

# Where Is the Power in Prayer?

Romans 8: 26-28

Here's a question for you, "Why does God answer some prayers and not others?" How about another one, "Why should we pray about little things in life if God doesn't solve big problems like the oil spill, climate change, and genocide?" Actually, these are questions for me as part of my summer "Ask Jack" sermon series. These are really good and challenging questions, but there are some assumptions behind those questions that affect how we answer them

Some assumptions about God are behind these questions on prayer. What is your image of God? What do you believe about God? Is God all-powerful? All-knowing? Is God all-present? Would you describe God as perfect love or as the ultimate creator?

What about natural disasters, the suffering of innocents, and deadly conflicts between peoples of faith. Don't these evils challenge our understanding of God? The ancient question still haunts us: how can an all-powerful, all-knowing, and good God allow these things? How can we worship a God like that? What options for understanding do we have?

One option is that God is good, but not all-powerful or all-knowing— not really GOD. Another is that God is all-powerful and all-knowing, but not good at least the way we define *good*. Perhaps the best option is to consider a different understanding of God altogether. There is a well-known story, told in different forms, about a group of people describing an elephant, having never before seen one, using only their sense of touch. None of them had the complete picture. Each touched a part. In addition, they had to describe what they were feeling in concepts and language they already knew.

We understand God only in part and use terms and concepts we already know. In large measure, they reflect us: our own experiences, fears, and insights. The dominant image of God in Bible is "theistic" with God conceived as a particular and super-human being. But there is another view in the Bible as well—an understanding that everything is within God and that there is no place outside God. God is reality itself-- not a particular being in time or space, not a "being" *per se*.

The definition of God as "being itself" is not the same as God not being personal. Essential to our faith understand is that God is available in relationship. We are all within God and God is within us. The universe reveals God to us. Even though that doesn't explain all the "why's" of suffering, it recognizes that God is with us in that suffering.

Just as assumptions about God lie behind many of our questions on prayer, we also bring some assumptions about prayer itself. Theology is a mirror of our own souls. We tend to shape who our God is on the basis of our own experience. This is a very natural process, but we need to approach the knowing of who God is with great deference and humility. The *knowing* is not a matter of having a knowledge of ideas or doctrines. It is truth that can only be known in relationship. It is a knowledge that is lived. God *is*.

So, how is prayer supposed to work? Is God supposed to fix everything, just some things, or what? The answer to many of our questions about God is found in prayer? But prayer does not always bring the kind of results we seek. So what's the problem? Is there a problem? Prayer is a partnership with God. The *why* and *how* do matter, but what matters most is that you stay with it. Keep trying, and don't give up.

We can change the world through prayer! Maybe such a statement is overly simplistic? Perhaps the idea is a little overwhelming? But we are connected to God and that connectedness is prayer. Why should we pray? My great grandfather used to say that, in business, if two partners agree on everything, one of them is not necessary. One helpful way of seeing the world is as a partnership with God. We are individuals and human systems living in partnership with God. We are also actors in the ongoing work of creation.

There are many helpful images for prayer. You might say that prayer is the conference room where God meets us. Prayer is a spiritual discipline. It is an ongoing conversation through which we grow and maintain a relationship with God. Prayer is the discipline we practice to develop self-awareness. We pray to discover the power of our partnership with God.

What do we really expect when we pray? In the new movie *Eat, Pray, Love*, the lead character prays at a time of crisis, "Lord, this is the first time I've talked with you directly." Like most of us, she asked for a sign of what to do. "Fix this, God! I'm afraid and want you to take care of this so I can go on living my life as I want to." Occasionally, these prayers are answered. We receive insight and direction. Most often, though, honest prayer begins or deepens a process that takes us from where and who we are to what we have potential to become.

When we pray, we're living in hope for the future. We place ourselves by faith in the present reality of God. Prayer changes things. Prayer changes us, prepares us for life. Through prayer, we deal with life's struggles before we encounter them outside ourselves. Prayer changes the world since we're part of that world. Community prayer changes the corporate atmosphere of institutions, even churches.

Prayer, in some mystical way, changes what is possible to God. Prayer does not change God's abilities, but what's possible for God changes because of prayer. Human choices control our world. Our choices, along with those of all people throughout history have resulted in the powers of darkness being in control of this world.

