

Does Prayer Change Things?

1. Introduction

If you have ever been to the inner city of Adelaide or Melbourne you could witness a nostalgic kind of public transport: tram cars or cable cars. And the way they work provides a pretty accurate illustration of the way prayer works. The cars ride on rails which are embedded in the roads. But they can't move or go anywhere unless they are powered by electricity. For that purpose electricity cables run along the rails, held up above the tram cars by posts. To collect the power running through the cables, the trams have an apparatus mounted on the roof called a *pantograph*. This pantograph makes contact with the overhead wire and conducts the electricity to the engine of the tram. Without the pantograph the tram won't go anywhere.

Prayer is like this pantograph. It connects our lives and our faith to the power source, God himself. To find our way through life, to find strength, to find comfort, to find direction, we need prayer. We need to be in constant contact with God. Prayer is so important, that Augustine once said (to use another illustration) that prayer is the breath of faith. Indeed, without prayer, faith cannot exist; or perhaps it can exist in some kind of intellectual or routine way, but not as a living relationship with God. We'll say more about that later.

So it is obvious that when we consider the topic of prayer today, we are talking about a very important topic - crucial even, for our lives with God. And one of the first things I learnt when I prepared this address, is that I don't pray enough. If prayer is so important, then we should be doing it more often. And that brings me to the aim of this address. The specific question that is the focus of the address, *Does Prayer Change Things?*, should not be the introduction to an intellectual discussion about the ins and outs of prayer. Our discussions today should not merely be a theological exercise to satisfy our curiosity. No, the aim of our meeting today should be that we pray more. The greatest desire of every Christian, including all you ladies here this evening, is to

be near to God. Prayer is the way to do that. So let us, therefore, use this time to encourage each other to pray, so that we may all grow closer to God.

Now, one of the things that may stand in the way of our prayer is the question or doubt if prayer does actually work. Does prayer really change things? That is the question we will focus on. We will do that in three parts. First, we will speak more generally about what prayer is and what makes it difficult for us to pray regularly. Then we will go into that one specific reason that can make prayer difficult: the relation with God's sovereign will and plan - does our prayer change God or his plan? And finally, we will briefly go into a few more questions regarding the hearing of our prayers. So first to the question:

2. What is prayer?

2.1. Definitions

In the literature I read in preparation for today, I found a few different definitions of prayer. One says: Prayer is asking. That is a simple definition, but it also very biblical. If you consider the prayers you find in the Bible, most of them contain one or only petitions. I don't need to give you any specific examples - just pick any prayer Psalm and you will find that many are prayers asking for something. Some ask for rescue from a dangerous situation, or for health, or forgiveness, others ask for peace and the nearness of God. So, indeed, when we pray, we should not be afraid to ask the Lord.

But there is more to prayer. Another definition is: Prayer is communicating with God. Which is very true. Another one: Prayer is keeping company with God. Also very true.

But I think we can be more specific. Prayer is not only asking, and prayer is not merely communicating. The best definition I found is: Prayer is an expression of our covenant relationship with God. This definition includes the ones I mentioned first. Indeed, prayer is all about relationship, as faith is all about relationship. God has made a covenant with his children, and he seeks to interact with them. Within the covenant he reveals himself to his children through the Means of Grace, the administration of

the Word and the Sacraments. God speaks to us through his Word, and he strengthens our faith through the sacraments. Our prayer is our answer, our reply to God's speaking to us. Our prayer is a response, or even an echo to God's Word.

This underlines what I said earlier, that prayer is crucial to faith, crucial to a living relationship with God. If we do not use the God-given means to maintain the covenant relationship with God, that relationship will dry up. If we don't listen to God's Word in Bible Study and preaching, if we don't use or witness the sacraments to experience God's nearness, and if we don't use prayer to make our needs and concerns known to God, then our relationship with God, our faith, will wither and die.

So that is a good definition of prayer: an expression of the covenant relationship with God. I have also read a few inaccurate explanations of prayer.

2.2. Wrong views

Someone said that prayer is really talking to yourself. Perhaps at the end of the day you want to evaluate the events of the day, and so you pray, and you consider what you have said and done, and what you should change to make things work better. In this view prayer doesn't change God, it changes yourself.

