

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
Does Prayer Even Work?
Daniel 10:12-15**

On Easter we celebrated the crowds and we said to those who don't often visit that Easter is the time when we celebrate a mystery. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. We say that one of the differences between a religion and Christianity is that Christianity has mystery shot all the way through it. We don't pretend to understand everything. We have all kinds of questions. On Easter, we invited folks to come back for a series of questions that we have here in this body. The month before we had asked you for some of your questions about faith, things you don't understand or questions you have, even if they don't bother you that you can't answer easily. We had over 60 questions and lumped them into a pile. Today we would like to talk about one of the most prominent questions. It is basically, does prayer change God's mind at all? Why am I praying?

I'll deal with some of the specific questions in this group. The first question is this: "My 65-year-old brother was just diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer. It's already in his liver and lymph nodes. How do I answer my extended family members' questions? Where is God now? How do I share my belief in God's goodness and hope?" I'm not going to answer that last question today, in part because that's a question of pain, suffering, and evil, and two weeks from today we are going to focus on that exclusively.

But the person asking the question goes on and asks about prayer. "Can we really pray for something specific like my brother's healing, or should we pray for God's will to be done and for strength and peace during his illness and with whatever the outcome is? I've done the former, but that feels audacious. I don't know God's will and God does not always heal, so I pray that other way." That's question No. 1.

The second question is much simpler. It's this: "How do I hear God's voice? How do I know when it's God who is speaking to me?"

The third question I added because, frankly, I thought it was a question that a lot of people have, but are embarrassed to ask. It comes from a dad who is an agnostic, not sure about God, writing to his son who is a pastor-professor. The dad says this:

As I said before, I don't see that prayer ever works. Not only this, but I don't see how prayer ever *could* work. If God is all-good and all-powerful, and concerned about us, doesn't He already want the best for us? And so wouldn't He already be doing as much as He can ever do for us? So what are you asking for in prayer? For Him to care more? He supposedly already cares as much as He could. Are you asking Him to do more? He's

supposedly already doing everything He can. Are you informing Him of some problem so He'll do something about it? He supposedly already knows everything. So you can't inform Him about anything, you can't coax Him to do anything, and you can't empower Him to do anything. So what the hell are you doing when you pray? The whole thing seems like a total waste of time to me.

Do you have an answer for that? Before we jump into the *head* answers, I just want to say that all through this series, we've been praying that you would hear the question beneath the question. A lot of times when somebody asks about the existence of God, the real question is "How come God doesn't really feel present to me?" When somebody asks about prayer, the real question is often, "How come my prayers go unanswered? Why don't I sense God here?" It's not a theological thing, it's a real life thing. "She is going to die. Help me!" And so for people who are pray-ers, who today are feeling like their prayers are being sent back to them marked *rejected*, *address unknown*, we want to say that we understand. This is a real life issue for many, not for many of you right now, but for many of *us* right now.

Let's take that last question first. It's from the book that Greg Boyd wrote about his interaction with his agnostic dad called *Letters from a Skeptic*. The dad says, "I don't see that prayer ever works." He wonders why we would ask God for something if He already knows everything. I think it starts with the premise that the main purpose of prayer has very little to do with asking for stuff. The main point of prayer is to establish and then build a relationship, a faithful love-filled relationship, with the God who is our Creator and Redeemer.

What kind of relationship would I have with my wife, Laura, if the only time I talked to her was when I was asking her for something? It wouldn't be very good. When we talk, we talk about everything, our fears, our hopes, our days, and our future, the things that we are learning. That is the way it is supposed to be with God. Prayer is supposed to have as its main function just being with someone we love. In other words, prayer is recognizing again in the middle of the afternoon, "Oh, You're here! Did You see that duck? What did You think about that?" with someone you love, to listen, to talk, just to be there with your Creator. Prayer is a reminder that God is here, so Greg answered his dad's question about asking for things this way. He said, "Dad,

Asking for things—what's called "*petitionary prayer*"—is simply one minor aspect of this total relationship. It's not that God needs our petitions to be informed or empowered to do anything. You're right: He's already as good, as concerned, as informed, and as powerful as He can be. But because a loving relationship with Him is His highest agenda for us, He constructs the order of things such that a loving relationship with Him will be facilitated. And thus He ordains that some things will only be done through prayer.

Because God has love as His highest agenda, He gives us some say-so in our lives. We have to have some choice if we are going to be free people, because only people with a free will can love. If I don't have any choice about whether I love you or not, it's not really love. I'm being forced to do it. But if I choose to love or not love, then my choice, my love, has real meaning and so God gives us choices to go this way or that way. He knows the over-all chapter headings, but He allows us to write the script in between, to marry this person or that, to take this job or that, to declare this truth or that lie, and each choice is a reflection not necessarily of what God wants, but what God allows.

