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The Purpose of Prayer

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## **Introduction: Why Pray?**

Prayer is widely recognized by Christians as an important aspect of a healthy relationship with God. However, logical difficulties arise in any attempt to explain why prayer is necessary. Humans certainly cannot tell God anything He does not already know. Surely God will do what He wants regardless of human requests, and He does not always answer those requests, so why ask Him anything?

There are examples of prayer throughout Scripture, and numerous commands for Christians in the New Testament, but never a complete explanation of how prayer works. A proper understanding of this important aspect of Christian life requires an examination of scriptural references to prayer in order to assess the theological and practical implications of various interpretations.

For the purpose of this paper, prayer may be defined as any communication from man to God. While there are multiple types of prayer found in Scripture, the focus here will be specifically on petitionary prayer, which involves a request to God with the expectation that He will respond. The theological issues involved center around the question of free will and God's providence: Is it possible for God to be affected by human requests? If so, what are the implications regarding His power and knowledge? If not, what is the purpose of prayer?

## **Prayer in Scripture**

### **Prayer in the Old Testament**

Interestingly, while prayer plays a significant role in the Old Testament, commands to pray are not found in the law, nor is there an explanation of what prayer is or why people did it. However, throughout Scripture there are examples of God's people praying with confidence that

God would hear them. Even without considering the Psalms and other songs of praise to God, there are many examples throughout the Old Testament of prayers of praise, thanksgiving, confession, lamentation, and petition, which includes intercession. Abraham and Moses are two examples of men who pleaded with God on the basis of what they knew of His character, and He was pleased to answer them (Gen. 18:25; Ex. 14:18-19). The implication seems to be that communicating with God in these various ways is the appropriate response to a right understanding of who He is.

Ap-Thomas defines petitionary prayer in the Old Testament as “a request to God with regard to a specific unsatisfactory state of affairs affecting the pray-er, which has been caused by, and so is remediable by Yahweh, at His discretion.”<sup>1</sup> The understanding seemed to be that God was ultimately responsible for all that affected His people, whether good or bad. They were either obedient and prosperous or guilty of sin and subject to discipline, whether individual or corporate. Throughout the Old Testament there is unquestioning confidence that God is in control of every situation. Amos 3:6 affirms this in the rhetorical question, “Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?”<sup>2</sup>

Since the Old Testament treatment of prayer is more descriptive than prescriptive, it cannot be the sole basis for forming a theology of prayer. Referring to the tension between predestination and free will, Lemke states, “the polytheistic context of the Old Testament made it

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<sup>1</sup> D. R. Ap-Thomas, “Some Notes on the Old Testament Attitude to Prayer,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 9, no. 4 (December 1956), 423, accessed November 15, 2019, Atla Religion Database with AtlaSerials PLUS.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture references are from ESV unless otherwise noted.

imperative to emphasize God's sovereignty and monotheistic uniqueness rather than secondary causes."<sup>3</sup> As we will see below, the New Testament focuses much more on human responsibility.

### Prayer in the New Testament

Jesus builds on that foundational understanding of prayer in the New Testament and makes communication with God more relational. Not only does He lead by example in showing the importance of communion with God (Matt. 14:23, Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16, 6:12, 9:28, 11:1), but He specifically commands His disciples to pray with confidence of achieving results (Matt. 7:7, 11; John 14:13-14). In the new covenant, Christ's blood allows access to the Father and adoption as sons of God through the Spirit (Rom. 8:14-17; Heb. 10:19-22). Hunter affirms that "the privilege of speaking with God so intimately was not given to even the greatest Old Testament saints."<sup>4</sup> In the New Testament then, the purpose of prayer becomes a more intimate aspect of a personal relationship with God.

Jesus commanded His disciples to pray multiple times for various reasons. Perhaps the most important reason is the relationship between the believer and the Heavenly Father, who delights in giving good gifts to His children and invites them to boldly ask (Matt. 7:11; Jas. 1:17). Related to this is the glory that God receives when prayers are answered (John 14:13). Paul clearly was convinced of the importance of prayer as well, for he repeatedly instructs the believers to be diligent in prayer (Rom. 12:12, 15:30; 2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 6:18; Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2;

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<sup>3</sup> Steve W. Lemke, "God's Relation to the World: Terrance Tiessen's Proposal on Providence and Prayer." *Criswell Theological Review* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2004), 209, accessed November 15, Atla Religion Database with AtlaSerials PLUS.

