiritual realm. As such, we can call upon God to grant us power over evil.

- "For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." -1 Timothy 4:8
- "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." – Matthew 26:41

6. Prayer is Always Available

This point is covered separately in another article. But, in short, another reason to pray is because prayer is always available to us. Nothing can keep us from approaching God in prayer except our own choices (Psalm 139:7; Romans 8:38-39).

7. Prayer Keeps us Humble Before God

Humility is a virtue God desires in us (Proverbs 11:2; 22:4; Micah 6:8; Ephesians 4:2; James 4:10). Prayer reminds us that we are not in control, but God is, thus keeping us from pride.

- "Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." –Matthew 18:4

8. Prayer Grants us the Privilege of Experiencing God

Through prayer we obtain an experiential basis for our faith. We do not ignore the intellect or reasons for faith, but prayer makes our experience of God real on an emotional level.

9. Answered Prayer is a Potential Witness

If our prayer is answered, it can serve as a potential witness for those who doubt.

10. Prayer Strengthens the Bonds Between Believers

Prayer not only strengthens our relationship with God, but when we pray with other believers, prayer also strengthens the bonds between fellow Christians.

11. Prayer Can Succeed Where Other Means Have Failed

Have all your options been exhausted? Prayer can succeed where other means have failed. Prayer should not be a last resort, but our first response. But there are times when sincere prayer must be offered in order to accomplish something.

12. Prayer Fulfills Emotional Needs

Do we need God through prayer? Yes! We were made to function best, emotionally, in a prayerful relationship with God. As C.S. Lewis put it, "God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other." [2]

Prayer, then, has its reasons, and they are many.

Learning From the Prayer Life of Jesus

Luke 11:1 reads, "One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples'" (NIV).

There's much to learn from this passage beyond the significant Lord's Prayer that follows it. For one, we learn that what sparked the unnamed disciples' curiosity to learn about prayer was the fact that he saw Jesus in prayer.

We also learn that John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray and, as a result, the disciples of Jesus were also interested in learning to pray, or at least one of them was! Isn't it interesting that out of all the disciples only one of them asked Jesus to teach them to pray? It sometimes seems the church is in a similar situation today regarding prayer. We talk about prayer, we study prayer, we say our prayers, but how many of us actually seek earnestly for God to teach us to pray?

Why did Jesus pray?

One way we can learn to pray is by looking at the prayer life of Jesus. Although the Gospels don't provide a detailed biography of Christ, they do offer captivating glimpses into His prayer life. First, however, it will be helpful to answer the question, "Why did Jesus pray?" This is sometimes puzzling for Christians. After all, if Jesus is God, why did Christ need to pray?

Theologically speaking, there are at least three reasons that Jesus prayed. First, Jesus prayed as an example to his followers. This is an example we continue to learn from, as this article demonstrates. Second, the Incarnation consists of both divine and human natures. From His human nature, it was perfectly natural for a Jewish believer such as Christ to pray. Third, the nature of the Trinity allows for communication between its members. As God the Son, Jesus could pray to God the Father.

Jesus and Prayer

Jesus prayed for others. In Matthew 19:13, we read, "Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them." Despite the fact that "the disciples rebuked those who brought them," Jesus said the children should not be hindered "for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (v. 14). In John 17:9 we

read, "I [Jesus] pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given Me, for they are Yours." This underscores the need for intercessory prayer.

Jesus prayed with others. Luke 9:28 reads, "[Jesus] took Peter, John and James with Him and went up onto a mountain to pray." Jesus prayed alone, as we'll read below, but He also knew the value of praying with others. Acts 1:14 underscores the importance of Christians praying with one another: "They all joined together constantly in prayer ..."

Jesus prayed alone. Luke 5:16 reads, "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." As much as Jesus understood the value of praying with and for others, He also understood the need to pray alone. Psalm 46:10 reads, "Be still, and know that I am God." Sometimes it's important for us to "be still" before God, but the only way to do this, especially in our hectic culture, is to do so alone with God.