Another one said that prayer is therapeutic. If you sit down or kneel down to pray, you can talk about all your problems and so you can get things off your chest. It's better to pray than to bottle up all your worries and concerns.

Again another said that prayer works like a good sleeping pill. You pray before you go to sleep, out of guilt or obligation. I once saw a sign outside an outreach centre. It said: If you can't sleep, don't count sheep, talk to the Shepherd! I'm sure this sign meant well. It wants to bring people to pray to God, to get in touch with God. But you can also interpret it to say that talking to the Shepherd will put you to sleep quicker than counting sheep. But that is not what prayer is for...

Other reasons why people pray is to make sense of things. They try their best to work their way through life, but at one point they run into some kind of trouble that they can't sort out. Only then do they pray. They use God as a God-of-the-gaps.

Finally, there are some Christians, mostly in Charismatic circles, who pray to God in a name-it-and-claim-it fashion. They say that God has promised to hear all our prayers. Well then, they pray for just about anything they want: a house, health, money, a good job, a long life. But this is seriously misunderstanding God's Word, as we will see later on. God is not some kind of cosmic butler, who is at our beck-and-call, to give us whatever we want whenever we want it.

So we have good reason to pray, and bad reasons. If we agree on those then why is it still so difficult for many of us to pray regularly?

2.3. Why is it so difficult?

The ultimate reason why we struggle to pray is sin and Satan. When Adam and Eve lived with God in paradise, their communication with God was natural, as natural as breathing and eating and drinking. God used to take a stroll with Adam in the cool of the evening. And they talked and discussed things. But because of the Fall, that line of communication has been broken. Talking to God, communicating with him, does not come naturally anymore. As a matter of fact, many say that to talk to God feels quite unnatural. You're talking to someone who is not there, to someone who does not reply - at least, that's how it feels. But it is true, our old nature is not tuned in to God. We need the Holy Spirit of God to turn our natures around, so that we want to seek to be with God and communicate with him.

Satan is our great enemy in any spiritual matter. Satan knows better than we do, that prayer is our line of communication with God. He knows very well that if he can take prayer away from us, he can alienate us from God altogether. We struggle to pray because we battle spiritual forces around us. We need to be aware of that and pray to the Lord to keep Satan far away from us.

Then there can be other reasons, more trivial if you will, that can make praying difficult. There is the busyness of every day life. Many ladies here, either with children at home, or single ladies working outside the home, or those who do both! - you are extremely busy. It can be very difficult to find a quiet time of the day when you can

read and pray. And if you do, there is still so much going on in your head. It is difficult to focus on God and prayer in this busy life.

More generally, we live in a materialistic country, where there is not much attention for anything spiritual to begin with. We also live in a culture, where Science is god. Many don't need to ask God for anything anymore, because Science provides. There was once a farmer in Holland who didn't come to the annual Prayer Day for harvest and crops. The minister looked him up and asked him why. The farmer said: "Reverend, why should we pray anymore, we have fertiliser now!"

There is also so much entertainment nowadays. There is TV and the Internet, other modern media. It's hard to get people away from behind their screens. Someone said that we can get entertained to death. In a spiritual sense, I think that is quite true.

For Christians in particular, there can be more reasons. There are doubts about God really hearing our prayers. We sometimes pray passionately for something but we don't receive. How is that possible in the light of texts that say so clearly that God will give us what we need?

And there is of course the topic of this paper: why bother praying if God has already determined in his plan everything that will take place in the future?

We will go into that in a minute. But first we must also establish the reasons why we do still pray.

2.4. Why do we still pray?

There are at least three reasons why we should still pray, in spite of the spirit of the age of our time, and in spite of our questions and doubts. First of all, God has commanded that we do. In Ps. 50:15 we find that wonderful verse which is the title of a book by Rev. Westerink: "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me." In Lk. 18 the Lord speaks a parable. Luke introduces it like this: "Then he spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart." Paul often says that we must pray. In Col. 4:2 he writes: "Continue earnestly in prayer,

being vigilant in it with thanksgiving.” And in 1 Thess. 5:17 he writes very clearly: “Pray without ceasing.”

