

Can your prayer change God's mind?

By Fr. Dave Heney

Are your prayers doing any good? Does God hear and answer prayers? If God is all powerful and all loving, will He cure your loved one of sickness, or answer rosaries, litanies, and other prayers for your deeply felt needs? What is the power of prayer after all? What is the point of praying for anything?

What is prayer after all?

Prayer is simply talking to God ...whom you also recognize is the creator of the universe ...and you. After all, you did not choose to be born into this world at this time and in this place and into your family. You simply discovered yourself alive here and now. Someone else was clearly in charge! ...God is worth talking to!

This God of the whole universe wants to hear you *personally*. You can actually talk to God in the full dignity of your human nature and not fear His divine power at all. He invites your conversation because He loves you, and only wants what is good for you.

He created you with free will and deeply respects your freedom. You have the power to either accept or refuse God's invitation to talk. Why refuse? He simply wants you to talk with Him personally and honestly. Something beautiful happens when you do.

Your prayer immediately affirms ...*there is a God* ... who is above all things, and affirms your humility before Him. The main message of the Book of Genesis, the first book in the bible, is simply that "*There is a God ...and it is not you!*"

You recognize first that you did not cause yourself to be born, but found yourself alive ... here in this place ...and in this time. You humbly recognize that someone else is in charge of the universe ... and you!

Jesus invites you to pray constantly for what you want. He also tells you how: "*Ask in my name*" and it will be answered. That means you ask *in the same way that Jesus would ask*, which is to ask for whatever God wants for your salvation. "*Not my will but yours be done.*" (Mark 14:36) It might be a

good idea to discover who this person of Jesus is, and what His salvation means.

Frustration might arise when you think you know better than God about your needs or how your prayers should be answered, and perhaps are not pleased when God's answer may differ from yours.

While Jesus does promise that you will receive an answer (Mt 7:8), He doesn't promise that you will get exactly what you ask for...instead, He promises that you will get what you *need for your salvation*. (Eph. 1:11)

Jesus assures you of this when He says, "*Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asks for a fish? If you then, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask Him!*" (Mt 7:9-11)

Whose Prayer gets answered?

Imagine a hungry lion coming upon a young zebra on the African plain. Imagine they both pray for deliverance; the lion from hunger ...and the zebra



from the lion! How are we to understand how each prayer should be answered? Farmers pray for rain and wedding couples pray for no rain on their wedding day. What is God thinking when He answers prayers one way or the other? How should God answer your prayers?

Jesus Prays in Gethsemane

On the night before He died, Jesus went to a small olive grove near Jerusalem called *The Garden of Gethsemane*. He knows He is facing arrest and crucifixion, so while there He prays that He might *not have to go through this horrible event*. You would probably pray the same thing! Yet, God answers His prayer ...with a clear “No.”

Jesus learns He will have to go through with His suffering because God, His all loving Father, knows it would lead to the salvation of the whole world, a much greater good than ending the suffering of Jesus on that Good Friday. *God answers your prayers in the same way ...that is only good for your salvation*. That is why Jesus responds, “*Not my will ...but yours be done!*” Jesus knows His Heavenly Father knows what is best for your salvation. *God answers prayers in a way that is always, and only ...good for your salvation*.

The natural world, with its rain cycles, earthquakes, lion and zebra battles, and other natural events play themselves out according to their natural and ancient rhythms. God designed life to evolve in these natural ways that cause animals to prey on each other and the earth to go through its natural weather and geologic changes.

Do you like beautiful mountain scenes? Well, they are caused by violent earthquakes, volcanoes, and powerful geologic forces. They are natural events that we adapt to as best we can, using our human intelligence to understand as best we can. They are also events when the very best in our human nature often comes out ...rescuing victims and caring for the injured. You can certainly pray for rain or no rain, earthquake or no earthquake, but

the answer will only come according to what is good for your personal salvation.

God did not command us to build our homes on earthquake fault lines or flood plains or brushfire zones. We chose that, and must accept that responsibility, and learn from our mistakes. Taking responsibility is a step to your salvation for sure. God’s will is for you living your life to the fullest! (*John 10:10, 15:11*)

How you react to events is key

The world is the way it is, with its natural events, both good and bad. By God’s design, you arrive in this world with both natural genetic benefits and handicaps as well. Some are born with a genetic predisposition to cancer or other problems and



others with robust health. What God offers you is the grace to be grateful for your benefits and the wisdom to use them well, and the courage and virtues to face your handicaps and overcome them by also using them well too. That is how you develop as a human person. *Wisdom comes from suffering*. Your human development comes from your facing the facts of your life on this ever evolving and sometimes geologically dynamic planet earth, and using them well, *for your salvation*.

You can share in the joy of creation

God knows you need to eat each day ...so why doesn’t an all loving God provide your meals? God knows it is better for you to develop your own human skills to get an education, get a job, ...and pay for dinner yourself! That is taking responsibility. That is how we all grow and mature as human persons. You help create your own life.

God calls you to help develop yourself and the world into His Kingdom of love. He will not force anyone to follow Him in making this Kingdom of love, so He also depends on good people to accept His call to be missionaries to spread faith and love around the world, to learn medicine to heal broken bodies, and to grow food in innovative

ways to feed the hungry. *He needs us to accomplish these missions!* God will not do what He knows you can do yourself. Your salvation is always a two-way process, there is what God does ...and what you do. We can feel a wonderful joy in sharing in God's creative work.