Jesus prayed in nature. Psalm 19:1 reads, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." What better place to commune with our Creator than among the wonders of nature? Luke 6:12 says, "One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray..." He could have gone to a home, a synagogue or if He were near Jerusalem he could have gone to the temple to pray. But there were times when Jesus made the decision to pray where He was, which often happened to be in nature. We are surrounded by so much that is "man made" that sometimes it's difficult for us to remember that this is not our world, but God's world (Genesis 1:1, Psalm 24:1) full of wonders for us to enjoy.

Jesus could pray as a sprinter or a marathon runner. The Lord's Prayer is full of wisdom, but it is short enough to be easily memorized and serve as an example of a sprint rather than a marathon prayer. But Jesus also knew how to dedicate long periods of time to prayer. As we read in Luke 6:12, Jesus "spent the night praying to God." We, too, need to be able to offer short prayers, as well dedicate long periods of our lives to prayer.

Jesus prayed regularly. This insight is gleaned from a passage cited earlier, Luke 5:16: "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." The word "often" is not hidden, but makes it obvious that Jesus prayed regularly. Throughout the Gospels whenever we read of Jesus and prayer, it comes up regularly and naturally. It was simply a part of His worldview, integrated into every aspect of Christ's life. Can we say the same about prayer in our life?

The prayers of Jesus were heartfelt. Jesus did not pray in a cold, distant manner, but in heartfelt supplication, demonstrating empathy and a genuine love for God. This is demonstrated clearly in John 17, where Jesus prays for Himself, His immediate disciples, as well as for all believers.

Jesus prayed based on His knowledge of God and His truths. The prayers of Jesus were based on God's revealed truths and, as such, were in line with a solid biblical worldview. In John 4:24 Jesus said, "God is spirit, and His worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." He also said, "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32), underscoring the importance of truth in the life of Jesus and, in turn, our lives. Proper prayer requires us to have a truthful understanding of God and what He has revealed to us through His Word.

Jesus taught persistence in prayer. "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1). The parable Jesus shared is not meant to depict a pestering disciple who finally bugs God enough that He chooses to respond, but about persistence in prayer and waiting on God and His timing.

Jesus knew that not all his prayers would be answered as expected. This is a difficult prayer lesson to learn, but the fact of the matter is that not all our prayers are answered in ways we expect. Even Jesus knew this hard lesson as he cried out to God the Father from Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-44). Three times Jesus prayed for God to allow an easier path, but Jesus knew, "Yet not as I will, but as You will" (26:39). Unanswered prayer is such a challenge to the Christian life that we'll address the matter in more detail in another article in this series.

As You Will

When Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, "Yet not as I will, but as You will," He offered a tremendous but seemingly simple insight into prayer: God is in charge. As we learn from the prayer life of Jesus – and there is much to learn – we need to keep this overarching principle in mind. A disciple asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray," (Luke 11:1) and in response was taught the Lord's Prayer. But by studying the prayer life of Jesus, we can learn not only the important truths of the Lord's Prayer, but so much more.

Probing the Problems of Prayer

Most of us have encountered problems in our prayer lives to one degree or another. Maybe God did not answer our prayer [1]. Or we encountered a moral dilemma such as should we pray for or against enemies? Perhaps we wonder whether or not prayer is worth bothering about. After all, if everything is already going to happen according to God's will, then our prayers cannot possibly change His mind, right? While space will not allow us to go into detail on matters relating to problems and prayer, in this article we will try to probe the issues biblically and reasonably.

Should we pray for enemies?

Do our enemies deserve our prayers? The answer to this problem of prayer is easy and hard. It is easy, biblically speaking, because Christ said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ..." (Matthew 5:43-44, NIV). But this directive to love and pray for our enemies is a problem for us sometimes because our natural inclination is not to pray for our enemies. But by seeking to imitate Christ, we grow in our level of maturity enabling us to love and pray for our enemies.

Should we pray against enemies?

But doesn't the Bible support praying *against* our enemies? There are instances in the Psalms, for instance, where prayers openly ask God to defeat enemies. Biblically, we can pray for victory over enemies, but coupled with the command to love our enemies, we should not do so spitefully or out of malice. We should pray for the defeat of enemies with the right attitude – that of wanting to see God's Kingdom increase, not to satisfy our petty grudges. God is just, but He is also merciful. Therefore, praying for God's justice to prevail against enemies is right. We should also keep in mind that there are instances where our enemies are not truly fellow human beings, but "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

Prayer and Proverbs: Absolutes or Guidelines?

