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Does Prayer Influence God?

Adapted from chapter 4 of *Quiet Talks on Prayer*, by S D Gordon, 1904

Some may feel that prayer does not influence God; that such a statement does not agree with God's Word.

At random memory brings up a few very familiar passages, frequently quoted. "Call unto Me, and I will answer thee, and will show thee great things, and difficult that thou knowest not." (Jeremiah 33:3). "And call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee and thou shalt glorify Me." (Psalm 50:15) "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." (Matt. 7:7). Here it seems, as we have for generations been accustomed to think, that our asking is the thing that influences God to do. And further, that many times persistent, continued asking is necessary to induce God to do. And the usual explanation for this need of persistence is that God is testing our faith and seeking to make certain changes in us, before granting our requests.

This explanation is without doubt quite true, *in part*. Yet the thing to mark is that it explains only in part. And when the whole circle of truth is brought into view, this explanation is found to cover only a small part of the whole.

We seem to learn best about God by analogies. The analogy never brings all there is to be learned. Yet it seems to be the nearest we can get. From what we know of ourselves we come to know Him.

Will you notice how men give? Among those who give to benevolent enterprises there are three sorts of givers, with variations in each.

There is the man who gives because he is influenced by others. If the right man or committee of men call, and deftly present their pleas, playing skilfully upon what may appeal to him; his position; his egotism; the possible advantage to accrue; what men whom he wants to be classed with are doing, and so on through the wide

range that such men are familiar with; if they persist, by and by he gives. At first he seems reluctant, but finally gives with more or less grace. That is one sort of giver.

There is a second sort: the man of truly benevolent heart who is desirous of giving that he may in of help to other men. He listens attentively when pleas come to him, and waits only long enough to satisfy himself of the worth of the cause, and the proper sort of amount to give, and then gives.

There is a third sort, the rarest sort. This second man a stage farther on, who takes the initiative. He looks about him, makes inquiries, and thinks over the great need in every direction of his fellow men. He decides where his money may best be used to help; and then himself offers to give. But his gift may be abused by some who would get his money if they could, and use it injudiciously, or otherwise than he intends. So he makes certain conditions which must be met, the purpose of which is to establish sympathetic relations in some particular with those whom he would help. An Englishman's heart is strongly moved to get the story of Jesus to the inland millions of Chinese. He requests the China-Inland Mission to control the expenditure of almost a million dollars of his money in such a way as best to secure the object in his heart. An American giver. a large sum to the Young Men's Christian Association of his home city to be expended as directed. His thought is not to build up this particular organization, but to benefit large numbers of the young men of his town who will meet certain conditions which he thinks to be for their good. He has learned to trust this organization, and so it becomes his trustee.

Another man feels that if the people of New York City can be given good reading they can thereby best be helped in life. And so he volunteers money for a number of libraries throughout that city. And thousands who yearn to increase their knowledge come into sympathy with him in that one point through his gift. In all such cases the giver's thought is to accomplish certain results in those whose purpose in certain directions is sympathetic with his own.

Any human illustration of God must seem crude. Yet of these three sorts of givers there is one and only one that begins to suggest how God gives. It may seem like a very sweeping statement to make, yet I am more and more disposed to believe it true that *most persons* have unthinkingly thought of God's answering prayer as the first of these three men give. Many others have had in mind some such thought as the second suggests. Yet to state the case even thus definitely is to make it plain that neither of these ways in any manner illustrate God's giving. The third comes the nearest to picturing the God who hears an answers prayer. Our God has a great heart yearning after His poor prodigal world, and after each one in it. He longs to have the effects of sin removed, and the original image restored. He takes the initiative. Yet everything that is done for man must of necessity be through man's

will; by his free and glad consent. The obstacles in the way are not numberless, nor insurmountable, but they are many and they are stubborn. There is a keen, cunning pretender- prince who is a past-master in the fine art of handling men. There are wills warped and weakened; consciences blurred; minds the opposite of keen sensibilities whose edge has been dulled beyond ordinary hope of being ever made keen again. Sin has not only stained the life, but warped the judgment, sapped the will, and blurred the mental vision. And God has a hard time just because every change must of necessity be through that sapped and warped will.

Yet the difficulty, though great, is never complex, but very simple. And so the statement of His purpose is ever exquisitely simple. Listen again: "Call unto Me, and I will answer thee and shew thee great things and difficult which thou knowest not." If a man *call* he has already turned his face towards God. His will has acted, and acted doubly; away from the opposite, and towards God, a simple step but a tremendous one. The calling is the point of sympathetic contact with God where their purposes become the same. The caller is beset by difficulties and longs for freedom. The God who speaks to him saw the difficulties long ago and eagerly longed to remove them. Now they have come to agreement. And through this willing will God eagerly works out his purpose.