<sup>4</sup> W. Bingham Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 98.

1 Thess. 5:17; 1 Tim. 2:1). He and other New Testament authors specifically emphasize the need for believers to pray for each other in order to grow spiritually (Jas. 5:16; Heb. 13:18; Jude 1:20).

What types of requests should petitionary prayer include? Jesus indicates that believers are welcome to ask God for anything (John 15:7). However, the focus of prayer in the New Testament seems to be on personal and corporate spiritual growth, as mentioned above. Some other reasons to pray include asking God to provide for physical needs (Matt. 6:11; Jas. 5:14) and to keep from entering temptation (Matt. 5:13, 26:41).

### **God's Providence**

Since God commands His people to pray, the theological question that arises is how God is affected by the requests made of Him. Scripture certainly seems to indicate that prayer is important because God hears and responds to requests. However, the degree to which God hears and responds has implications for many theological doctrines including God's goodness, knowledge, power, constancy, immanence, transcendence, and love.

Various positions have been proposed to explain this issue. Open theism claims that God is passible, genuinely responding to prayers as part of His active relationship with His people, but this brings into question the extent of His knowledge, power, and transcendence. Calvinism, on the other hand, claims that God has pre-ordained everything, including prayer, upholding His sovereignty, transcendence, and impassibility, but permitting the problem of God's goodness and human free will. Both views will be evaluated here in consideration of related theological implications.

## Open Theism

An open theist view claims that God has voluntarily made His actions in the world contingent on the prayers of His people.<sup>5</sup> In His desire for genuine personal relationships, He has limited His knowledge of what will happen in the world so that humanity might truly have free agency. “A world in which we are free is necessary if there is to be both moral action and meaningful response to God’s overtures of love.”<sup>6</sup> It is a partnership in which God and His people influence each other and work together to bring about what God desires. This means that God is not impassible; He is genuinely affected by human action and communication.<sup>7</sup> He still knows everything that there is to know at a given moment and does not need information from humans, but, according to Sanders, “God wants this sort of conversation not because we have anything stupendous about which to advise him but simply because God decides to make our concerns his concerns. God wants us to be his partners not because he needs our wisdom but because he wants our fellowship.”<sup>8</sup>

According to this view, prayers as well as actions of individuals truly affect the world, which seems to be in alignment with the biblical emphasis on the importance of prayer. Sheets goes so far as to claim that God cannot act apart from prayer: “He needs and is waiting on

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<sup>5</sup> John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*. 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 281.

<sup>6</sup> David Basinger and Randall Basinger, eds., *Predestination & Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty & Human Freedom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 119.

<sup>7</sup> Robert J. Matz and A Chadwick Thornhill, eds., *Divine Impassibility: Four Views of God’s Emotions and Suffering* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 109, accessed November 17, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>8</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 281.

something from us to bring about change.”<sup>9</sup> However, another implication of open theism and free will, which Sanders admits, is that God is limited in both knowledge and power; He does not know the future for certain and cannot answer prayers that depend on other free beings.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, God cannot be trusted to answer prayers even if He wants to. This limitation of His power is a grave problem, which leads to the consideration of an alternate view.

### Calvinism

Upholding God’s sovereignty and perfection in knowledge and power, Calvinism restricts human freedom to a compatibilist view and emphasizes God’s impassibility. Therefore, He is unable to be influenced by prayer; He will do what He desires regardless of human input. Everything that happens is pre-ordained according to His purposes. However, since He clearly desires that His people pray, it must be concluded that our prayers are ordained as well. “So as to act sovereignly, God apparently will move his people to pray so he can respond.”<sup>11</sup>

This means that, as Sanders criticizes, God cannot truly respond to prayer. “In order for God to respond there must be more than one possible future with options from which God selects based in part by a consideration of your request. If God determines everything, including our prayers, then God could only ‘respond’ to his own ordained decisions.”<sup>12</sup> In that case, it is not truly a response at all. This diminishes the authenticity of a relationship with God since humans are incapable of genuine communication with Him.

