

God, Faith and the Practice of Prayer

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Final in a five-part series

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*Why do we pray in the face of natural disasters?
Can it do any real good? Can our prayers really affect God?
These questions and others are our topic for this week.*

This week's study is a bit different. I've arrayed some Scripture passages on prayer in a worksheet of sorts. In his book, *Creation Untamed*, Fretheim urges us to take a second look at the passages below and consider what they say to us about God, faith, and prayer. Below each passage, write down one central point about prayer that you get out of the verse or passage.

Exodus from 32:9-14 (NRSV)

The LORD said to Moses, ". . . Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them . . ." But Moses implored the LORD his God . . . turn from your fierce wrath . . . and do not bring disaster on your people. . . . And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Central point:

Deuteronomy 4:7 (NRSV)

⁷ For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him?

Central point:

Proverbs 15:8 (NRSV)

⁸ The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD,
but the prayer of the upright is his delight.

Central point:

Isaiah 1:15 (NRSV)

¹⁵ When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

Central point:

Isaiah 59:1-2 (NRSV)

See, the LORD's hand is not too short to save,
nor his ear too dull to hear.
² Rather, your iniquities have been barriers
between you and your God,
and your sins have hidden his face from you
so that he does not hear.

Central point:

Isaiah 62:6-7 (NRSV)

- ⁶ Upon your walls, O Jerusalem,
I have posted sentinels;
all day and all night
they shall never be silent.
You who remind the LORD,
take no rest,
⁷ and give him no rest
until he establishes Jerusalem
and makes it renowned throughout the earth.

Central point:

Isaiah 65:1-2 (NRSV)

- I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,
to be found by those who did not seek me.
I said, "Here I am, here I am,"
to a nation that did not call on my name.
² I held out my hands all day long
to a rebellious people,
who walk in a way that is not good,
following their own devices;

Central point:

Jeremiah 26:19 (NRSV)

¹⁹ Did King Hezekiah of Judah and all Judah actually put him to death? Did he not fear the LORD and entreat the favor of the LORD, and did not the LORD change his mind about the disaster that he had pronounced against them? But we are about to bring great disaster on ourselves!"

Central point:

Romans 8:26 (NRSV)

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

Central point:

By Fretheim's count, there are 97 Old Testament prayers outside of the book of Psalms and 38 of them are spoken by lay people, not prophets, priests, or kings. These prayers, often seeming more like conversation, are integral to the story of God and his people. They express the nature of their relationship. And prayer is just that . . . a relationship. Prayer isn't simply language; for Paul writes that the Spirit lifts up to God the prayers that we can't articulate. He urges believers to "pray without ceasing" (1 Th. 5:17). And the sampling of OT prayers above helps us to grasp the true depth and wonder of the relationship that God desires to have with us and for which we were made.

In these passages, we find Moses interceding with God for the rebellious people and changing God's mind. You'll find many who will argue that it can't really be that God changes his mind, at least not in anything like the sense that you and I mean. But is it really so crazy to suggest that God changes his plans and actions in response to those whom God loves. What is love if it isn't a relationship characterized by genuine mutuality?

We find a God who is present and close and who is delighted when his people pray. To no surprise, we find that our sins damage our relationship with God and that we can be in

such a state at times that God turns a deaf ear. We learn nonetheless that God is always there, ready to listen and to respond. And as you'd expect in a genuine relationship, God is deeply affected when we hurt and ready to listen, even crying out "Here I am" in the face of our silence.

Finally, the passage from Jeremiah 26 takes us to the story of Hezekiah told in 2 Kings 20:1-11. Hezekiah, king of Judah, was one of the few good kings of either Israel or Judah. Hezekiah fell ill and was near death when Isaiah, God's prophet, told him that the Lord had said Hezekiah would not recover. It was time for the king to get his house in order. In his sorrow, the king wept bitterly and prayed to the Lord, reminding God that he had always been faithful to God and done what is good in God's sight. Before Isaiah had even gotten out of the building, the Lord told him to go back to the king and tell him that he would be healed and would live another fifteen years. . . . This is the God whom we worship and with whom we pray; a far cry from the "divine mind" of Plato and Aristotle.

Can prayer really change what happens?

I considered for a while the title for this section of the study. I wanted something clear and penetrating. Too often when we talk about prayer we limit ourselves to the change prayer makes in ourselves and in our relationship with God. But there is this ever-present question as to whether prayer can actually change the course of events. We pray for a friend's recovery from illness. We pray that we and our home would be spared from a devastating storm. Then, our home is destroyed and a loved one lost. Not surprisingly, we wonder whether our prayers have any real effect at all. Or we begin to think that we prayed poorly, or lacked faith, or, worse, that perhaps there is simply no one on the other end of the line.

In his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard writes:

God's response to our prayers is not a charade. He does not pretend that he is answering our prayer when he is only doing what he was going to do anyway. Our requests really do make a difference in what God does and does not do. The idea that everything would happen exactly as it does regardless of whether we pray or not is a specter that haunts the minds of many who sincerely profess belief in God. It makes prayer psychologically impossible, replacing it with dead ritual at best. And of course God doesn't respond to this. You wouldn't either.