Petitionary prayer is simply the spiritual aspect of that same power to influence that God gives us in the physical world. Lift the rock or don't. In the same way that God decided He would not do everything He wanted on a physical level to help us become free, He will not do everything He'd like on a spiritual level. He gives us this spiritual say-so, prayer is spiritual say-so, for the same reason He gives us say-so on a physical level, to help us become free, to help us learn to trust and depend on Him so that we can have a real, loving relationship with Him. There are some things God chooses not to do until He is asked, because He wants us to learn the freedom and responsibility of asking. God is not a spiritual vending machine. Put in four prayers; you'll get this answer. God is not a puzzle where if you figure it out right, you'll get what you ask for. There is a relationship here and that's part of what makes prayer a mystery, but you understand it almost intuitively.

You know, the great thing about talking about prayer on Mother's Day is that there is no way we can ever understand or define the depths of a mother's fierce love. You just can't do it, but we know that it's there and that's how prayer affects things. In ways we cannot quantify, we develop the assurance that God is there and that God cares immensely. "Well, then why doesn't God answer my prayers?" Mother's Day: As I walked into Breadsmith this morning, a mom walked out with a screaming three-year-old, not whimpering or crying, a *screaming* three-year old boy. The guy I'm walking in with says, "Yeah, must be Mother's Day. Where's the dad?" She sits her little boy down on a chair outside and tries to calm him. "Why aren't my prayers answered?" Well, what's the batting average of a typical three-year-old with mom? Most of the time a three-year-old is saying, "Why this? Why not that? Why not over here? Why not now? Please, now. Please, NOW!" Is it that the mother doesn't love her child because she is saying, "Wait" or "Not yet" or "No"? Of course not.

Parents delight in the curious questions asked by their children, at least the first 452 of them before nine o'clock in the morning. We love that, but we know that saying, "Not yet" takes more love than saying, "Here. Sure. Have a fourteenth Tootsie Roll." We want so much for the best for them that we do not always give them what they want. That's the way my prayers are and that's why I think it's important to pray, to establish that relationship.

What about that first question that was asked? A woman has a sick brother. "Can we really pray for something specific like the healing of an illness or should we just pray for God's will to be done?" There's a passage in Paul's letter to the church in Rome where he's talking about prayer, and the reason I love it is because Paul is me. Paul says,

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought,

that could be translated, "We don't even know how to pray,"

but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words [Romans 8:26].

We are all three-year-olds, all of us. It should not surprise us that our prayers are not answered the same way. It should not surprise us that a lot of times, we don't even know how to pray. Prayer, the whole idea of talking to God about our lives, reminds us fairly constantly that we live in a broken world. Ask the children of Syria. Ask the children of Lake and Pillsbury this morning with another shooting right outside their houses. Prayer reminds us we live in a broken world.

The Bible contains a prayer book, a book full of prayers. It's called the Psalms. Psalm means song, but those songs are just prayers that have been turned into songs. The most common of the prayers in the Bible is called a lament. "Oh, God, why did You let that happen?" "Oh, God, why is this still going on?" "Oh, God, help me." Prayer often reminds us that we are in a broken world and we don't even know how to pray.

I have a book that an old woman gave me in my very first pastorate when I knew so much more than I know now. It's actually out of print. You can only get it through Amazon.com. It's called *Prayers for Impossible Days* by Paul Geres and I love it, even the chapter headings. This is When You Pray, A Prayer for Days When Things Go Against You, I like this next one more now than when I first read it, A Prayer to Age Without Bitterness, A Prayer After a Separation, Prayer When You Are the Subject of Gossip, Prayer When You Are Worried About Money, Prayer About Sorrow for Sin, Prayer When You Feel That You've Failed, A Prayer When You're Tired of Prayer.

I love *Prayers for Impossible Days*. They help me answer the question, "Shall I pray for what is specifically on my mind or shall I pray for God's will?" For God's sake, pray for what's on your mind. Pray for exactly what you think is on your mind because that is the kind of prayer that God loves, the prayer of our hearts. Not "I ought to pray for that. I want this, but I ought to pray for that, because maybe if I pray for that, I'll get this." You're confusing God, much less yourself. "God, I don't know what's best, but I do know what I want." That is more honest. I would tell this woman not to get too spiritual for God. Acknowledge the will of God. Say, "I'm trying to trust You, God," and pray like *heaven* for comfort and for healing.

What about that second question on the list? It's a real short question. "How do I hear God's voice? How do I know when God is speaking to me?" If I have learned anything in the 55 years that I have followed Jesus, it's that prayer is very disconnected from my emotions. Prayer is not an emotional experience. Sometimes I go, "Oh, God, I pray for my children that they will be . . ." and I'm filled with love for the kids and I can't wait to see how God answers my prayer. But most days I'm like, "Okay, God, I'm supposed to pray for my kids so, I'm praying for my kids." "Okay, God, I'm supposed to pray for this, so I'm praying for this. I don't feel it, but I'm still praying for it." Isn't that the key to love, to do it when you don't feel it? To have a relationship that is founded in reality is not to have it founded in emotion, but in perseverance. Sometimes I think God wants me to keep praying and praying for something, not so that I'll know whether God is serious, but so that I'll know that I am serious about this. Is this really important? God is teaching me to persevere. C. S. Lewis once said he thought the prayers he prayed when he was totally, emotionally detached might be the most powerful, the ones that got right to the throne of heaven.