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<sup>9</sup> Dutch Sheets, *Intercessory Prayer* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1996), 33.

<sup>10</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 283.

<sup>11</sup> Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, 56.

<sup>12</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 279.

This view also fails to explain the phenomenon of unanswered prayer, which will be further addressed below. If every prayer is ordained by God as His method of accomplishing His intended purposes, it should follow that every prayer that is prayed is answered. However, this is not always the case in the Bible or in the personal experience of believers, which also brings up the question of evil in the world. “[Calvinists] cannot account for why a loving God would decree such extensive and gratuitous evil.”<sup>13</sup>

Why pray then? If God cannot be affected by prayer, the only conclusion must be that prayer somehow affects the person praying, aligning God’s followers with His character and His will. While this is certainly true, Scripture seems to indicate that there is more going on when people pray than merely a changed attitude. This view is insufficient as well.

#### Solution: A Paradox

Both views expressed above must conclude that God cannot reliably respond to prayer, either because He is limited by other free beings or because prayers are predetermined and He cannot genuinely interact with humans. Thus, the question of the purpose of prayer is not resolved. Are these the only possible explanations?

It is evident from Scripture that God knows and decides everything that will happen, and He also responds to prayer.<sup>14</sup> While these apparent contradictions are difficult to reconcile, they must both be accepted in order to have a clear understanding of God and of human responsibility. There are various combinations of the two views described above, designating certain issues as nonnegotiable while being willing to compromise on others.

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<sup>13</sup> Lemke, “God’s Relation to the World,” 213.

<sup>14</sup> Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, 51.

One helpful solution is to understand God as existing outside of time. In this case, His knowledge of everything that will happen does not imply a limitation on human free will.<sup>15</sup> This is the main difficulty that arises in considering God’s omniscience, because it is often assumed that the future is already set if God knows everything. However, “suppose that God knows the future without *foreknowing* it. This would be the case if God (and his knowledge) exists outside of time. In this conception of God he could still know everything that is yet future *relative to us*; but since he is not himself in time, these things would not be future *relative to him*, and so he would not know them *as* future.”<sup>16</sup>

This is consistent with a qualified passibility view, in which God’s character remains constant but He interacts with humans and allows Himself to be affected by what happens in the world. As Peckham explains, “because God has created a world wherein creatures possess freedom and God has opened himself up to being affected by creaturely causes, all human activity has implications for God’s will and God’s emotions.”<sup>17</sup> This view preserves God’s omniscience and omnipotence while placing genuine importance on the prayer of the believer.

Indeed, the implications of the doctrine of prayer must be considered when evaluating which view to accept. An open theist might believe in the importance of prayer in affecting change in the world, but must accept that God is limited in His ability to answer prayer, whereas the Calvinist might have difficulty in finding motivation to pray since he will necessarily pray if God ordains it. Neither of these are consistent with Scripture nor compatible with the Christian life.

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<sup>15</sup> Basinger, *Predestination & Free Will*, 73.

<sup>16</sup> James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds., *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 78.

<sup>17</sup> Matz, *Divine Impassibility*, 110.

C. S. Lewis clarifies this point by comparing the activities of work and prayer, which are essential in a world that involves any degree of human freedom. “In both we try to produce a state of affairs which God has not (or at any rate not yet) seen fit to provide ‘on His own.’”<sup>18</sup> God has chosen to accomplish His purposes in this world through the obedience of His people, which includes prayer.

## **Implications for Christian Living**

### Relationship with God

In light of these theological considerations, what are the implications for the prayer life of the believer? Jesus indicates, in His teaching and by example, that God truly desires a personal relationship with the individuals He has created and allows them to call Him Father (Luke 11:1-2; John. 1:12-13; Acts 17:29; Rom. 8:15-16; Gal. 4:5-6; Eph. 1:5). Like all children to their parents, the relationship should involve love, communication, and obedience, though this must look different between man and God. “Obedience demonstrates to God that we love Him.”<sup>19</sup> In addition, His commands to ask for things indicate that He desires that His people depend on Him. According to Sheets, prayer is necessary because “God chose, from the time of the Creation, to work on the earth *through* humans, not independent of them.”<sup>20</sup> This is the same reason that Jesus gave his disciples the task of continuing to make disciples and further God’s kingdom on earth.