A Very Old Question

So, this leads us back to the very old question: Does prayer influence God? No question has been discussed more, or more earnestly.

Sceptical men of fine scientific training have with great positiveness said "no." And Christian men of scholarly training and strong faith have with equal positiveness said "yes." Strange to say both have been right. Not right in all their statements, nor right in all their beliefs, nor right in all their processes of thinking, but right in their ultimate conclusions as represented by these short words, "no," and "yes."

Prayer does not influence God. Prayer surely does influence God. It does not influence His purpose. It does influence His action. Everything that has ever been prayed for, of course I mean every right thing, God has already purposed to do. But He does nothing without our consent. He has been hindered in His purposes by our lack of willingness. When we learn His purposes and make them our prayers we are giving Him the opportunity to act. It is a double opportunity: manward and Satanward. We are willing. Our willingness checkmates Satan's opposition. It opens

the path to God and rids it of the obstacles. And so the road is cleared for the free action already planned.

The further question of nature's laws being sometimes set aside is wholly a secondary matter. Nature's laws are merely God's habit of action in handling, secondary forces. They involve no purpose of God. His purposes are regarding moral issues. That the sun shall stay a bit longer than usual over a certain part of the earth is a mere detail with God. It does not affect His power for the whole affair is under His finger. It does not affect His purpose for that is concerning far more serious matters. The emergencies of earth wrought by sin necessitate just such incidents, that the great purpose of God for man shall be accomplished.

Emergencies change all habits of action, divine and human. They are the real test of power. If a man throws down the bundle he is carrying and makes a quick wild dash out into the middle of the street, dropping his hat on the way, and grasp convulsively for something on the ground when no cause appears for such action we would quickly conclude that the proper place for him is an asylum. But if a little toddling child is almost under the horse's hoofs, or the trolley car, no one thinks of criticising, but instead admires his courage, and quick action, and breathlessly watches for the result. Emergencies call for special action. They should control actions, where they exist. Emergencies explain action, and explain satisfactorily what nothing else could explain.

The world is in a great emergency through sin. Only as that tremendous fact grips us shall we be men of prayer, and men of action up to the limit of the need, and to the limit of the possibilities. Only as that intense fact is kept in mind shall we begin to understand God's actions in history, and in our personal experiences. The greatest event of earth, the cross, was an emergency action.

The fact that prayer does not make any change in God's thought, or purpose, reveals His marvellous love in a very tender way.

Suppose I want something very much and need it as well as want. And I go to God and ask for it. And suppose He is reluctant about giving: had not thought about giving me that thing; and rather hesitates. But I am insistent, and plead and persist and by and by God is impressed with my earnestness, and sees that I really need the thing, and answers my prayer, and gives me what I ask. Is not that a loving God so to listen and yield to my plea? Surely. How many times just such an instance has taken place between a child and his father, or mother. And the child thinks to himself, "How loving father is; he has given me the thing I asked for."

But now suppose God is thinking about me all the time, and panning, with love-plans for me and, longing to give me much that He has. Yet in His wisdom a does not give because I do not know my own need, and have not opened my hand to receive, yes, and, further yet, likely as not, not knowing my need I might abuse, or, misuse, or fail to use, something given before I had felt the need of it. And now I come to see and feel that need and come and ask and He, delighted with the change in me, eagerly gives. **Tell me, is not that a very much more loving God than the other conception suggests?** The truth is *that* is God. Jesus says, "Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of *before ye ask.*" And He is a Father. And with God the word rather means mother too. Then what He *knows* we need he *has already planned* to give. The great question for me then in praying for some personal thing is this: Do I know what *He* knows I need? Am I thinking about what He is thinking about for me?

And then remember that God is so much more in His loving planning than the wisest, most loving father we know. Does a mother think into her child's needs, the food, and clothing and the extras too, the luxuries? That is God, only He is more loving and wiser than the best of us. I have sometimes thought this: that if God were to say to me: "I want to give you something as a special love-gift; an extra because I love you: what would you like to have?" Do you know I have thought I would say, "Dear God, you choose. *I* choose what *you* choose." He is thinking about me. He knows what I am thinking of, and what I would most enjoy, and He is such a lover-God that He would choose something just a bit finer than I would think. I might be thinking of a dollar, but likely as not He is thinking of a double eagle. I am thinking of blackberries, big, juicy blackberries, but really I do not know what blackberries are beside the sort He knows and would choose for me. That is our God. ***Prayer does not and cannot change the purpose of such a God. For every right and good thing we might ask for He has already planned to give us. But prayer does change the action of God.*** Because He cannot give against our wills, and our willingness as expressed by our asking gives Him the opportunity to do as He has already planned.