

“Why Pray?”

I grew up in the church, believing in God, and believing in prayer.
I still believe in God and I still believe in prayer.
But my beliefs have changed.

I used to believe in a God who had created the Universe
and who had loved the world enough to send Jesus to live and die for love of us.
But the God I believed in was a God who was pretty much hands off,
allowing me to live my life as I thought best.
Yes, if I got into trouble or needed help I could ask, I could pray,
but the prayer would go like this:
‘God, here’s what I need and it would be really great if you could give it to me,
but if you can’t, that’s okay, I understand.
You probably have more important things to do.
At any rate, you know what’s best. Amen.”

So...what do you think of that prayer? Is there anything missing in it?
And what do you think of the concept of God that it reflects? Is it what the Bible teaches?

What I have come to understand over the past 15 years is that what that prayer is lacking is faith.
It takes no faith to say, “God, I’d like...but I won’t count on it.”

Now you may be saying to yourself,
“But isn’t that what Jesus said in the Garden of Gethsemane the night he was arrested? “
Well, that may be what it sounds like.
But I don’t think we can take that prayer as his normal prayer –
it was certainly not a normal situation.

He prayed for hours that night and his prayer was so intense that he sweat blood.
It’s not that the prayer “God, I’d like...but your will be done” is wrong.
It’s just that it skips the whole “*if you have faith and do not doubt*” part
that Jesus talked about in our reading from Matthew.

If I am asking God to do something in my life,
I need to ask, in faith, believing that God not only can, but will, answer my prayer.
I need to ask with boldness and confidence and total trust.
I need to invite others to join me in that prayer.
I need to testify that I expect God to answer my prayer.
I need to take a leap of faith and say,
“I believe in a n all-powerful and all-loving God
who can work miracles and do wonders and dazzle me!”

So why do I pray?
There are more reasons than I can count, but let me just give you three.

1. I pray because: **Prayer changes things**. Prayer changes circumstances around us.

Three examples from the Bibleⁱ:

* Joshua prayed like it would stop the sun from going down (and it did!)ⁱⁱ

* Elijah prayed like it would actually change the situation (and it did!)ⁱⁱⁱ

* David prayed like it would stop the plague (and it did!)^{iv}

And one example from my own life....

Every year that I've been at Salem I have prayed this prayer:

“God, you see that we adopted a deficit budget again.

I'm asking that you provide the funds to make up that deficit,

without us having to use up the \$600,000 principle of our endowment.

I have stood on your promise and proclaimed your promise, God:

I have said that if we do your will,

you will provide the resources for us to continue to do your will,

as a testament to your power and glory.

And when you answer this prayer, God, I will sing your praises!”

Our treasurer could come up with the exact figure,

but I am pretty sure that the cumulative deficits

probably add up to well over \$600,000.

The eyes of doubt can always rationalize away answered prayer,

and in this case those eyes may credit the stock market.

But to my eyes of faith, this is nothing less than the miracle of an answered prayer

that has changed *things*, prayer that has changed our circumstances.

2. I pray because: **Prayer changes me**. Prayer can change our bodies, minds, hearts and souls.

Two examples from the Bible^v:

* Hannah prayed like it would result in her having a child (and it did!)^{vi}

* Jesus prayed like it would raise Lazarus from the dead (and it did!)^{vii}

And one quick example from my own life:

I use to be your typical main-line Protestant

who found it very uncomfortable to talk about God or church or anything spiritual
outside of my congregation.

I had absorbed the rules of our current culture that tell us

that one doesn't talk certain things – like religion or politics or money or sex.

But at some point I prayed that God would be more real to me,

and one day God answered my prayer in a dramatic way.

I knew God's power in a way I had never known it before,

and that knowledge changed a lot of other things inside me.

I am now so excited about what God is doing in my life, I can't keep the news inside

and I find myself telling people I hardly even know

about the awesome things God has done for me!

I didn't actually pray for God to change me – I just wanted to know God better –

but my prayer ended up changing *me* in ways I had never expected.

3. I pray because: **Prayer changes God.**

Two examples from the Bible^{viii}:

- * Moses prayed like it would actually change God's mind (and it did!) ^{ix}
- * God planned to destroy Nineveh,
but the people prayed like it would actually change God's mind (and it did!)^x

Does prayer actually change God?

Well, I don't believe there is anything we creatures could ever do that could change the character and nature of God.

And I'm not sure whether I have any evidence that we actually change God's mind or not, except for two things: the Biblical evidence, and my own experience of being a parent.

As far as my experience as a parent, well, since I am made in God's image, I believe that our relationships with our children reflect (however dimly) God's relationship with us.

And there have certainly been times when I was planning on doing a certain thing and my children persuaded me to do something different.

As far as the Biblical evidence is concerned, Scripture is full of if/then propositions from God: "if you do this, I will do that", "if you do that, I will do this".

And so every single time I turn to God and confess my sins, God forgives me.

Every time I fall down, God picks me up.

Every time I get off the path, God sets me back on it.

Every time I disobey God, I deserve to be punished,

but when I turn to God in repentant prayer, God relents of the punishment I deserve.

Then, too, in James 4:2 we read, "*You do not have because you do not ask God.*"

and that seems to indicate that if we don't ask, we will not have,

and so we ask in order that God may act differently.

I pray because in my life I have discovered that prayer works.

It works in huge ways like thousands of dollars coming to me from a virtual stranger.

It works in middle sized ways like giving me signs to confirm that I'm still on the right path.

It works in small ways like helping me find my lost keys or lost phone.

I pray because Prayer changes my life.

Prayer changes *things* in my life. Prayer changes *me*. And Prayer even changes *God*.

I believe that there is no greater power on earth

than the power that connects us with the Source of all that is.

And that Source is prayer.

This Lent I invite you to join me in our Lenten Adventures in Prayer.

This week we looked at Y we pray.

And over the next 4 weeks we will be using the letters PRAY

to learn how to pray, how to go deeper into prayer, and how to harness the power of prayer.

If you're satisfied with your life just the way it is now, then maybe you should sit this one out,

but if you want things to change in your life and you are open to being changed

I promise you that you will not be disappointed.

The more I pray, the more God answers, the more God surprises, and the more God delights.

And the farther I get into the journey, the greater the adventure it becomes.

So, this week I ask you to pray.

Pray that God will demonstrate in ways that will dazzle and delight you

all the reasons Y we need PRAY!

So PRAY – and may abundant blessings be yours! **Amen**

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- ⁱ “7 Reasons I Believe Prayer Changes Things” by Greg Stier [<https://gregstier.org/blog-7-reasons-i-believe-prayer-changes-things/>]
- ⁱⁱ “... *Joshua said to the Lord... ‘Sun, stand still ... and you, moon....’ So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped....*”
[Joshua 10:12,13]
- ⁱⁱⁱ “... *Elijah ...prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for 3.5 years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain...*” [James 5:16-18]
- ^{iv} “...*the LORD answered [David’s] prayer ,, & the plague on Israel was stopped.*” [2 Samuel 24:25]
- ^v Op. Cit., “7 Reasons...”
- ^{vi} “*I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him.*” [1 Samuel 1:27]
- ^{vii} “...*Jesus ... said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me.... When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out....*” [John 11:41-44]
- ^{viii} Op. Cit., “7 Reasons...”
- ^{ix} “*Then Moses entreated the Lord his God, and said, ‘...Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people...’ So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.*” [Exodus 32:11-14]
- ^x “*Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; ‘ and God relented from the disaster that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it.*” [Jonah 3:10]