The second reason is that the Bible is choc-a-bloc full with prayers. Like I said earlier, many of the Psalms are prayers. All the saints in Old and New Testament prayed to God without ceasing. We read about prayers of Abraham, Moses, Elijah in the Old Testament. The Lord Jesus himself prayed for hours on end. In Lk. 5:16 it says about our Lord, who was surrounded by so many people seeking healing: “But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.” And so God’s Word shows convincingly that prayer is an integral part of the life of a Christian. We cannot do without communication with God.

And thirdly, we pray because God has promised that he will listen to us. In Jn. 14:13 the Lord Jesus says to his disciples: “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.” And in Lk. 11:9 we read that well known word: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.” And there is Jas. 1:5: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” Or this Ps. 65:1-2: “Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion, and to you shall vows be performed. O you who hear prayer, to you shall all flesh come.” I could mention many more texts that confirm this promise of God: if you ask, I will answer. If we didn’t have that certainty, we would have no reason to pray at all.

And that brings us to the next part of this address. We have considered what prayer is, what could keep us from praying regularly, and why we still do it. In this paragraph we will highlight this one challenge to prayer: does prayer really change things? Does it really have any effect?

3. Does prayer change things?

3.1. Of course it does

Our first and final answer to that question must be: of course it does! And why? Because otherwise God's command to pray would make no sense, and because it would make God a liar who promised that he will listen to us and answer our prayers. If you believe that the Bible is the Word of God, and if you believe that God is true and trustworthy, then you also have to believe that your prayer makes a difference. Anything else would make God a liar. And even our Lord Jesus Christ, who was and is God himself, would be misled, as he prayed many times to his Father, asking him for many things.

Furthermore, the Bible is full of examples of prayers that have effect. We read about one of them in 2 Ki. 20. King Hezekiah became seriously ill. God sent the prophet Isaiah to him to tell him that he would die. Then Hezekiah prayed to the LORD that he might live. And even before Isaiah had left the palace of the king, the LORD told him to go back to Hezekiah to tell him that he would live for another 15 years.

There is the example of Elijah in 1 Ki. 18 and Jas. 5. On Mount Carmel he prayed to the LORD, that God might answer with fire from heaven. And instantly fire rained down on the altar that Elijah had built.

Think of Hannah in 1 Sam 1. The LORD had not given her any children. So she prayed passionately to the LORD that he might give her a son. And she promised that if he did, she would give her son to be a priest in the temple. And God heard her prayer, and gave her Samuel.

I could go on and on. There are many, many examples of prayers that are heard by God. To say that prayer doesn't really change anything would directly contradict all these stories.

Perhaps you find this a bit all too obvious. But it is nevertheless an important point to make. As we will see next, we find it difficult to combine God's hearing of our prayers with God's sovereign plan. But in the Bible there is no such conflict. Sometimes we find people in the Bible asking about God's will: why does this have to happen to me? - like Job. What did I do to deserve this? But never does anyone ask: I'm not sure if prayer is of any use, because God has already mapped out my life anyway. I daresay that this

problem is not found anywhere in the Bible. For the people of God in the Bible there was no such conflict, there existed no tension between our prayers and God's plan.

Let's keep that in mind, as we now first clarify that supposed conflict.

3.2. Conflict with God's plan?

The problem is that we know that God knows the future already. And if God knows the future, it can only be so, because God has already made the future. God does not only know what will happen, he also planned it that way and makes it happen that way.

It says for instance in Ps. 139: "You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them." And in Acts 2:23-24 we read this about the Lord Jesus: "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God - this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." Think also of the time when the Lord Jesus said that Peter would betray him three times. And the Lord Jesus knew exactly that Judas Iscariot was going to deliver him to the Jewish leaders. We find many, many prophecies in the Old Testament which are fulfilled either shortly after the prophecies were spoken, or many years, even centuries, after. There can be no doubt that God knows the future and makes it happen.

So God's plan does not change. Furthermore, God himself does not change either. In Mal. 3:6 it says quite clearly: "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed."

There is even a word of the Lord Jesus about prayer that confirms this in Mt. 6:7-8: "When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

So God is unchangeable, the future of the world is pre-determined in detail, and God knows what we will ask of him, before we have even thought of it ourselves. Indeed, then why pray at all?

