

Why pray?

By Dr. Jim Denison

A friend sent me this essay. It quickly hit home with me--see if it does with you.

Satan called a worldwide convention. In his opening address to his demons, he said, "We can't keep the Christians from going to church. We can't keep them from reading their Bibles and knowing the truth. We can't even keep them from biblical values. But we can do something else. We can keep them from forming an intimate, continual experience with Christ.

"If they gain that connection with Jesus, our power over them is broken. So let them go to church, let them have their Christian lifestyles, but steal their time so they can't gain that experience with Jesus Christ. This is what I want you to do. Distract them from gaining hold of their Savior and maintaining that vital connection throughout their day."

"How shall we do this?" asked his demons. "Keep them busy with the nonessentials of life and invest unnumbered schemes to occupy their minds," he answered. "Tempt them to spend, spend, spend, then borrow, borrow, borrow. Convince them to work six or seven days a week, 10-12 hours a day, so they can afford their lifestyles. Keep them from spending time with their children. As their families fragment, soon their homes will offer no escape from the pressures of work.

"Over stimulate their minds so they cannot hear that still small voice. Entice them to play the radio or CD player wherever they drive, to keep the TV, the DVD player, and their CDs going constantly in their homes. Fill their coffee tables with magazines and newspapers. Pound their minds with news 24 hours a day. Invade their driving moments with billboards. Flood their mailboxes and e-mail with junk, sweepstakes, and every kind of newsletter and promotion.

"Even in their recreation, let them be excessive. Have them return from their holidays exhausted, disquieted and unprepared for the coming week. And when they gather for spiritual fellowship, involve them in gossip and small talk so they leave with souls unfulfilled.

"Let them be involved in evangelism. But crowd their lives with so many good causes that they have no time to seek power from Christ. Soon they will be working in their own strength, sacrificing their health and family unity for the good of the cause."

It was quite a convention. And the demons went eagerly to their assignments.

Has the devil been successful in his scheme? You be the judge. While nearly 9 in 10 Americans say they pray to God, only one in four is "completely satisfied" with his or her prayer life. Only 60% of Protestants who pray are "absolutely certain" that prayer makes a difference in their lives.

There are many reasons we don't pray as often or as passionately as we could and should. But near the top of the list is the question, "why?" If we don't understand why we should do something, it's harder to do it. "Because I said so" isn't an answer any child wants to hear from a parent.

A dear friend raised this issue with me. If God knows what we are going to ask, why ask? If he already knows what we are going to do, why pray? If my prayer causes God to do some good thing he was not going to do until I prayed, what does this say about the character of God? Why does he sometimes heal when we pray and sometimes not? Why pray?

To obey God

The first answer to the question is the one children don't like to hear: because our Father says so. Because Scripture tells us to pray.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was explicit: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). Ask, seek, knock--each is an imperative, not a suggestion. Each is God's demand of us.

We are to pray with *urgency*. Charles Spurgeon, the greatest of all Baptist preachers, warned us: "He who prays without fervency does not pray at all. We cannot commune with God, who is a consuming fire, if there is no fire in our prayers." Maltbie Babcock agreed: "Our prayers must mean something to us if they are to mean anything to God."

Hear Spurgeon again: "The sacred promises, though in themselves most sure and precious, are of no avail for the comfort and sustenance of the soul unless you grasp them by faith, plead them in prayer, expect them by hope, and receive them with gratitude." He added, "Do not reckon you have prayed unless you have pleaded, for pleading is the very marrow of prayer."

We are to pray urgently and *continually*. Jesus' words are in the present tense: pray and keep on praying. Our Lord prayed before light, after dark, all night long, continually. His word commands the same of us: "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

George Mueller, the great minister and man of faith, prayed patiently for five personal friends who did not know the Lord. After five years, one came to Christ. In ten more years, two more were saved. After 25 years, the fourth friend came to Christ. He kept praying for the last friend for 52 years, then died. The fifth friend came to know Jesus a few months afterward. Keep praying.

How do we pray with continual urgency?

- *Begin*. Make an appointment to meet with God. I read about a man who put on his calendar each day, 7-7:30, prayer. But he kept missing it. Then he changed it to say 7-7:30, God. That's a harder meeting to neglect.

- *In Jesus' name*: "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:13-14). Do you believe that you deserve to be heard, or do you pray on the basis of Jesus' death for you?
- *According to God's will*: "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us--whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of him" (1 John 5:14-15). He will give us what we ask, or something better.
- *For God's glory*: "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father" (John. 14:13). Do you seek your glory or his?
- *With a clean heart*: "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my prayer" (Psalm 66:18-19).

