

Does Prayer Change Things?

Millions of plaques have been sold and hung on millions of walls with the short saying: “Prayer Changes Things.” But is that true? Does prayer make any difference? Many of us would be quick to say, “If prayer doesn’t change anything, why bother praying? Isn’t change the whole point of prayer?”

Before attempting to answer the basic question, let’s just think for a moment about prayer in general. Prayer is communion with God. Prayer is communication within relationship. Change is not primarily what prayer is about. Prayer is mostly about love and relationship with God.

Think of it this way. Imagine a man and a woman who meet each other and start going out together. At a party in his apartment she sees a plaque on the wall that says, “MARRIAGE CHANGES THINGS.” She laughs at first but then she asks him what it means. He says, “There are a lot of things in my life that I don’t like, that need changing. I drink too much, I’ve got a lot of debt, I’ve been fired from my job again and all of the women that I have any kind of relationship with in my life are all mad at me, even my mother. I want to get married in order that all of those things can be changed, so that I can have what I want and be happy.”

The woman can’t believe what she is hearing and says, “What if marriage won’t change the things you want changed?”

He replies, “Why would I bother to get married if marriage wouldn’t change the things I want changed?”

If she’s really smart she’s out of there. She’s gone. As attractive as he may have seemed at first, she wants a husband who marries her because he loves her, because he wants to be with her, because of their relationship — not because he wants changes.

Well God has feelings too! It can’t be very pleasing to him if we think of prayer and a re-

lationship with him most of all in terms of what we can get fixed in our lives. It is true that changes do come from a personal relationship with God and that prayer is an important means, but that is quite secondary to what prayer is about. How often God must think to himself, “I want people to love me just for me. I want people to pray just because of the relationship that we have together, not because of what I can do or what I can give.”

Prayer is primarily about God and not primarily about change. When we understand that we’re ready to tackle the question, “Does prayer really change things?” by breaking it down into four parts.

Our first consideration is: does prayer change God? There’s an interesting story in the Old Testament in II Kings 20:1-6 about a king in Israel who was diagnosed as being in the later stages of a terminal illness. He did what most

of us would probably do — he prayed desperately and wept for God to help him. The story goes like this:

In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah, son of Amoz, went to him and said, “This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.”

Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, “Remember me, O Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and done what is good in your eyes.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the Lord came to him, “Go back and tell Hezekiah, the leader of my people, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now you will go up to the

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temple of the Lord. I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city for my sake and for the sake of my servant, David.’”

This is not a guarantee that when any of us walk out of the physician’s office with the diagnosis of a terminal illness that we will get fifteen years added to our lives because we turn our heads to the wall and pray a prayer like Hezekiah’s. But in the case of Hezekiah that is exactly what God did. The same God who gave the first prognosis of impending death to Hezekiah is the God who changed the prognosis to fifteen more years of productive life. The answer seems clearly to be that prayer changed God

But the theologians among us are quick to object. What about Malachi 3:6, “I the Lord do not change” — what about the immutability of God? It is here that we cross over a line into the mysteries of who God is and how things work for God. We have enough trouble figuring ourselves out, a lot more trouble figuring other people out, much less understanding and figuring out God.

Some would say that God planned it all and knew both what we would ask and what his answer would be. Others think that God chose to leave some options open and dependent on whether or not people ask. It’s as if people who pray get option A and people who don’t pray get option B. Or there are those who look across this line to the mysteries of God and say that God doesn’t change; we change

The truth is that we don’t know exactly *how* it works. We do know *that* it works. People pray and God acts in ways that from our point of view look as if God is the one who is doing the changing.

I think that Hezekiah probably did not analyze the intricacies or the mysteries of God. He simply looked at what had happened and said, “It worked. I got one message from God and I prayed and I got a different message from God and I like the second one a whole lot better!” From Hezekiah’s point of view, prayer does change God.

Our second consideration is: does prayer change circumstances? Once again look at Hezekiah’s experience. His circumstances changed from sickness to health. The Bible gives many other examples as well. Look at James 5: 16-18:

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and one half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

The clear teaching of the Bible is that when righteous people pray, circumstances change because the prayers of righteous people are powerful and effective. When Elijah prayed the circumstances changed.

I read that and I have a flashback to an experience I had once. I stood with a farmer next to his tractor in a muddy sugar beet field in Colorado. It was getting late into the fall and it had rained for days. The forecast was for more rain. Harvest was impossible. He and I stood there in the mud and prayed that God would intervene and stop the rain. I went home and that evening the Denver television weather forecaster said that the weather system that was coming through stopped short of us and there would be dry weather and sunshine until the system started moving again.

“Coincidence!” some would say. Perhaps. Although I like the statement that an English archbishop once said, “It’s amazing how many coincidences there are when people pray.” Does God change circumstances when we pray? The Bible says, “Yes. He does.”