Before we try to answer that question we must add an important caveat. We saw earlier that this particular question is not asked in the Bible. Then why do **we** ask it? Is it really only because we have trouble praying? We have to carefully examine our own motives for asking the question. Could it be that we're asking the question also because we are frustrated that God doesn't give us what we want? Could it be that behind this question hides a desire to control God? Could it be that we question God, because we don't agree with him?

Remember that this is the reason why people had idols in the Old Testament, and still have idols in our time. People have idols because they think that they give them what they want. And idols can be manipulated. Idols are manageable. In the Old Testament people sacrificed to their idols to appease them, or to ask for rain and fertility. In the end, the gods did not control the people, but the people the gods.

And that is a crucial difference with the God of the Bible, with our God. Our God cannot be manipulated. We don't control God, but God controls us. And that is a good thing! If we could make God give us anything we want, this world would be an utter and complete chaos. No, we depend on God to give us what we need. That means that we need to trust God, put our lives in his hands, and not try to control him and make him do what we want.

We need to keep this well in mind. God will not called be to account. And we may not challenge his love and wisdom with our questions. With that always in mind, let us see what kind of answer we can find.

3.3. How to resolve the supposed conflict?

To resolve the question we have to go back to the definition of prayer: it is an expression of our covenant relationship with God. A covenant is always made between two or more partners. God's covenant with us obviously has two partners, God and his

people. The covenant that God has made with us is one of a living relationship. God is a God who goes with his people through history, even until the return of Jesus Christ. God is with us every day. That is different, for instance, from a worldview called Deism. This worldview holds that there is a God, a Creator God. But it says that this Creator God once made the world, and kind of wound it up like a clock, and now stands by from a safe distance to see the history of the world unwind.

But our God is not like that. He goes with his people, listening to them, interacting with them. That is the essence of the covenant, where God says: I will be your God, and you will be my people. That is not just an observation or conclusion, that is a declaration of love. Throughout the Bible we see God acting in history, guiding his people, listening to his people. From Abraham to Egypt, from the Exodus to Canaan, from the Exile to the rebuilding of the temple, and from then to the coming of the Messiah. And since Christ's resurrection and ascension, God continues to go with us - from Pentecost to the building of the early church, to the Reformation, to this day. And he will always be with us until Jesus comes back on the clouds of heaven.

And why? Because God has a covenant with us. And in that covenant, that living relationship, there is living interaction. And that is why God is affected by our prayers. That is why God does allow his actions to be decided by prayers. In God's covenant we are partners, not equal partners, but partners nonetheless. In 1 Cor. 3:9 Paul says about missionaries like him that "we are fellow workers with God." God has included us and our prayers in his plan. God is waiting for us to pray to him so that he may take action.

How does that work exactly? Well, we can put it this way: God has not only ordained the ends, but also the means. God knows what is going to happen, but God has also given the means by which he makes things happen. For instance, God has given us life. But he has also given us the means by which to stay alive, namely to eat and drink. We won't stop eating and drinking and say: if it is God's plan that we live, we will live, whether we eat or not. No, God ordains the end, but also provides the means to that end.

There is one example that I know of in the Bible that says this so clearly, in Job 42. You all know the story of Job. Job's faith was tested by the Lord beyond imagination.

His friends tried to tell him what he did wrong. But Job never gave up trust in the Lord, although he did not understand why all those bad things happened to him. And in the end Job was vindicated. God then told Job's friends that he was angry with them. And then the LORD God says to them in vs 8: "Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly." You see how Job's prayer is included in God's plan without any conflict. God knows that Job shall pray for his friends, and God also says that when he does, he will hear his prayer.

In other words, there is no conflict between our prayers and God's sovereign will, because they are both included in his eternal plan.

For our human minds, these two, God's will and our prayers, will continue to be difficult to reconcile. But in the end we must let it rest, and accept our responsibility as partners in the covenant with God, that we must pray so that God can answer.

Consider that this is the same in other contexts as well. For instance in the work of mission and evangelism. God knows who his elect are. God knows exactly who will be saved and who won't. But does this relieve us from the responsibility to make disciples of all men (Mt. 28:19-20)? Of course not. God uses the means of mission and evangelism to reach those who are his elect. In Acts 18:10 the Lord said to Paul in a vision, when he was in Corinth: "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people." These people already belonged to God, but God still needed Paul to go to them and preach the gospel to them.