If God seems silent, check yourself by these biblical standards. But know that your Father wants to hear you even more than you want to be heard. And pray. Let nothing stop you. Do it today.

Because prayer changes you

A second reason to pray: time with God changes us. When we are in the presence of God, his Spirit transforms us. Prayer is the way the Carpenter shapes and molds the wood of our lives. He must touch us to change us. In prayer we do not talk about him, but to him. We do not study him, we are with him. And then our time in prayer makes us more like his Son, which is his purpose for our lives (Romans 8:29).

Frederick Buechner said that we are to pray continually "not, one assumes, because you have to beat a path to God's door before he'll open it, but because until you beat the path maybe there's no way of getting to your door." Blaise Pascal believed that "All the troubles of life come upon us because we refuse to sit quietly for a while each day in our rooms." Gordon MacDonald adds: "I have begun to see that worship and intercession are far more the business of aligning myself with God's purposes than asking him to align with mine."

Oswald Chambers taught, "Prayer is the way the life of God is nourished. We look upon prayer as a means of getting things for ourselves; the Bible's idea of prayer is that we may get to know God himself."

We pray because God tells us to. Why does he want us to pray? Because then he can shape and mold us, preparing us for eternity and using us on earth. Prayer is the hand of God on our souls.

And so prayer positions us to receive what God's grace wants to give. You could not read these words unless you were close enough to your computer to be able to see them. Sitting in front of your computer screen does not mean that you deserve these words, good or bad. Just that you can receive them.

In the same way, there is much God wants to give us but cannot until we are willing to receive his grace. We have not because we ask not (James 4:2). He wanted to guide me in writing this essay, but could not speak effectively to me unless I was ready to listen. He wants to guide you through the rest of this day, but cannot unless you are willing to follow. Time in prayer connects your Spirit with his, so you can hear his voice and follow his will.

In these ways, prayer does not change God so much as it changes us.

Because your Father always hears you

So we are to pray because God requires it, and because he uses prayer in our lives. Here's a third reason to pray: because our Father always hears us. Jesus promised: ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened. No exceptions. God has an "open door" policy with the universe. Billions of people pray in thousands of languages, all at the same time, and God hears each one. You included.

Jesus followed his promise with a parable (Matthew 7: 9-11). Stones along the Sea of Galilee were small limestone balls, in appearance much like the bread of the day. Fish-like snakes grew in the Sea; they were without scales and thus forbidden to the Jews as food (Leviticus 11:12). Now, if you were a father in those days and your hungry child asked for bread, would you trick him with a stone? If he asked for a fish, would you give him a snake? Of course not. And compared to God, we are "evil." Our perfect Father who is love always hears us. This is the promise of God.

The difference between hearing and answering

However, "hearing" and "answering" may not be the same thing. We often say that God hasn't heard our prayers if he has not yet granted our request in the way we asked it. But a father hears the child's request which he must refuse just as he hears the request he can grant.

Here's a one-sentence theology of prayer: *When we pray, God always gives us what we ask for or something better.* He always hears us, and always grants our request in the way that is for his glory and our good. He is not capricious, arbitrary, or deaf. He is a Father who is excited every time one of his children calls him. Every time.

The Greeks told a story about Aurora, the goddess of the dawn, who fell in love with Tithonus a mortal youth. Zeus offered her any gift she might choose for her mortal lover. She naturally chose that Tithonus might live forever; but she had forgotten to ask that he might remain forever young. And so Tithonus grew older and older and older, and could never die, and the gift became a curse.

Our Father is no Zeus. He loves us so much he watched his Son die in our place, on our cross, for our sins. Do you know anyone who loves you enough to send their child to die for you? One did.

Reasons God does not grant what we ask

The simple fact is that a loving Father cannot give us everything we ask in the way we ask for it. A farmer prays for rain; a baseball fan prays for sunshine that same day, for that same county. Both sides prayed for victory in the Civil War.

His timing may not be ours. He might right now be working to answer your prayer, but you cannot yet see that work. You're needing a new job, and have prayed for one. Today God is engineering circumstances in such a way that a person is being promoted to the home office of her corporation. Then someone in her office will be moved into her position. Then that person's job will be yours. It is going to take another two months for that process to become obvious to you, though God is working on the issue right now. You just don't know it.

And God loves us too much to give us what we ask for, unless it is for our good. When one of our boys was very small, he watched me use a razor blade to scrape paint from a window and wanted to play with this shiny new toy. He was incensed that I refused.

Here we come to one of the great mysteries of the Christian faith. When we prayed for something God did not grant, we can know that it was best that he acted as he did. Even when we do not understand why. The person did not get well. The house burned down; the divorce became final; the car wreck happened. It's not a question of timing, for the worst has already occurred. And we do not understand why God did not grant us our prayer.