Part of the problem is that we fail to comprehend how God has freely chosen to work in this world. God works through us. Going back to the creation story, we were the ones tasked with filling the world and subduing it. It is a mistake to think that when it comes to life, we do part A and God does part B. Or that we "let go and let God" waiting for God to do it all. Or that we try to do it all. Rather, we do it all *and* God does it all.

If I go back to school so I can get a better job, it will change the course of the future. Not even the most rigid determinist doubts that. But when it comes to God, all of a sudden I believe that what I do (pray) is pointless and has no effect – on God or on the future.

But read again the sampling of OT passages above. They show us the truth that our prayers not only do us good, they do God good, and they can affect the course of events. God works with my hands, my intellect, *and* my prayers. Indeed, the more fully I embrace a genuine trusting and faithful relationship with God the better instrument I become for God's purposes and my own. Yes, the truth is that our friends die prematurely and storms strike. Creation remains wild, untamed, and even hostile. However, Fretheim writes:

We confess that in response to prayer (and in other ways) God is at work in these devastating effects to bring about positive results in and through human (and other) agents. But one must also speak a "Who knows?" (e.g., 2 Sam. 12:22; Joel 2:14) or a "Perhaps" (Jonah 3:9 GNT) with regard to the effect of the divine work upon specific persons and particular generations. It is not a question as to whether God wills good in the situation, but whether, given God's own self-limited ways of responding to evil and its effects in the world, what can actually be done and how and when.

John Wesley
A Prayer of Submission

My prayer life has been strengthened by reading and absorbing the prayers of others. These prayers can help to reshape the desires of our hearts. I found this prayer in a volume of the *Upper Room Spiritual Classics*. The prayer is from a collection published by Wesley in 1733, before his mission in Georgia. I've abridged the prayer and updated its language a bit.

To you, O God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, my Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, I give up myself entirely. May I no longer serve myself, but you, all the days of my life.

I give you my understanding. May it be my only care to know you, your perfections, your works, and your will.

I give you my will. May I have no will of my own. Whatsoever you will, may I will, and that only. May I will your glory in all things, as you do, and make that my end in everything. May I ever say with the Psalmist, "*Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.*" May I delight to do your will, O God, and rejoice to accept it. Whatever threatens me, let me say, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him." And whatever befalls me, let me give thanks, since it is your will.

I give you my affections. Dispose of them all. Be my love, my fear, my joy; and may nothing have any share in them . . . What you love, may I love; what you hate, may I hate . . .

I give you my body. May I glorify you in it, and preserve it holy, fit for you, O God, to dwell in. May I neither indulge it, nor use too much rigor toward it; but keep it, so far as I am able, healthy, vigorous, and active, and fit to do you all manner of service.

I give you all my worldly goods. May I prize them and use them only for you. May I faithfully restore to you, in the poor, all that you have entrusted to me, above the necessities of life. May I be content to part with them too, whenever you may require.

I give you my reputation. May I never value it, but only in respect of you; nor endeavor to maintain it, but only as it may serve and advance your honor in the world.

I give you myself and my all. Let me look upon myself to be nothing, and to have nothing, apart from you. Be my sole governor; be my portion and my all.

O my God and my all, whenever I am tempted to break this solemn promise, when I am pressed to conform to the world and to the people and customs that surround me, may my answer be: "I am not my own. I am not for myself, not for the world, but for my God. I will give God the things that are God's. God be merciful to me a sinner."

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In *The Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg observes that too many people resort to prayer only when they are desperate. In normal circumstances they are happy to make do with their own resources and abilities. Have you ever been a desperation-only pray-er? What do such desperation-only prayers reveal about our view of God, prayer, and ourselves?
2. Is there a time that a prayer of yours showed clear and immediate results? What was it like to experience such an answer? Was your request answered as you hoped it would be or were you surprised? How did things work out?
3. Fretheim's claim is that the Bible reveals that our prayers can change the future. You can influence God to do something that God would not have done without your prayer. Do you really think this is so? Is it just too hard for you to believe that God would pay that much attention to what you say? If it is hard for you believe, what do you do with these stories of Moses, and Hezekiah? What really makes them so different from you? Dallas Willard says if we don't believe that our prayers make a real difference, then it is psychologically impossible to pray as we should. What do you think he means? Do you agree? How can we strengthen our confidence that God not only listens to us but responds with both compassion and action?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Genesis 18:16-33 Abraham negotiates with God by holding God to the standard of justice and righteousness. What does this story about the relationship between Abraham and God?</p>	<p>Tuesday, Exodus 32 The story of the golden calf. Moses prays for the people and God changes his mind, taking a different course forward.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 2 Kings 20 King Hezekiah is told by the prophet Isaiah that he will die of his illness. But the king prays and God changes his mind.</p>	<p>Thursday, Isaiah 65:1-7 The people have lamented over their troubles and God has been there ready to listen and to respond. But they have turned elsewhere for help. You can sense God's disappointment and righteous anger at being ignored by his own people.</p>
<p>Friday, Romans 8:28-39 Prayer is relationship. It nourishes and supports and expresses a deep and abiding relationship that nothing can break.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