Many a Christian parent has lamented the fact that their adult child has not come to Christ or has chosen a dangerous path for their life. Proverbs 22:6 reads, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." But what if you do your best as a Christian parent and your child does turn from their faith?

This seeming problem in prayer has to do with how we approach and interpret the wise sayings of Proverbs. This book offers much wisdom, but it does so in a sense of providing generally true principles and guidelines, not absolute promises. Seen from this perspective, we can glean much helpful advice from Proverbs, but this advice is not intended as a guarantee.

Especially in cases of children who turn away from the faith or perhaps never embrace it. This is a matter beyond parental influence and control. Children make their own choices. As parents we can do the best we can, but ultimately we cannot make decisions for God on behalf of our children.

If we can't change God's will, why bother praying?

This is a common problem of prayer. The objection seems reasonable at first glance, particularly if we have a background in a Christian tradition that stresses God's sovereignty. If everything that happens does so within the bounds of God's perfect will, then why bother praying? This would be a powerful objection if we knew God's will perfectly. But we don't. We do know, however, that God has called us to pray and that our prayers can have a positive influence on the world and the people in it.

Also, some things are predestined by God, while others are not. The ones that are not are the ones that we can indeed influence through prayer. As Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest write, "Although prayer will not change those events that God predestined to be accomplished by his own power unconditionally, many aspects of our lives are not unconditionally determined ... Although prayer that asks God to act contrary to His nature or unconditional purposes is of no avail, our petitions in other matters have great and eternal significance." [3]

What if prayers are in opposition?

What if two people are praying for opposite results? Does God just flip a coin and decide to answer the prayer of one person, but not another? No, God is not arbitrary. In fact, if prayers are in opposition He may decide not to answer either one. But it's also possible He will answer the prayer of one person, but not the other. Why? This is a question we don't always have the answer to. We usually only see a fraction of the tapestry that God is weaving throughout history and in our lives. This is not easy for us to understand, particularly when our prayer happens to be the one that has seemingly

gone unanswered, but we can be assured that God's will has not been thwarted. He simply has other plans for us and, therefore, we must trust Him to always do what is in our best interest in the long term.

Sometimes we are the problem of prayer

Although it's difficult to accept or see, sometimes we are the problem of prayer. How? Sometimes we don't pray, we don't pray in faith, we pray wrongly, we pray for the wrong reasons or we pray out of habit rather than conviction.

In these instances, we are the problem, not God or His truths. Fortunately, this problem in prayer can readily be corrected if we will get ourselves back on the right track in our relationship with God. This involves making an effort in growing our spiritual maturity and should also involve the desire to gain a greater understanding of God through His word as well as through our relationships with others.

Every "problem" in prayer that we encounter should be seen as a challenge to help us better understand God and ourselves as we seek to solve the seeming problem. This is not something we can always do alone. As such, we must rely on other members of God's body – the church – to help us along on our journey. Likewise, we must help others as best we can, too.

Does God hear everyone's prayer – even those who follow other religions?

Does God only hear the prayers of Christians? Or of faithful Christians? What about people of other faiths? Will God hear their prayers, too? Will He answer them?

The theological answer to the question is that yes, God, being all knowing, must hear everyone's prayers. So He does hear the prayers of Christians and non-Christians alike. But hearing and answering are different matters. If God were to answer the prayer of someone involved in a false religious system, we can surmise that God would do so only if His answer would lead them closer to truth rather than closer to error.

Also, there may be instances where an adherent of another religion – or even a Christian – might attribute something to God answering prayer, but that may not necessarily be the case. It may be that a series of circumstances have resulted in what we believe to be an answer to prayer when in reality it was not. This, of course, is

difficult if not impossible to determine and should not lead us to doubt God's hand at work in our lives.

However, assuming the seeming answer to prayer is not against God's clearly revealed will, and assuming that the apparent answer leads us closer to truth and closer to God, then there is no real reason to doubt God's involvement in our lives.

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible.

[2] C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Macmillan, 1952), Book II, Chapter 3, "The Shocking Alternative."

[3] Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, *Integrative Theology, Volume 2* (Zondervan, 1990). p. 111.

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