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<sup>18</sup> C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 106.

<sup>19</sup> Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, 99.

<sup>20</sup> Sheets, *Intercessory Prayer*, 28.

The New Testament contains specific instructions for effective prayer. Jesus used the phrase “Your will be done” in His prayers and indicated that His disciples should do the same (Matt. 6:10, 26:42). He also taught that believers should make their requests to God in His name, the name of Jesus (John 14:14; 15:16; 16:23). However, those words alone are not what cause prayers to be heard; Jesus teaches His disciples in John 15:7 that they must be abiding in Him for their prayers to be answered. Abiding in Christ involves faithful obedience to Him.<sup>21</sup> James 5:16 reiterates this in the promise that “the prayer of a righteous person has great power,” implying that righteous living is the requirement for effective prayer. James also indicates that it is important to ask in faith and with right motives (Jas. 1:6, 4:2-3). Only by obeying God’s Word is it possible to pray confidently in accordance with His will and in Jesus’ name. This means that believers must be aware of who God is and what He desires; they can only be involved in the work He is doing in the world if they learn to make His desires their own.

God also wants His followers to persist in prayer. In Luke 18:1-8 Jesus told His disciples a parable “to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart,” giving the example of the widow who received justice only because she kept asking persistently. Yancey discovered the reason for this in his commitment to persistent prayer, which “changes me by helping me see the world, and my life, through God’s eyes. As the relationship progresses I realize that God has a clearer picture of what I need than I do.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, 101.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 152.

## Unanswered Prayer

If there is so much scriptural basis for confidence in prayer, why are prayers not always answered? Even the closest follower of Christ will not always understand God's ways of accomplishing His purposes (Isa. 55:9; Rom. 11:34). However, in the case of the prophet Jeremiah, God told him multiple times *not* to pray for the people because He revealed that He was set on judging them and "wanted no alterations in his plans."<sup>23</sup> Hunter adds, "There are also certain practical problems involved with praying for what we want. Christians pray in conflict... We pray shortsightedly and often selfishly."<sup>24</sup> In addition, even with the best intentions prayers are often made in ignorance of the consequences or of what people actually need. Only God knows how certain answers to prayer will affect the world. On the other hand, perhaps it is a mistake to say that God does not always answer prayer; Lewis states that "all events without exception are answers to prayer in the sense that whether they are grantings or refusals the prayers of all concerned and their needs have all been taken into account."<sup>25</sup>

The existence of evil and human freedom has implications for prayer as well. Yancey points out that even "Jesus knows the heartbreak of unanswered prayers."<sup>26</sup> God has chosen to let people have their own way, so in this world there will be disappointment and heartache in many situations. However, He remains in control and wants His people to continue praying in confidence that He will ultimately make all things new.

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<sup>23</sup> Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* 134.

<sup>24</sup> Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, 61.

<sup>25</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, (New York: Harper One, 1947), 293.

<sup>26</sup> Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* 81.

## **Conclusion**

Scripture leaves no doubt that prayer is important for several reasons. Since God has chosen to involve mankind in His work in the world, we can be confident that our prayers as well as our actions matter. As seen in the Old Testament, God wants us to appeal to His character and agree with Him about what ought to happen in the world. He is glorified when we depend on Him to answer our requests. It is difficult and unhelpful to explain how prayer changes events and what might happen if we do not pray; instead, confident in God's omniscience and omnipotence, believers must faithfully make requests in accordance with what we believe to be His will.

Prayer is also important for personal spiritual growth. God designed a right relationship with Him to involve a cycle of obedient living and conscious praying; He uses prayer to teach us to think like Him and live a life that is pleasing to Him. The New Testament indicates that we ought to depend on God to provide for all our needs, and especially emphasizes praying for spiritual growth. Thus, the purpose of petitionary prayer is to present requests to God that are consistent with His desires, trusting Him to act in His wisdom and allowing ourselves to be transformed as we depend on Him and learn more about His will.

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