Well, what about people? Does prayer change other people? Some of the most impassioned prayers are called intercessory prayers. Intercessory prayer is when one person prays for change in another person. The examples are many. It’s when a parent prays for a prodigal daughter or son. It’s a husband praying that his wife will change her mind and come back to the marriage or a wife praying for her husband,

that he will not follow through on the threatened suit of divorce. It is the child that prays for the sick parent to be made well and not to die. They are the prayers for churches and for companies and for countries. My guess is that if you added them all up, God listens to billions of intercessory prayers every day.

Does it work? Let's look at James 5:13-15:

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.

Here the Bible is obviously saying, "Yes! Prayer does change others." In fact, there are commands in the Bible for us to pray for God to change others. I've witnessed and experienced both the prayers and the changes in others.

But we must be careful that we do not adopt some notion that says that our prayers will overrule the sins and the choices of another person. In the verses we read from James 5, it's the sick person who wanted to be made well and therefore requested the prayers of others.

God allows people to make bad choices and to sin. That means that if another person chooses to murder or to abuse we cannot force that person through our prayers not to sin. God allows them to choose even through their choices may do terrible damage to themselves and others. We certainly can pray to God and ask him to put on the pressure through circumstance and conscience, but he still leaves the choice up to each individual.

The city of Saint Augustine, Florida, is named after a man named Augustine who ran away from God sixteen hundred years ago. He was a man who was given to misconduct, to prolific sexual promiscuity. He ran away from his family and he ran away from God. He knew what he was doing, and he did it intentionally.

Augustine had a Christian mother who prayed often for him for years. She wept in her prayers. When he left his home town in North Africa she even went down to the dock and prayed that he would not leave, pleading with him not to go. He ignored her pleas. He chose to do everything contrary to her prayers, until one day he made a choice of his own to turn to Jesus Christ and give up his sinful way of life. I believe that God answered his mother's prayers to change him. Augustine also chose for himself the pursuit of God.

On the other side of our country on the West Coast the city of Santa Monica, California, is named after Augustine's mother, Monica. The sparkling of the light on the ocean reminded the early settlers of Monica's tears as she wept and prayed for her son and so they named the city Santa Monica.

Does prayer change others? Both the Bible and our own experience say, "Yes."

But there's a fourth and a final question that is usually the least asked, and that is "Does prayer change me?" In practical terms, I suppose it's the most important question of all.

Jesus believed the answer was yes. The night before he was crucified he interrupted his own prayer to spend a few moments with his three best friends. He told them they should watch out and pray so that they don't fall into temptation. It's as if Jesus pictured life as something like a battle-field with bullets whizzing through the air and land mines buried under the surface. He was

warning his friends that there are temptations that can blow your life apart if you give in to them. He was saying that praying for ourselves is the best protection.

Here's how I look at prayer and me. When I pray it is not to change God to do things my way, it is to change me to do things God's way.

It's like taking your car in for a wheel alignment. All the driving, turning, bumps and potholes throw the wheels out of alignment with the car's frame. The technicians don't bend the

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frame to line up with the wheels; they adjust the wheels to line up with the frame. Every day I need to be realigned with God — my thoughts with his thoughts, my will with his will, my life with his life. Yes, prayer changes me.

Before leaving the question “Does prayer change things?”, I want to add on four end notes. The first one is that when praying, let us center on Christ and not on the change — because if we get change without Christ, it’s not worth having. Christ without change is impossible. So seek the Christ more than the change in order to get the best of both.

A second end note is to remember that prayer is relational, not mechanical. Too often we apply a mechanical model to the things the Bible says. For example, when a person is sick and asks the elders to anoint him with oil and to pray for healing, I’ve seen situations where people have gotten well very quickly, and I’ve seen other situations where they haven’t. Then we wonder why it didn’t work. But that’s the way machines work, not relationships.

When I push the elevator button I expect it to come — it’s a mechanical thing. But people are not like that. Saying “Come” to a husband or wife is seldom a good approach. Because it’s a relationship! Relationships include time, intimacy, reconciliation and much more. And that’s what prayer is like. Don’t think that we just go and push God’s button and get what we want. It’s couched in the context of who we are and who he is and how we are related together.

A third end note is to understand that the answers from God come in “yes,” “no” and “later.” Understand that God is God and that it is he who chooses who and how and when to answer prayers for change.

The fourth and last end note is to remember that God delights to give us good. He is our father in heaven, who encourages us to ask, who wants to bring about good changes.

Jesus uses this example: “Picture a family sitting around a table. The son says, ‘Dad, would you pass the fish?’ What father would then take a plate of snakes and pass them instead? Or if the son says, ‘Dad, could I have an egg, please?’, what father would substitute a scor-

pion that would sting the son that he loved?” That doesn’t make sense. Jesus says, “If you understand that, you’ll understand that God the father never gives us something to injure us or hurt us; he delights to give us good.”

God is better than the best of human fathers. He does not trick us. He will not harm us. He never seeks to give us evil. He is a wonderful father who delights to give us good.

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