"How do I hear God's voice?" I'm not sure that prayer is a huge hearing aid. I used to think that there was something wrong with my prayers because I was not often enough hearing God say, "Go through the door on the left." I think that prayer is more me turning constantly enough to God that I am able to see God in the world around me, to know that God is in both the door on the left *and* the door on the right. The important thing is not to choose the correct door, it's to look for God to be present with you.

We are often taught that we should wait until God reveals Himself in prayer. I question that sometimes. I don't think you should rush, but I think that if you wait for that little mystical voice in

the middle of the night to tell you exactly what you want to hear, you are usually just waiting for exactly what you want to hear. I think God reveals Himself to us in many other ways.

A Mom's Day story: We're trying to teach our three-year-old Maggie about prayer. She is seated in one of those little scooters. "Why should we have to pray before we get the ice cream?" "Well, it's because when we pray, God talks to us and when we pray enough, we learn how to listen to God. We hear God speak back." Maggie cocks her head to the side and goes, "Okay, Jesus." "Yup, just heard Him again." It may be that's why children are closer to the Kingdom of Heaven. It may be that she learned a lesson on prayer, that the prime purpose of prayer is that you and I will learn to see God in this world all through the day. People were shocked six or seven years ago when a journal revealed that Mother Teresa, the great saint of India, had gone for 50-plus years without feeling the presence of God. This great spiritual woman, who called people to pray every day as she did, said she felt God's presence when she became a Christian and then for a period in the middle of her life, but then never again.

And that just hurt a lot of people's faith, but it helped me so much! It made me feel like, "Oh, God, really! Oh, God, well, if You treat Mother Teresa that way, there's hope for me." Dorothy Day, the great Christian activist, spoke to God for decades and said she did not hear God so much as she had a growing sense of God's reality in her day. She did not hear God so much as she had a growing sense that God was there. A pastor who was involved in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous was Sam Shoemaker. Sam would often say to people who said they didn't believe in prayer, "Well, why don't you try it for thirty days. What have you got to lose? Every day, just three times a day. Not all day but three times a day. Write a card that says, 'God, right now I'm going to pray about' and finish that sentence. Pray every day for thirty days. I guarantee you that in thirty days, whether or not you hear God's voice, the world will look more God-filled."

"When I hear God's voice, how do I know it's God speaking to me?" Laura is not here this weekend. She is down in Chicago. Her baby brother David, my brother-in-law, has stage 4 cancer. It looks very grim. Many of you know that Laura does a blog called *Awake My Soul* and she went down there with a draft of the blog she wanted to show them before she sent it out. The blog is on prayer and it says, "What are the six most important words in prayer?" The six most important words in prayer are found in the Book of Daniel. Everybody remembers Daniel in the lion's den, but you probably also remember from Sunday School Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fire, right? In the furnace. What happens is, the king creates a huge idol. He says that everybody who doesn't bow down to this idol gets thrown in the furnace. The three of them love the king, but they love God even more and so they refuse to bow. The king hauls them in front of him and says this.

¹⁵ Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" ¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." [Daniel 3:15-18]

“But even if He does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” And into the furnace they went. “But even if He does not.” The rest of the story was the second miracle. The first miracle is that these people had come through their prayers and through their lives and through their relationships into a belief that God was there all around them and if they prayed, God would deliver them. “But even if He does not,” they trusted that this God loved them. And my wife is going down to tell her brother, “I’m praying for you ‘but even if He does not . . .’” Only prayers given over a lifetime can offer you the unshakable conviction that there is a God who loves you and wants your best. You will have doubts and concerns about every prayer every day of your life, but if you continue to look for the God to whom you pray in the world around you, you will be reminded that you are beloved of God. You are the apple of God’s eye.

Remember I told you that in Romans 8, the apostle Paul says that we don’t even know how to pray? This is how Paul ends the chapter. He says,

³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord [Romans 8:38-39].

I’m not sure if this is helpful to your friends who don’t believe in God, or even to your friends who have questions about whether prayer works. But for those of you who are working to pray even if your heart is broken, my prayer is that this mysterious relationship we have with God will change you and you will see God all around you.

Jesus was asked one time by the disciples to teach them how to pray and He showed them. Why don’t you close your eyes?

Lord, we *talk* about prayer sometimes more than we pray. You don’t want to make it simple like a child, but You want to make it clear that when we pray we should say, “Father, I know You are in heaven, but I sense that You are here. Our Father, who art in heaven, I know that You are here. Bless Your Name. Bless You because You are the source of goodness and all that is loving in this world. Hallowed be Thy Name. Your Kingdom come. Your will be done. God, help me to see what You want me to do. Help me to see Your will being done in this world. Give us this day our daily bread. God, I think that means I’m not supposed to worry about tomorrow, but for today’s bread, and I pray for that bread for me and for those whom I love. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Wash me clean that I don’t have to pretend anymore, God. And deliver us from evil. Evil often walks the streets and sometimes it hides in my heart. Deliver us from evil and we will see that Yours is the power and the Kingdom and the glory forever and ever.” And all God’s children said,

[All:] Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.