

Does God always answer prayer? Does God always give us what we ask for? What happens to my prayer if I sin? Will God no longer hear me, or will he no longer give me what I ask? Will God always answer yes to some prayers – for example, prayers for healing? Does God in fact need our prayers? Is he in some way ignorant of our needs? If not, what is the use of telling him about them?

The subject of prayer is riddled with questions, some of them significant, some of them trivial, and some of them imponderable. As a follow-up to our special issue on prayer (Briefing #74), we'll seek to answer some of these questions over the next several issues of The Briefing.

Why pray?

Some, such as William Barclay, argue that prayer hardly needs a reason, since it is the most natural and spontaneous activity in the world. Everybody prays, at least sometime. And this is true enough. I know of a man who was aboard a ship caught in a typhoon. He prayed for God to save him, promising that he'd find out about God if God came to the rescue. God did, and he did, and now he's a Christian.

However, even though prayer may 'naturally' spring to our lips in some circumstances, in many others it does not. On the whole, prayer is extraordinarily difficult. It's not like eating or breathing. If the Scriptures are any guide, we have to be taught it, encouraged and exhorted to devote ourselves to it and labour and strive to continue in it. The word used to describe Epaphras' prayer in Colossians 4:12 is the word from which we get the English 'agonize'. This is the experience of all of us. Whenever we turn to prayer, a hundred things crowd in. Persevering in prayer is strenuous work.

The answer to our question 'Why do we pray?' depends on who we think God is and how we think we can relate to Him.

Our View of God

1 Kings 18 tells the story of the contest between two types of prayer. You no doubt know the story – the scene is Mt Carmel, and the opponents are Elijah and the prophets of Baal.

The contrast could certainly not be more stark. The prophets of Baal do all that is humanly possible to arouse the action of their 'god'. As Elijah taunts them, they slash themselves with swords and continue their "frantic prophesying" (as the NIV puts it) until evening – to no avail. Elijah prays very differently, and Yahweh answers without delay. Two different 'gods'; two very different types of prayer.

There are many views of God and they all influence the nature of prayer. The moral policeman, the substitute parent, the grand old man, the heavenly friend, the managing director, the absent designer, the pale Galilean – each view will yield a different reason for praying, and a different kind of prayer.

Two extreme views perhaps capture the mood of our community: ‘the God of the gaps’ and ‘the God of service’.

The God of the Gaps

When all else fails, when we shake our heads in amazement, when we just can’t explain it – that, according to this popular view, is where God fits in. God is the explanation for the inexplicable. The things that modern scientific knowledge can explain belong under the category ‘Nature’, but there is still a place for that strange twilight zone of the mysterious.

And in that zone God can be safely confined. Of course, as technology advances, there is less and less room for God. Even Christians can lapse into this conception of God. How many of us, when we get sick, pursue the following course:

1. Ignore it and keep going;
2. Make some concession to our mortality and take some Panadol;
3. If pain persists, we see our doctor;
4. If that fails, we resort to prayer.

Our actions speak louder than our righteous words about prayer. Our actions show that we don’t view sickness as falling within God’s sphere of influence. It is a ‘natural’ phenomenon, deserving a natural explanation and a natural remedy. We don’t turn to God in prayer right from the start because we have subconsciously adopted a ‘god of the gaps’ mentality.

The God of Service

The other extreme is just as heretical. In a book entitled Prayer: the Greatest Force on Earth, Thomas Payne muses on Isaiah 45:11.

If we rightly consider the character of the one who uttered these words we may reverently conclude that the actual authority is given for the right to believe that prayer is the one power on earth whereby we may command the Almighty, for it says in Isaiah 45:11,

“concerning the works of my hand, command ye me” (AV).

If we look at Isaiah 45:9-12 for the context of this verse, we see that God is indignant with His people for presuming to quarrel with their Maker.

“Does the clay say to potter, ‘What are you making?’”

By ignoring the context and emphasizing a quirk in the AV translation, Thomas Payne manages to extract precisely the opposite meaning from the text.

We are not urged in the Bible to go around commanding God to do this or that. God is the Sovereign, Almighty, Ruler of All. He is not some celestial lackey, hanging about to see what we will require of Him next. The God of the Bible is never approached that way.

We have outlined two rather extreme views of God that affect prayer. There are many hundreds more scattered along the spectrum. What is more, we all have a view of God that is at least slightly wrong. None of us have a perfect knowledge, and so we all have to keep applying ourselves to the Scriptures to correct our view of God.

Who, then, is this God that we claim to approach in prayer? Before we sketch some of the aspects of God's character that particularly relate to prayer, we need to make one other important point.

The Relationship Factor

As Christians, prayer is not a mechanical process. It's not as if we simply discover the right view of God from the Bible, and then with that tucked in our pocket, close our eyes and rattle off our requests. Prayer is the expression of a living relationship with God. We will deal with this subject more in coming articles, but at the outset we need to note that our prayer relationship with God involves both faith and speech. We relate to God by talking to Him, by listening to Him, by trusting His words and doing them. God is not like the dumb gods of the prophets of Baal. God speaks, and His words can be relied upon. Prayer is relating to God – talking to Him. In his book *How to Talk with God*, Stephen Windwood puts it well:

The analogy of human friendship is helpful here. Why do we talk to our friend? Not because they are useful to us, or confer benefits upon us, although these frequently are the by-products of friendship. The reward for friendship is the friend himself. We appreciate his personality, enjoy his company, his conversation, and find fulfilment and enrichment in the fellowship of giving and receiving.

