

## Why Pray?

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Does prayer work?

Have you ever asked yourself that question?

When my answer to that question first got upended was the very first time I can remember ever being angry with God.

I grew up in a home that prayed. We prayed a lot – not necessarily publicly but certainly at home. You see, my parents believed in two things regarding prayer – that we should do it and that we shouldn't make a show of it. They reminded us of Jesus' words to not pray for show but to instead to go in our closet and pray in private. But those private prayers, they told us, were very important. As kids, we prayed every night before bed. It was a discipline that I continued as I got old enough to pray by myself. All the way through high school, I would pray before I went to bed. Sometimes, it would be just a few seconds. Sometimes, it would be quite long. Sometimes, I would fall asleep praying.

I would thank God for all the good things in my life. I would ask God to make me a better person. And I would pray for all the people I knew who were hurting in some way. And I always believed that my prayers worked, meaning, that in praying, somehow my prayers might move God to act in a way to help those for whom I prayed.

The person I prayed for, probably more than anyone else, was my friend and high school classmate Liza. When she was around 10 years old, she started developing tumors on her eyes that eventually left her blind. The tumors then spread to her brain and her kidneys. By the time we graduated high school, she'd had dozens of eye surgeries, two brain surgeries, and a kidney surgery. But that didn't stop her. She decided to go to college and we both found ourselves living in Birmingham Alabama in college dormitories on opposite sides of town our freshmen year.

We kept in touch. I still prayed for her nearly every night.

My college had beautiful grounds and so I would often go for walks across the quad at night. Sometimes, I would find a nice, secluded spot among the trees, and have my prayer time there. One night I was out on the quad and started praying. As usual, I started praying for Liza and suddenly the wind started blowing quite hard. I continued to pray and the wind continued to blow. The trees were swaying, my hair – this was back when I still had hair – was flapping.

And I was convinced that something was happening. I was convinced that the wind blowing was a sign that God was hearing my prayer. Could it possibly be that Liza was about to be healed? I went back to my room and called her. No answer.

A day or so later, I heard back from her. She had not been healed. In fact, the same night that I was praying on the quad, she tripped over something in her dorm room and broke her ankle.

For the first time in my life, I allowed myself to be angry with God and I told God I was angry. And, for the first time in my life, I began to question the whole point of prayer. I began to wonder if prayer does in fact work. It was maybe my first crisis of faith.

I started to believe that my previous understanding of prayer was far too elementary. If the God of the universe needs me to convince God to do something good for somebody by praying, then I'm not sure what to make of that God. And if that's the case, then I began to question why I should pray at all. For a while I didn't.

And it was actually the Lord's prayer that helped me start praying again. We pray this prayer every week in church and there's a version of it in our Scripture today.

*"Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."*

Maybe the most influential book I've ever read for my faith development and theology is Daniel Erlander's *Manna and Mercy*. It almost looks like a children's book and it is accessible to kids, but it is also the most beautiful, life giving interpretation of Scripture I've ever seen. Dan was a New Testament scholar and he was once asked why he chose Manna and Mercy as the title for his book. He said that it was customary for Jewish rabbis to teach their disciples a prayer as a summary of their teachings. So when the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, they aren't really asking Jesus to teach them how to talk to God. Rather, they're asking Jesus to give them the summary, to give them the high points of what he's all about.

And Jesus responds by saying, here are the main things for you to remember:

God's kingdom come. Work to make the world a place where love and peace and justice prevail.

Give us our daily bread. Work to build a world where all have enough and may we learn to live with only what we need. May we have our daily bread – no more and no less. It would have reminded the hearers of the story of Manna in the wilderness. God has created the world so that we all have enough if some of us don't take too much.

Forgive us as we forgive others. The way of God is the way of mercy and if we want to walk in God's way, we too will extend mercy to others.

Save us from the time of trial. Save us from all those things that try to get us to take more than we need, that tempt us to hold grudges and withhold forgiveness, that tempts us to trust in power and force and wealth rather than the values of God's kingdom.

By putting these values in the prayer he taught his disciples, Jesus was telling them (and us) that this is what it means to follow him in a nutshell.

Manna and Mercy.

And what I notice about this prayer is that it's not so much asking God to do something as it is asking that we might take on the heart of God. In other words, this kind of prayer is not trying to change God; it's trying to change us.

And what Jesus says next, I think, is an insight into how that change happens. He tells the story of an unjust judge who finally grants justice because of the persistence of the one who is asking. He's tired of being bothered when the person asks over and over again. One way to interpret this parable, the most common way, is to say that if persistence works with an evil judge, surely it will work with God. But you've heard me say before, and I'll probably say it many more times, that parables never have a single solitary meaning, but rather can convey different truths with the same story. I think that's one reason Jesus taught in parables so often.

Another way to interpret this story is to think of us as the judge. You see, prayer can transform us, it can help us take on the heart of God, but that doesn't happen if we aren't persistent. That's why things like prayer, journaling, meditation, and reading Scripture are called spiritual disciplines – they aren't meant to be practices we engage with as needed but rather a regular practice that becomes as much a part of our life as eating. And like all disciplines, the more we practice, the more we become connected, the more we become transformed.

Recently, one of my favorite writers, Ann Lamott wrote an article on prayer in the New York Times. I found her words some of the most profound and beautiful words I've ever read about prayer. She said:

*I do not understand much about string theory, but I do know we are vibrations, all the time. Between the tiny strings is space in which change can happen. The strings are infinitesimal; the space between nearly limitless. Prayer says to that space, I am tiny, helpless, needy, worried, but there's nothing I can do except send my love into that which is so much bigger than me.*

*How do people like me who believe entirely in science and reason also believe that prayer can heal and restore? Well, I've seen it happen a thousand times in my own inconsequential life. God seems like a total showoff to me, if perhaps unnecessarily cryptic.*

*When I pray for all the places where we see Christ crucified — Ukraine, India, the refugee camps — I see in my heart and in the newspaper that goodness draws near, through UNICEF, Doctors Without Borders, volunteers, through motley old us.*

*When I am at my most rattled or in victimized self-righteousness, I go for walks, another way to put my feet to prayer. I pray for help, and in some dimension outside of my mind or language, I*

*relax. I can breathe again. I say, "Thank you." I say, "Thank you for the same flowers and trees and ferns and cactuses I pass every day." I say, "Thank you, thank you, thank you."*

*And that prayer changes you.*

So we come back to that same question that I began with. Does prayer work?

If by work, do I mean that somehow we can convince God to do something that God wouldn't otherwise have done. I don't think that's how prayer works. No doubt there are plenty of times when I've prayed for someone or something and something seemingly miraculous happened. I can't explain those times. I only try to accept them with gratitude.

But there are also those times like I experienced with my friend Liza where it seemed like my prayer didn't "work," at least not in the way I was hoping. I can't explain those times either.

As to whether some prayers seem to be answered while others aren't is a mystery and I would be extremely suspicious of anyone who claimed to be able to answer that question.

But what I believe is that the point of prayer is not to change God. It's to change us. We pray so that we will be more aware and feel more deeply the pain of those for whom we pray – just like God does. We pray so that we will cultivate lives of gratitude and pay attention to the blessings all around us. We pray so that we will become more like Christ – more merciful, more loving, more kind.

And for those things, prayer absolutely works...better than anything I know.