Let's return to the powerful theological understanding that we are partners with God. The vision our faith has for this partnership is the redeeming of the darkness of this world: redeeming of persons and redeeming of the powers themselves. God redeems. The -movement of God's universe is toward redemption and healing. We help through the imperatives of prayer. When we pray, we request God to act and we commit ourselves to participate. We are engaged in an act of co-creation as described by theologian Walter Wink:

One little sector of the universe becomes translucent *and incandescent: a vibratory center of power that radiates the power of the universe*" (*The Powers that Be*, 186-87)

How does prayer work? Matthew's Gospel gives us a good example. The Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6: 9-13) is a model prayer. It is also a model for prayer, a "thumb-nail" sketch of the content and attitude of prayer. For example, when you pray, pray to God! That seems obvious, but we often get so caught up in our concerns and needs that we forget to focus on the One who is intimate and holy. To "hallow God's name" means to give reverence to the Ultimate Reality the name God represents.

*Your kingdom come* is a plea for God's nature to become the reality of this world. *Give us daily bread* is a request for us to be aware of the needs around and in us. It is to distinguish needs from wants. And *forgiveness* is a two-way street. Being forgiven by God doesn't depend on our

forgiving others. We cannot earn God's forgiveness and love, but the ability to forgive indicates our awareness of having been forgiven--that there is in us a core of grace.

Regarding prayer for being kept from temptation and delivered from evil, we might be saying, "God don't bring us there! Keep us from falling away! Give us the ability to hang on and hang in, to find ways to believe and trust!"

Beyond this, then, how should we pray? Do you notice something curious in Jesus' prayer? Almost every statement is imperative, like a command. *Hallowed be your name! Kingdom, come! Give us daily bread! Forgive our sin! Don't bring us to temptation!*

Our prayer is response to the Spirit urging me to be urgent in prayer. My passion and commitment are crucial My faithfulness in prayer is irreplaceable. The risk factor goes up as our prayers get more specific. How specific are you willing to be in prayer? A willingness to be very concrete and specific brings new intensity to our prayers. In the same way, the more concrete and specific we are in planning and committing ourselves, the richer life will be.

Prayer is not a magical grab bag for wishes. Sometimes I wish it were because sometimes the things I pray for don't happen. Quite often, my efforts to control others and shape life to my image fail. Sometimes I understand why and sometimes I don't. But I believe that prayer is a mystical connection through which God is changing the world. There is a power and an understanding that is not ours.

It doesn't matter if I use the right words. It doesn't matter if I'm good enough or spiritual enough. What is vital is that I do it—that we pray! Any amount of faith that we bring to prayer is enough for God to use. God's nature, God's power, and God's faithfulness are all that matters. And God always gives the Holy Spirit. The Spirit always brings healing and wholeness. It's not our ability or piety that makes prayer effective, but rather our willingness to pray. What really matters is God being God

Why should we even bother to pray at all? Prayer is the power of a connectedness with God that can change the world. We help bring the *Kingdom of God* from invisible to visible reality. It happens little by little through individual people of faith. The Holy Spirit makes it happen even when we don't have a clue. Praying is inseparable from doing and doing is inseparable from praying.

One of the primary results of prayer is growth and transformation. For individuals, praying brings transformation and spiritual growth. For humanity, prayer brings social transformation and reform. For all of creation, prayer brings an awareness of the Oneness of all life. Prayer is life beyond our understanding-- a mysterious connection. Prayer is action, a mystical channel through which God touches and transforms the world. Prayer is listening followed by words that reveal themselves through the open channel of your life. The Spirit moves through you and into you and there is prayer. God's kingdom comes in you and through you, and prayer continues, and God's will is done.

Prayer is a matter of truly wanting to bring social justice: to enable universal inclusion of those who are outcasts, to love our enemies and bring peace to our world. The really scary and powerful aspect of prayer is how much God wants us to grow and how much growing and changing there is for us to do.

Prayer is a team sport. We're invited to enter the story of God with our own stories. Sometimes the answers to our prayers take a long time. Sometimes they never seem to be answered. Maybe God is just waiting on us to respond—waiting for us to hear the prayers of the hungry and the outcast. Can it be that God is asking us, “How long will you cooperate with systemic injustice and greed in the world? How long will you allow the inequity to continue?” Only God can redeem people and systems. God apparently does so only with our help.