Now read the following words of the psalmist and it is at once apparent that what he gets out of communion with God is quite simply God:

“Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

(Psalm 73:25, 26)

In prayer, we have the kind of relationship with God that the psalmist had. As James says:

“Come near to God, and he will come near to you.”

(James 4:8)

This is a clear word from God for us – as we draw near to God, so He will come near to us. It is never to be a one-sided relationship. And that relationship with the gracious, wonderful Creator and Redeemer of the World is the supreme benefit of prayer.

The God of the Bible

There are many aspects of God's character that we could single out, but let us look at three which relate specifically to prayer:

1. God's ability
2. His willingness and
3. His holiness

God is able

In Mark 9, the father of a boy with an evil spirit comes to Jesus, desperate for help.

“If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

“If you can?” replies Jesus. “Everything is possible for him who believes.”

(Mark 9:22-23)

In chapter 10, the disciples puzzle over the possibility of anybody being saved, having been shocked by the ineligibility of the rich young ruler. Jesus again has a reply:

“With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

(Mark 10:26-27)

Throughout the Bible, God is supremely able. This is the God Jesus prays to in Matthew 11:25, “The Lord of Heaven and Earth”, the supreme one, the one in control. It would be terrible indeed to pray to a God not in control, a God who was not quite up to dealing with sin or rescuing His people.

This is seen in his actions. He creates and sustains all that exists (Col 1:15f.). Even the fall of sparrows and the hairs on our head are within his ken (Matt 10:29-30). We need never doubt God’s ability to do anything, more even than we can ask for or imagine (Eph 3:20).

God is willing

In the first chapter of Mark’s gospel, a leper comes to Jesus to be cleansed. He says to Jesus,

“If you are willing, you can make me clean”

(Mark 1:40)

Here, the problem is not Jesus’ ability, but his intention. Is he willing to heal? Could he be bothered? Jesus compassionate reply is as simple as it is moving,

“I am willing. Be clean!”

Also notice that in the passage quoted above (Matthew 11:25), Jesus addresses God not only as the Cosmic Lord but also as his Dad. And what will a father not do for his son? If even we human fathers want the best for our children, how much more will God, the source of all fatherhood, generously give good gifts to His children (Matt 7:7- 12)?

God is holy

We have very briefly looked at two unmistakable characteristics of the biblical God— that throughout the Bible, God is revealed as willing and able to do anything for the sake of his children. Yet although we are like Him in some ways (as parents who love their children), we are completely unlike Him in others. The holiness of God has a tremendous impact on our relationship with Him. He is pure; we are riddled with sin. He is righteous and just; we are selfish and inconsistent. The biblical examples of this are too numerous to mention. Perhaps Joshua 24:18-19 will suffice. The people of Israel are adamant that they will choose to serve Yahweh and no other God, but Joshua has hard words for them:

“You are not able to serve Yahweh. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins.”

God is too pure to look on evil (Hab 1:13) and that presents a problem for human prayer. Can we imagine the revulsion God feels at the smallest of our lies, or the most insignificant (to us) example of our selfishness? How can we approach a God like this and think that we will even get near him, let alone talk with Him.

The answer to the problem, of course, is Jesus. Through his death in our place, we have access to the throne room of God (1 Pet 3:18; Heb 4:14-16). The barrier between the holy God and unholy human beings is broken down in Christ (Eph 2:18).

Why do we pray?

God's character, His actions in creation and redemption, and the relationship we have with Him in Christ – all these things allow prayer to happen. We mustn't take them for granted. Unlike the prophets of Baal, we relate to a God who speaks and acts. We know a God who is willing and able to fellowship with His children and hear our requests. He is a loving God who has created us and saved us even from His own wrath. Prayer is not the most natural thing in the world – it is a glorious privilege springing from the graciousness of God.

More than this, the God of the Bible demands prayer. As the Creator of the world, He is angry with the ungodly because they do not thank him or worship him (Rom 1:20- 21). If we acknowledge God as the Creator, then we must fall on our knees and thank Him for all His works.

In addition, His character and our relationship with Him demand that we make requests of Him. This is an important point, especially in the current spiritual climate, where asking God for things is seen as somehow rather shoddy. Asking God to act in the world gives Him glory.

It acknowledges Him for who He is – the supreme Ruler and Lord of All. When we call on Him for even our basic provisions (physical and spiritual), we express our trust in Him, our personal dependence on Him, our knowledge of His cosmic rule. We are building up a picture of the biblical reasons for prayer. With the God of the Bible, thanksgiving, supplication and fellowship are entirely appropriate. Through His character and actions, they are allowed and even demanded of us.

However, there is one final point. We are also commanded to pray (e.g., 1 Thess 5:17; Ps 50:12-50; Eph 6:18f). Despite all that we know of God, we don't pray. In our selfishness and foolish independence of mind, we forsake Him and go our own way. This is another reason why prayer is never natural – because of our sin. It will always be hard because in this life we will always be sinful. The fact that we find prayer a struggle presents problems of its own. Our longing for a better prayer life makes us a sitting target for anyone offering a new (or very old) revolutionary technique. But that is an issue for another article...