

Got Questions? Does Prayer Effect God?

Exodus 32:7-14; 1 John 5:14-15

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Sitting on the side of your bed...sitting in traffic...laying down to go to sleep at night...in a quiet place in your home...you think about a situation in your life that is beyond your control. As you think about it, and your emotions get revved up, you decide the best thing to do is pray about it. So you do. You pray. The next day you pray the same prayer again, and the next day again.

Slowly you get the idea that you haven't had an answer. What's going on? I'm a compassionate person. I'm praying for somebody else...not for a car for me. Why is this not working the way I thought it was supposed to? Is God listening?

That type of questioning is not unique to you. All you have to do is look around the room and you'll see plenty of other people who have asked the same questions. So what's the deal with prayer?

There are really two parts to that question:

1. What is involved in my act of prayer?
2. Do my prayers have any effect on God's actions?

In the Gospel of Luke, just following the passage where Jesus teaches the disciples the Lord's Prayer, we find the following:

Luke 11:5-10

Then, teaching them more about prayer, he used this story: "Suppose you went to a friend's house at midnight, wanting to borrow three loaves of bread. You say to him, 'A friend of mine has just arrived for a visit, and I have nothing for him to eat.' And suppose he calls out from his bedroom, 'Don't bother me. The door is locked for the night, and my family and I are all in bed. I can't help you.' But I tell you this—though he won't do it for friendship's sake, if you keep knocking long enough, he will get up and give you whatever you need because of your shameless persistence.

"And so I tell you, keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

The parable highlights that if perseverance can make a difference in dealing with other people, how much more in our relationship with God.

However, while it may take a lot of persistence to get anything out of another person, God is more than willing to answer prayers. (The question remains...why pray?)

Whether your prayer is on behalf of another person (intercession) or is about something you would like to have happen (petition), prayer is an act of exploration. When we pray we are ultimately seeking to discover God's will and submit to it so that it may be our own will, too.

I like one commentator who suggested that the experience of praying can often be an experience of desperate struggle – like Jacob's wrestling match with the angel by the Jabbok River. Jacob's struggle was not only with God, but with himself.

When we speak the same words over and over again, it is not to persuade God, but to challenge ourselves as we seek to overcome pride, selfishness, or indifference to the will of God.

Think about the idea of perseverance. On the surface we think of it as doing something over and over again – as in the saying "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, again."

But there is a subtlety to the practice of perseverance. If we are truly persevering toward a goal that we initially missed, then inherent in the future acts are changes from the initial act.

Perseverance in prayer is no different.

As we persevere in our prayer, our prayer must change as the Spirit leads us toward the will of God.

There is blessing that God wants to give, but we must ask for it. However, we cannot ask with wrong motives (e.g., selfishness, worldly desires, desires not based in seeking God's will)

James 4

You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives....

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.

Ask, seek, knock is not just about perseverance...it is about moving out of our own sphere of desires into God's.

Think about the progression:

We are to *ask* for what we think we want.

Then we are to *seek*. Seek what? Seek God's will – discerning whether ours matches up with God's. We want to place the knocking with the asking, but it really goes with the seeking. We want to knock on the right door, so we need to spend time seeking it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Over time, as we pray, the Holy Spirit will change our prayer essentially leading us to the proper door...we know this is true because the scripture says that whoever seeks, finds.

The proper door on which to knock is the one in which the will of God resides.

What about the question: Can we change God's mind with prayer?

The Bible contains stories that seem to indicate a person's prayers changed God's mind.

For example,

Moses' intercession on behalf of the Israelites in Exodus. They had made the golden calf and God's anger burned against them. God suggested that He would destroy them all and start over with Moses. But Moses reminded God of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...and God relented.

Does God change His mind as a result of man?

A part of the character of God is that God is immutable, or unchangeable, with respect to his will. However, we must never mistake "immutability for immobility," as if God were some stoic being unable to be affected by anything in any way. God created people, and He has chosen to enter into relationship with us, to be affected by our choices and actions, by our obedience and disobedience.