It is texts such as this one, and the one from Job 42 that show us that there is no conflict between our prayers and God's will. What does remain is this: our responsibility. We are responsible partners in the covenant. God wants to use us to do his will. We must therefore, as partners, let ourselves be used as instruments. We must not be slack in prayer, but eager to pray, because we know that God has ordained that our prayers make a difference.

4. The hearing of our prayers

Allow me to say just a few more words about the hearing of our prayers - because the very reason why we asked the question, Does prayer change things?, is that we often struggle to pray. There are, however, more reasons why we struggle to pray, and I don't want to just ignore these - also considering the aim of this address, that we are encouraged to pray more.

Fact is, that we do not always receive what we pray for. The Bible also mentions such prayers. In 2 Cor. 12:7ff Paul prays that God will take away the thorn in his flesh, whatever that exactly was. But God did not hear him. "My grace is sufficient for you", said the Lord God.

The Lord Jesus Christ himself prayed that the cup of suffering would be taken away from him. He prayed in tears, sweating drops of blood (Lk. 22:44). But God did not take the cup away. Instead he gave his Son strength to drink the cup of the wrath of his Father to the last drop.

Before we answer the question of so-called unanswered prayers we must make two observations. First, imagine that God did answer all our prayers! What would happen if we could control all God's actions. We would effectively be god ourselves. And would that be a good thing? Would it be good if sinful and near-sighted people like you and I would be in control of the world? I imagine that our world would not exist very long at all.

And second, we have a God who is almighty, all knowing and perfectly wise. Considering that we are not perfectly wise, then it logically follows that God will not hear each and every prayer. Fact is, that God is wiser than we. If God is supremely wise, then he must necessarily not hear all our prayers. Like a good king, who oversees the big picture of policies, economies, war and peace - he can refuse the request of one of the citizens of his country, just because he knows more and he knows better.

Besides that, the Lord gives indications for how we should pray. We should pray in faith, not doubting that God can do what we ask (Jas. 1). We should pray with a clear conscience, not hiding sin from God, like it says in Ps. 66:18: "If I had cherished iniquity

in my heart, the LORD would not have listened.” We must pray according to God’s will, so not selfishly, like it says in 1 Jn. 5:14: “If we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.” We must always have God’s honour and the upbuilding of his kingdom in mind, like Abraham did when he pleaded with God for Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen. 18.

Furthermore, God has his reasons for not giving us what we ask. Perhaps he wants to teach us patience, like Zechariah and Elisabeth. Perhaps we need to wait very long so that we may examine our motives. God may want to build our trust and faith. God may still hear, but in his time, and in his way, not in the way that we expected.

In the end, God hears all our prayers. And God answers all our prayers with everything that he knows that we need. We don’t always know what we need. But we need to put our trust in God. Job never knew what hit him. And God never revealed to him the reason for his suffering. We know, because we read about the background in the Bible, but Job never knew. Job protested and complained, but in the end he realised that God cannot be held accountable. God has proven his love and compassion in Jesus Christ. With him we are in safe hands.

5. Conclusion

I realise that there is so much more to say about prayer. And perhaps I have raised more questions for some of you than I have answered. But I hope that you have been encouraged to pray to the Lord with a passion. We need prayer to live close to God. May the Spirit of God help us to give us faith and trust in our Father, who alone is all wise, compassionate and the overflowing fountain of all good.

Thank you.

Eddy Rupke

October 2014

Points to Ponder

1. Discuss the statement that prayer is crucial for a living relationship of faith with God. Do you agree? Can you identify with that?
2. Share your experiences about your struggles to pray. If you don't have a problem with praying regularly at all, then encourage others. Share advice on how to pray regularly and sincerely.
3. Tell each other about times when you found your prayers answered. This need not be any kind of miraculous event. The hearing of prayers more often happens through natural means. Don't you agree?
4. It was a bit of an eye-opener to me that the supposed conflict between God's sovereign will and our prayer is not found anywhere in the Bible. Do you agree that the issue can expose a desire to want to control God?
5. Do you find it difficult to accept that God knows better than you? What can you do about that?