A very dear friend in our congregation suffered from cancer for many months. I prayed every day for her healing. When she died, I was deeply distraught. Her healing would have brought such glory to God and good to her family. I didn't understand, and still don't.

Dr. E. K. Bailey was the Senior Pastor of Concord Missionary Baptist Church in Dallas, and one of the finest ministers of the gospel I have ever known. Our friendship was priceless to my soul. His preaching will be remembered always. Several times, God healed my dear friend of cancer. Then he did not. I still don't understand why.

I must assume that it was not best for them to be healed. They are both with the Father in glory, in a paradise we cannot begin to imagine. One second on the other side of death, they were glad they were in glory. In the providence of God, their contribution to his Kingdom on earth must have been completed, their reward prepared, their eternity made ready. Even though I don't understand or like it.

That's the faith assumption I must make when God does not grant what I ask--he is doing something even better. Though my finite, fallen mind cannot begin to imagine how that could be so, I must trust his love and compassion enough to accept it by faith. Not until I became a father did I understand some of the things my father said and did. Not until we are in glory will we understand completely our Father's will and ways (1 Corinthians 13:12).

What about free will?

Now let's complicate matters even further. We have been thinking thus far about situations where God did not give us what we asked for, and trying to trust that he did something even better. But are there times when his will is frustrated by our own? When he wants to answer our prayer, but human freedom prevents him?

The question moves us into the arena of sovereignty/free will, one of the most debated and divisive subjects in Christian theology today. We'll not go there except as the issue touches on a theology of prayer. Some theologians argue that God's sovereign will is not subject to ours, that human freedom can never frustrate or defeat the divine plan. They would not agree that misused free will could be a factor in God's answers to our prayers. He will do what is best, however humans react to him.

However, it seems to me that in at least one area, God's will is limited by ours. 2 Peter 3:9 states, "God is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." 1 Timothy 2:4 promises that God "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."

Some believe God has chosen the "elect" who will be in heaven and those who will be in hell, and that human freedom is not determinative of eternal destiny. They must interpret these two passages as relating only to the "elect." But the verses seem in their context to speak to all of humanity, never mentioning the "elect." It seems clear that God wants every one of his children to be with him in eternity.

Yet we know that many are lost: "If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15). Many will use their free will to refuse God's offer of grace. And he has chosen to limit himself to their freedom. He created us to worship him; worship requires a choice; God will not violate that freedom. His sovereign decision to enable our free will causes him to honor that freedom.

If this is true, we have at least one area where human freedom limits the perfect will of God. Is this possible in other areas as well, specifically with regard to prayer? Could it be that a reason God has not answered a prayer as you asked it is because someone is refusing to cooperate?

God wanted you to have a particular job, but the person who was to hire you misused his freedom to hire his brother-in-law instead. God intended to lead your daughter to a particular Christian young man at college, but she refused to follow the Lord's guidance. You prayed for God to use your life; he intended for you a deeply fulfilling ministry to children in your church, but you refused his leadership. Then you wonder why he hasn't answered your prayer.

I have not resolved this issue fully in my own mind. If God is sovereign, his "good, pleasing and perfect will" must be done (Romans 12:2). If God intends us to have freedom of choice, he must honor the decisions we make even when they are counter to

his perfect will. It seems to me that resolving this conflict in either direction creates a greater problem than we solve. If God's will controls our own, our mistakes and sins are ultimately his fault (violating James 1:13-15). If our will controls God's, he cannot fulfill his purposes for his creation (violating Jesus' claim that "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," Matthew 28:18).

So I am ready to accept both sides of the paradox. God is three and one; Jesus is fully God and fully man; and Scripture is divinely inspired and humanly written. In the same way, God will accomplish his perfect will without violating my freedom. There are times when we are like Joseph, sold into slavery by our brothers' misused free will. At the end of the story we will be able to say to them, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20). His love prevails.

Conclusion

Now, where does this subject come home to you? Do you pray much at all? Continually? With urgency? Is there a need you've abandoned, a request on which you've given up? A place in your life where God seems silent?

Perhaps this man's experience will help. An anonymous Confederate soldier wrote,

I asked God for strength that I might achieve; I was made weak, that I might learn to serve. I asked for health, that I might do great things; I was given infirmity, that I might do better things. I asked for wealth, that I might be happy; I was given poverty, that I might be wise. I asked for power, that I might earn the praise of men; I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life; I was given life, that I might enjoy all things. I got nothing I asked for, but all I hoped for. Despite myself, my prayers were answered. And I am, among all men, most richly blessed.

So can we be. This is the promise of God.