As I study scripture what I have found is that God's ultimate plan does not change. However, it appears as if He is willing to alter a present course...so long as it does not interfere with the accomplishment of His ultimate purpose. Listen in the following passage from Ezekiel for how God changes what God has planned based on the actions of people.

Ezek 33:13-16

When I tell righteous people that they will live, but then they sin, expecting their past righteousness to save them, then none of their righteous acts will be remembered. I will destroy them for their sins. And suppose I tell some wicked people that they will surely die, but then they turn from their sins and do what is just and right. For instance, they might give back a debtor's security, return what they have stolen, and obey my life-giving laws, no longer doing what is evil. If they do this, then they will surely live and not die.

It is evident that God is willing to alter planned actions based on our response. Author, Lance Hartman, explains God's acts in the Exodus passage in which Moses intercedes for the Israelites. I will let his words speak for themselves, because I can't improve upon them.

Rather than allow Moses to come down off the mountain and see what's going on, God initiated a dialogue with him about the scene below (vv. 7-8). After describing the mayhem in the valley, God said, "Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation" (v. 10). Moses responded by entreating the Lord with such effectiveness that by verse 14 we read, "Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened."

What's going on here? Did Moses point something out to God that He had overlooked or forgotten? Did he display sounder wisdom in this situation than God was displaying? Had anger clouded God's perception of things?

Surely not! Remember, it was God who brought the situation to Moses' attention. Before Moses speaks a word, we hear God saying, "Now let me alone . . ." Don't you find that curious? Not when you consider this was God's way of inviting Moses to enter into the situation on behalf of Israel.

Sin always evokes from God the holy response of wrath. (It's a shame it doesn't do the same in us.) For God to act any other way would be to compromise His character. Just as "the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men" (**Ro. 1:18**), and God provided a mediator to intercede on our behalf [in the person of Jesus Christ] (**Ro. 3:23–24**), so also God invites Moses to step in the gap for His people.

You see, Moses never changed God's mind. Instead, God brought Moses to a place where he wanted the very same thing that God wanted. The Messiah was to come from the house of Judah, not the house of Moses, and destroying all Israel would have also destroyed this promise.

God wanted to include Moses, His servant, in accomplishing His plan. As a result, Moses drew even closer to the heart and mind of God. God did not change through Moses' prayers; He embarked on a different course of action based on Moses' proper response. And this action was entirely in keeping with His unchanging nature—with what He had always intended to do.

Picture this: A few years ago, my family just took a trip to New England for vacation. One day we decided to travel through southern Vermont to see some covered bridges, maple sugar houses, etc. We knew what we wanted to see and we knew we needed to end up back at our hotel that evening. Sarah – our planner – laid out a course for the day's travel. Part way through the day we decided to change our course. It was okay to do that because we still saw the sites we wanted to see and we still got home.

If you can take that very simple example and apply it to God's purposes and how our prayers affect God, then you can see that God is unchangeable with respect to His big picture. But He seems to be willing to allow for deviations along the way based on the prayers of His people...provided those prayers are a reflection of the God-likeness within us.

Theologian, John Howard Yoder:

Why prayer? Because it lifts man from being an observer in God's arena to being a participant. He does not idly watch God's will being done in history; he earnestly seeks it. He asks for each need and praises for each victory. In prayer we see God near His *humblest* point: He allows men to do what He could do so easily. In prayer we see men at their *highest* pinnacle:

bringing fire from heaven, raising the dead, feeding the hungry, winning lost souls, and learning to fellowship with their Maker. In God's goal of discipling men, nothing is more effective than prayer.

What good are your prayers?

They are the means through which the grace of God becomes known to you, and that grace extends to others as you intercede on their behalf.

Through prayer we grow more like Christ.

Yes, God hears your prayers. Maybe the better question is: Are you listening to God's Holy Spirit? Keep praying, being led by the Spirit, and you will keep growing deeper in your relationship with the Lord.