

Does God Answer Prayer?

When I was a divinity student, I attended a conference on prayer sponsored by the Diocese of Toronto, Canada. The conference was slow moving until one priest exploded, “What I want to know is, do we believe anything happens when we pray? If so, what?”

Here is a question that has tested Christians for two thousand years: Does God answer prayer?

C.S. Lewis tells the story of a woman whose thighbone was eaten through with cancer. It took three people to move her into bed. The doctors predicted a few months of life. The nurses, who knew better, a few weeks. A priest came to her bedside, laid hands on her and prayed. A year later the patient was walking and the man who took the last X-ray photos was saying: “It’s miraculous.”

On the other hand, I know priests who are unable to pray specifically for the healing of persons who are seriously ill. They pray for deliverance from too much pain, strength to bear suffering, guidance for doctors, or support for loved ones. But not for outright healing. As one priest told me, “I have prayed for the healing of too many who had died.”

This then is the issue: Are we to believe anything happens when we pray? If so, then what?

Perhaps we can answer that question by asking another question. What precisely are we doing when we pray for our own needs and those of others? We are making a request. The essence of request, as distinct from compulsion, is that it may or may not be granted. In Gethsemane Jesus prayed three times that a certain cup might pass from him. It did not. So prayer is not an infallible gimmick. It’s not magic. The God who may say “yes” to our request may also say “no”.

And that is the difficulty, isn’t it? God’s “no” is hard to accept. We see the justice of a situation and wonder why God doesn’t respond as we think appropriate. How do we keep our faith in God when our prayer seems to go unanswered?

Journalist Terry Anderson was held hostage in Lebanon from March 16, 1985, until December 4, 1991. He was kidnapped by Hezbollah and held captive for nearly seven years. It was a grueling experience for him. Terry was given a Bible in which he was particularly drawn to St. Paul who struggled with unanswered prayer. Through Paul's struggles, Terry grew closer to Christ and renewed his trust in God. He concluded that prayer is not always answered as we might like. "I'm not sure anymore," he wrote, "that it is even right to ask for anything, except patience and strength to endure whatever comes, and help in understanding."

I am not sure Terry Anderson is right on his view of prayer, but I understand his point, especially when we pray for something that does not happen.

Do you remember what Isaiah says about God's ways? "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways, says the Lord" (Is. 55:8). There is a mystery here – a mystery to be lived rather than understood. Prayer that is truly prayer – prayer as both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament understand it – always begins in a spirit of humility: the acknowledgement that we are not God and therefore cannot presume to tell God what to do or when to do it. Yes, we can and should make our requests known to God, but we must never presume to demand that God give us what we want, when we want it.

One of the most common tendencies among some Christians today is to trivialize prayer by asking not for God's will to be done, but for our own ego preferences to be satisfied. God becomes the agent of the American dream: the guarantor of the good life – a sort of divine insurance policy against anything bad happening to us. The result is that many of us, unwittingly, have bought into the "health and wealth gospel" in which we give God our prayers and God gives us prosperity; we give God homage and God gives us health; we give God praise and God gives us success. But if the health and wealth gospel were true, then Jesus would never have been crucified.

Former New York Yankee manager Joe Torre recently celebrated his 85th birthday. Joe Torre is a man of deep faith. When the New York Yankees competed against the Boston Red Sox in a playoff series held in Boston, Joe Torre did what he always does on Sunday, he attended Mass at a local Roman Catholic church. After the Mass, Joe went to a side altar to light a candle and say a prayer – something he frequently does. A die-hard Boston Red Sox fan recognized Joe and said to him, "I hope you're not praying for

those Yankees to beat us in the game today.” Joe looked at the man and replied, “Sir, I never pray about winning baseball games. There are lots of more important things to pray for.”

Joe Torre refused to trivialize prayer. After all, if he prayed that the Yankees would win, he would also be praying that the Red Sox should lose. But does God really take sides in baseball, or in any sports game for that matter? The real question in prayer is not whether God is on our side, but are we on God’s side?

Abraham Lincoln understood that even where seemingly clear-cut issues are at stake, we need to be very careful about assuming which side God is on. During the Civil War Lincoln wrote these words in his diary: “I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that all about me seemed insufficient for the day.”

St. Paul, like Lincoln, struggled with the purposes of God regarding his persistent health issues. Since Paul was doing God’s work, why did not God answer his prayers and heal him? Instead God told him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Co. 12:9).