This is expressed beautifully in the Offertory Prayers at Mass. While God causes wheat and grapes to grow, we turn them into bread and wine by "*the work of human hands.*" God takes what we bring and transforms them into His Body and Blood. The Mass *combines* what God does and what you do to make His love present. We can share the same joy God has by sharing in the creation of something wonderful.

Does God still heal the sick?

The Gospel stories of healings are the happiest of all. Jesus heals the sick, removes evil spirits, and lifts the heavy rule of the Pharisees. What unites all events is freedom. Sickness, evil spirits, and heavy rules limit your freedom, so Jesus frees you from all of them, whether from sickness, Satan, or the Pharisees, as He also promised in His own kind of "*Inaugural Address*" (Luke 4:18). "*I have come to proclaim freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and set the oppressed free.*" Freedom is the essence of love. What Jesus brings is freedom ...so that you can love more!

God offers healing to sick persons, or anyone in need, so they can love more. That is the purpose of everything Jesus ever said and did. That is your salvation. *It is love that ensures your happiness now and in eternal life.* We believe God can heal you of your sickness, or other problems, and has done so many times before, as the Gospels and stories about the Saints confirm. But those cases still seem small in number compared to the millions who have ever been sick and are still sick today, perhaps like you right now. Why is that?

We need to remember what God considers a cure. While it might seem that only a few received healing in the Gospels and only a few famous cases in history after that, we affirm that *God offers every single sick person whatever cure it takes to restore you and your soul for eternal life.* It is your eternal life that is His goal. A few more years of health here is not any kind of victory if you are still not ready for eternal life!

In all Gospel accounts of miracles, every cure always had another purpose than just the recovery of health. For example, when Jesus cures Peter's mother-in-law, she gets right up and serves others. (Matthew 8:15) Her cure was a *means* to make a more loving life possible. *It is that love that is your purpose, not just health or sickness.* Jesus freed her to do just that. *There is no point in your being healthy or sick if you do not love.* However, many people that Jesus cured walked away with no change in their moral behavior at all. He does not want that!



Does God still offer miraculous cures? *Yes He does!* If a physical cure will produce that eternally directed spiritual and moral change in your understanding and behavior, and perhaps also be a witness to oth-

ers, then God will produce a miraculous and amazing physical cure. If God believes that it is actually your physical illness that can produce that change in your eternally directed understanding and behavior, and also be an amazing witness of compassion and courage to others; and for most people open to His grace that will be most likely what will happen, then it will be His will that you should face your sickness as it is ...with *His faith-filled compassion and courage that He will freely offer you in abundance.*

He is still "*Emmanuel*" (*God with us*) the only One who truly knows and deeply feels your illness as you do, and will faithfully stand with you in every moment. There is no better companion. You can certainly pray for a cure, but while you wait, you

are still a follower of Christ, and must still believe that your deepest happiness comes from freely loving God, others, and yourself, *in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health.*

There is a powerful example of how prayer changes us that is attributed to a Civil War soldier: *"I asked God for strength, that I might achieve; I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked for health, that I might do greater things; I was given infirmity, that I might do better things. I asked for riches, that I might be happy; I was given poverty, that I might be wise. I asked for power, that I might have other's praise; I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God. I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life; I was given life, that I might enjoy all things. I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I hoped for."*

Praying for someone else

God calls us to be a family that deeply cares for each other, and you do that when you pray for another's intentions. You can also ask a friend to pray for them too; that they succeed at work or get healthy soon. We believe those already in heaven are still in our family too, so you can also ask them to ask God for what you others need.

Why not ask those who are *closest to God*, as the saints and Mary are, to pray for your intentions, just as you might pray to God directly for yourself or for your loved ones? (*Ephesians 6:18, James 5: 16, 1 Timothy 2:1*) Even Jesus prayed to God for our intentions, *"I pray not only for them, but for all those who follow me. (John 17:1-25)*

Catholics have a beautiful prayer called the **Litany of the Saints** where we ask each saint to *"pray for us."* The **Rosary** is also a beautiful prayer to God through the intercession of Mary. While repeating many Hail Mary and Our Father prayers we meditate on our needs and ask for Mary's intercession.

Prayers are answered in God's time

Sometimes what you ask for ...you are just not ready to receive. Teenagers may ask for a new car when they are clearly not ready to drive. Waiting a few years is best although they would certainly disagree! Parents often say they never really knew what was important in life until they had children themselves. Married couples may finally under-

stand the meaning of the words of consecration when they first offer the same words of commitment to their spouse on their wedding day. You may have to undergo more life experiences before you fully understand what God has in store for you, and how your prayers are best answered.

Remember that your first experience of God is that He is the creator of the universe ...*and you!*

Your God-given human nature strives to understand your world as best you can, using all your human intelligence, abilities, and talents, recognizing what you can and cannot know. While you should do everything you can to make your world the best place possible, your main goal is your own salvation for eternal life. Remember what the main goal of your prayers for God's help for you or others is all about ...*eternal salvation*. That is what God wants.

All our prayers can end with the same words Jesus offered to His Heavenly Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, *"Not my will, but yours be done!"*

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(See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* sections 2629-2636 and 2738-2741 for more info)

