The Problem of Prayer **[1]**

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Many people—Christian or otherwise—will at some point wonder about the "problem of prayer". The "problem of prayer" asks whether there is any point to prayer: God knows everything, including the future, so why bother to pray? If everything is already predetermined, how can prayer change God's mind?

This problem can be further compounded by a perceived "lack of answers" to prayer.

In this article, I aim to briefly address these two concerns and describe why a Christian should not be distressed about either of them.

Why Pray at All?

The argument goes as follows: God knows the future, and before the world was created, He predetermined everything1. If everything is predetermined, then how do our prayers help? One could point to a passage such as Exodus 32:11–14, where Moses's intercession caused God to relent from destroying the rebellious Israelites. But this is a contentious passage. In fact, Moses's intercession did not calm down an emotionally out-of-control God.

Instead, this is not a matter of *either* our free will, *or* God's sovereignty. Rather, it is a harmonious union of it [2].

Before God created the world, God knew how we would act freely in any given situation. Given this knowledge, He predetermined a set of situations, which has played out in the world as we know it. Therefore, if Moses or ourselves pray, it is an act of free will as foreknown by God. God shaped reality around our free will actions.

So why did God relent because of Moses's prayer? Because He knew how Moses would react to His threat of destruction. This was a test for Moses (just as Abraham was tested when God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac). Moses's loving reaction to a rebellious people counted as *righteousness* to Moses, and was meant to serve as a correcting *example* to the Israelites.

This, really, is the point of our prayers: not to *accomplish* things, but to *reveal our motivations, desires and inclinations*. The significance of Jesus saying in Matthew 6:6:

> "But you, when you pray, enter into your inner room, and having shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."

is that so that we can reveal our true motivations. Are we concerned for those who are sick? Then we pray for them, because we are troubled that their sickness is a blight on God's good creation. Are we apathetic towards their suffering? Then we won't pray for their healing.

Based on God's foreknowledge of how we would pray, God may have rearranged circumstances, in the same way as He did when He relented from punishing the Israelites. He is not obligated, but even when He does not respond in the affirmative (see the section below), our hearts' desires reveal our sanctification—that is, that God's desires become our desires, and we are transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

Why Does God Not Answer?

The answer, simply, is that God *does* answer every prayer. The unpleasant realisation, though, is that God does not always answer in the affirmative. That is to say, sometimes He merely says "no". This does not make Him unloving or uncaring. As Jesus says in Luke 11:11–13:

> "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he won't give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? Or if he asks for an egg, he won't give him a scorpion, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

While this passage can be an appeal to prosperity, it actually highlights two crucial aspects of prayer. The first is the parent-child relationship which we have with God. God does have a much bigger picture of reality, and like a child who asks for a snake (but receives bread instead), we may not be aware of the foolishness[2] of our requests to God. But, like a child, we may get upset and resentful if we do not get precisely what we want.

This passage also points out that God does give freely what is most precious and significant: the Holy Spirit, God's saving grace and sustaining force in our lives.

What Jesus is referring to in the above quote is a prayer said in holy righteousness and with the aim of God's kingdom in mind, *not our own comfort apart from the kingdom*. Again, the whole context of the above passage (where the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray and He taught them the Lord's prayer) emphasises our relationship towards God (that of a humble dependant), but also that we have *responsibility*. God does not need anything, and we certainly cannot provide Him with anything. But because of the relational contract which exists between God and ourselves, we are responsible, for example, not only to receive forgiveness from God, but to forgive others as well (Luke 11:4). Neglecting this is spurning the offer of salvation which Jesus made: it is not a matter only of our own, personal salvation, but our salvation is a small part in the redemption of the whole world. Therefore our prayers cannot be rooted in selfishness (whatever form it make take). Instead, they must look to the betterment of the Kingdom, always.

Are Prayers Ineffectual?

All this ties in with another question which people may have: why is prayer not (seemingly) "accomplishing" anything?

Many studies [3] have been done on the effect of prayer on healing. The results have been varied,

with some studies showing a correlation between people being prayed for and the quality of their recovery, all the way to the opposite conclusion, where the findings have been that, statistically, prayer had been detrimental to the health of people[3].

One thing to realise is that *not all prayers are equal*. Firstly, if there is only one God, then prayers must be directed to that God. Speaking of some abstract, non-distinct divine entity is not (necessarily) enough; and definitely not a conception of God which is contrary to His true nature (in other words, praying to a false god instead of the true God). Secondly, God is not a genie that grants wishes. He is sovereign and ultimately works all things to the glory of His kingdom. Thirdly, as described in the sections above, the *motivation* must be correct: if we are driven by insecurities rather than God's sovereignty, such a prayer is not righteous. For example, we might fear losing our father to an illness, because he was a loving bedrock of our life. But that fear is not righteous: our trust should always be in God and that His will be done, and His kingdom will be advanced. Now, I am *not* saying that we should not pray for people to be healed. Rather, we need the correct perspective: pray that suffering will come to an end (whether through healing or otherwise), because suffering is a mar on God's good creation. Pray for life, because death destroys creation. Pray that someone will be encouraged and transformed through their ordeal, and be drawn nearer to Christ.

Pray Without Ceasing

Another point which Jesus makes in the Luke passage when speaking to His disciples, is that they must be persistent in their prayers (Luke 11:5–10). Again, this should not be taken to mean that obedient faithfulness will lead to prosperity. It should rather be understood to mean that God wants us to persist in our loving and godly desires.

A famous example is that of Monica, who was the mother of St. Augustine. Neither Augustine nor his father, Monica's husband, were Christian; a fact which deeply troubled and saddened her. But she kept praying for them. Augustine relates in his *Confessions* that she was one day speaking of her distress to a bishop. She begged him to help Augustine see the error of his heresies and convince him of the truth of Christianity. The bishop responded that Monica needed to continue praying and, seeing her sincerity and righteous desperation, said[4]:

> "Go your way; as you live, it cannot be that the son of these tears should perish."

Augustine later has a similar desire for his friend Verecundus to become a Christian, who only did so shortly before his death, which brought Augustine great comfort[5]:

> Thus thou hadst mercy on him, and not on him only, but on us as well; lest, remembering the exceeding kindness of our friend to us and not able to count him in thy flock, we should be tortured with intolerable grief.

Our prayers are serious matters: nothing is too insignificant for God to hear, or care. God will work all for the glory of His kingdom!

- 1. If you do not believe this, then you likely won't wrestle with the problem of prayer, but I personally would be highly cautious of such a position, as it can lead to all kinds of theological problems. The classical view of God, as omniscient and the greatest possible being, relies on His knowledge of the future.
- 2. Our requests can either be blatantly foolish, such as wanting a pet cobra, or foolish in the sense of us not understanding God's bigger purposes in an impossibly big (for us) and complicated world.
- 3. The authors of the paper to which is linked above conclude thus: "God may indeed exist and prayer may indeed heal; however, it appears that, for important theological and scientific

reasons, randomized controlled studies cannot be applied to the study of the efficacy of prayer in healing. In fact, no form of scientific enquiry presently available can suitably address the subject.".

- 4. Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.12.
- 5. Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.3.

Categories:

- Prayer [4]

Tags:

- prayer [5]
- augustine [6]
- st. augustine of hippo [7]
- monica [8]
- problem of prayer [9]
- molinism [10]
- counterfactuals [11]
- free will [12]
- kingdom [13]

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Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1172
[2] https://siyach.org/node/1141
[3] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2802370/
[4] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/3
[5] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/146
[6] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/139
[7] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/140
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[13] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/694