Paul understood that every prayer is an act of trust in the mystery of God’s ways. Just as all true prayer begins in humility, so no true prayer is possible without trust. And trust means that in the end, after we have made our request, we leave the matter in God’s hands. That’s why the most perfect ending to prayer are the words, “Thy will be done!” Prayer is desiring to be in God’s will; it is not demanding God to do our will.

Here are two principles to keep in mind as we pray.

First, our prayers make a difference. The Bible witnesses that when we pray for others, God may do for us what God might not have done but for our prayers. In other words, God can be moved by our prayers to affect the lives of those for whom we pray.

Look at Abraham in today’s lesson from Genesis. He literally bargains with God to save the people of Sodom. The remarkable thing about his prayer is that he manages to change the conditions on which God would destroy the

city. If there are 50 just people in Sodom, God would agree to spare the city. If there are 40...or 30...or 20...or 10... God would spare the city. Amazing, isn't it, how Abraham gets God to change his mind – not once but five times!

Prayer makes a difference, not just in world affairs but in our own personal relationships. There is a great truth that good people are as salt preventing surrounding corruption.

In college one of my friends was a Puerto Rican who grew up in El Barrio – Spanish Harlem in New York City. At that time the neighborhood was festering with gangs. Violence and drug use were part of the landscape. The school drop-out rate was one of the highest in the city. Amidst the tenements and the garbage-littered streets, my friend managed to get a first-class Catholic school education, go on to college and then graduate school at Yale University where he earned his doctorate. He then taught philosophy, first at Rutgers University, and then at the University of Notre Dame. If you ask my friend how he managed to rise from the slums to become a university professor, he will tell you this: “My mother was a devout Catholic. She prayed for me and with me every day. More than anything else, it was her prayers that protected me from all the pitfalls of life.”

Prayer makes a difference! That's the first principle. The second principle complements the first. Unless we pray, nothing else we do as Christians will succeed. We cannot be peacemakers or agents of justice if we first are not down on our knees in prayer. We cannot convert a secular world or be faithful witnesses of God's love unless we ourselves are saturated in prayer. We cannot be effective in Christian ministry – whatever that ministry might be – unless we are first engaged in prayer. Without prayer, no ministry, however well managed or well financed, can hope to succeed.

As your Interim Rector, I have observed two distinctive things about Advent Church. The first is that you like to eat. Your meals after Sunday worship services are exquisite. You are a generous church that feeds stomachs as well as souls. That may be obvious to you.

But there is another distinctive about Advent: you are a praying church. Every meeting begins and ends with prayer. Above all else, Advent is a praying church – a church that takes prayer seriously and practices it, day-in and day-out throughout the year. Without the centrality of prayer, I don't

think this church could be as open, loving and all-embracing as we are. Without prayer I doubt whether we would have had so many need-meeting ministries over the years. Or that the hearts of our people would be so generous and compassionate to human need.

Yes, the first prerequisite for Christians is to be faithful to Christ, but the second is to be faithful in prayer. The temptation is to make prayer an after-thought – the first thing to go when our schedules get tight. However, if we get our priorities right, prayer needs to be at the top of our list. If we are too busy to pray, then we might as well be too busy to be Christians – for what else is the Christian life but living in the awareness of God’s presence and power in our lives?

Martin Luther once admitted, “I am so busy now that I find if I did not spend two or three hours each day in prayer, I could not get through the day.” And John Wesley echoed Luther when he declared, “I have so much to do that I must spend several hours in prayer before I am able to do it.”

Luther changed the course of Europe by beginning the Protestant Reformation. Wesley changed the course of England by being a central figure in the Great Awakening. Yet the foundation for both men’s ministries was prayer. Never be too busy to pray!

Ask yourself: How seriously do I take prayer? How faithful am I in daily prayer? Do I pray before making any major decision? Is prayer an integral part of my life? Do I pray with a humble heart and a trusting spirit, recognizing like Isaiah that God’s ways are not our ways? Do I pray because I need to pray? Yes, I need the life of God in my own life, no matter what else happens by my praying. There is no better time than today – right now – to commit to a disciplined regiment of daily prayer.

The time and way in which our prayers will be answered are matters we leave entirely up to God. But we can be confident that every prayer we offer in faith will certainly be answered. The answer may be “yes” or “no”. It may be more than we asked, or it may be something we didn’t ask for at all. But an answer will surely come; we have God’s word for it.

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