



Talmid תלמיד a Hebrew word that means “a true disciple who desires to be what the Rabbi Jesus is.”

Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did. 1 John 2:6 (NIV)

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STUDY TO SHEW THYSELF APPROVED UNTO GOD, A WORKMAN THAT NEEDETH NOT TO BE ASHAMED, RIGHTLY
DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH. 2 TIMOTHY 2:15

Does Prayer Change Things?

Pastor Eddie Ildefonso

The Place of Prayer

What is the goal of the Christian life? Godliness born of obedience to Christ. Obedience unlocks the riches of the Christian experience. Prayer is what prompts and nurtures obedience, putting the heart into the proper “frame of mind” to desire obedience.

Of course, knowledge is also important because without it, we cannot know what God requires. However, knowledge and truth will remain abstract unless we commune with God in prayer. It is the Holy Spirit who teaches, inspires, and illumines God’s Word to us. He mediates the Word of God and assists us in responding to the Father in prayer.

Prayer has a vital place in the life of the Christian. First, it is an absolute prerequisite for salvation. Some people cannot hear; yet though deaf, they can be saved. Some may not be able to see; yet though blind, they can be saved. Knowledge of the Good News—salvation through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—will come from one source or another, but in the final analysis, a person must humbly ask God for salvation. The prayer of salvation is the one prayer of the wicked God has said he will hear.

What do those in heaven have in common? Several things. They have all been

justified, having put their faith in the atonement of Christ. They are all praising God. And they have all prayed for salvation. To be without prayer is to be without God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the hope and reality of heaven.

Second, one of the surest marks of the Christian is his prayer life. One might pray and not be a Christian, but one could not possibly be a Christian and not pray. [Romans 8:15](#) tells us that the spiritual adoption that has made us sons of God causes us to cry out in verbal expressions: “**Abba! Father.**” Prayer is to the Christian what breath is to life, yet no duty of the Christian is so neglected.

Prayer, at least private prayer, is difficult to do out of a false motive. One might preach out of a false motive, as do the false prophets; one might be involved in Christian activities out of false motives. Many of the externals of religion might be done from false motives, but it is highly unlikely that anyone would commune with God out of some improper motive. [Matthew 7](#) tells us that in the “**last day,**” many will stand at the Judgment and tell Christ of their great and noble deeds done in his name, but his response will be that he does not know them.

So, we are invited, even commanded, to pray. Prayer is both a privilege and a

duty, and any duty can become laborious. Prayer, like any means of growth for the Christian, requires work. In a sense, prayer is unnatural to us. Though we were created for fellowship and communion with God, the effects of the Fall have left most of us lazy and indifferent toward something as important as prayer. Rebirth quickens a new desire for communion with God, but sin resists the Spirit.

We can take comfort from the fact that God knows our hearts and hears our unspoken petitions more than the words that emanate from our lips. Whenever we are unable to express the deep feelings and emotions of our souls or when we are completely unclear about what it is for which we ought to be praying, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us. [Romans 8:26-27](#) says, “**the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.**” When we don’t know how to pray or what to pray for in a given situation, the Holy Spirit assists us. There is reason to believe from the text that if we pray incorrectly, the Holy Spirit corrects the error in our prayers before he takes them before the Father, for [verse 27](#) tells us that he “**intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.**”

Prayer is the secret of holiness—if holiness, indeed, has anything secretive about it. If we examine the lives of the great saints of the church, we find that they were great people of prayer. **John Wesley** once remarked that he didn’t think much of ministers who didn’t spend at least four hours per day in prayer. **Luther** said that he prayed regularly for an hour every day except when he experienced a particularly busy day. Then he prayed for two hours.

The neglect of prayer is a major cause of stagnation in the Christian life. Consider the example of Peter in [Luke 22:39-62](#). Jesus went to the Mount of Olives to pray as was his custom and told his disciples, “**Pray that you may not enter into temptation.**” The disciples fell asleep instead. The next thing Peter did was try to take on the Roman army with a sword; then he denied Christ. Peter did not pray and as a result fell into temptation. What is true

of Peter is also true of all of us: we fall in private before we ever fall in public.

Is there a right and wrong time for prayer? [Isaiah 50:4](#) talks about the morning as the time when God gives the desire to pray on a daily basis and about renewed confidence in God. But there are other passages that give times of prayer during all times of the day. No part of the day is set apart as being more sanctified than another. Jesus prayed in the morning, during the day, and sometimes all night long. There is evidence that he had a time set aside for prayer; however, considering the relationship Jesus had with the Father, we know that communion between them never stopped.

[First Thessalonians 5:17](#) commands us to pray without ceasing. It means that we are to be in a continual state of communion with our Father.

The Purpose of Prayer

Nothing escapes God’s notice; nothing oversteps the boundaries of his power. God is authoritative in all things. If I thought even for one moment that a single molecule were running loose in the universe outside the control and domain of Almighty God, I wouldn’t sleep tonight. My confidence in the future rests in my confidence in the God who controls history. But how does God exercise that control and manifest that authority? How does God bring to pass those things he has sovereignly decreed?

Augustine said that nothing happens in this universe apart from the will of God and that, in a certain sense, God ordains everything that happens. Augustine was not, however, attempting to absolve men of their responsibility for their actions. Our concern, though, in this section, is to answer the question, If God is sovereign over the actions and intents of men, why pray at all? A secondary concern revolves around the question, Does prayer really change anything?

Let me answer the first question by stating that the sovereign God commands by his sovereign, holy Word that we pray. Prayer is not optional for the Christian; it is required.

We might ask, “What if it doesn’t do anything?” That is not the issue. Regardless of whether it does any good to pray, if God commands us to pray, we must pray. It is reason enough that the Lord God of the universe, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, commands

it. Yet he not only commands us to pray, but also invites us to make our requests known. Jesus says that we have not because we ask not. James tells us that the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much. Time and again the Bible says that prayer is an effective tool. It is useful; it works.

John Calvin, in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, makes some profound observations regarding prayer:

But some will say, "Does he not know without a monitor, what our difficulties are, what is meet for our interests? So it seems, in some measure, superfluous to solicit him by our prayers, as if he were winking or even sleeping until aroused by the sound of our voices."

Those who argue this way attend not to the end for which the Lord told us to pray. It was not so much for his sake, as for ours. He wills indeed, as is just, that due honor be paid him, acknowledging that all which men desire or feel to be useful and pray to obtain, is derived from him, but even he benefit of the homage which we thus pay him redounds to ourselves. Hence, the holy patriarchs, the more confidently they proclaimed the mercies of God to themselves and to others, felt the more incitement to pray....

It is very much in our interests that we be constantly supplicating him, first that our heart might always be inflamed with the serious and ardent desire of seeking, loving, and serving him as the sacred anchor in every necessity. Secondly, that no desire, no longing whatever that we are ashamed to make him the witness, enter our minds while we learn to place all of our wishes in his sight, and thus pour out our heart before him. Lastly, that we might be prepared to receive all of his benefits with true gratitude and thanksgiving, while our prayers remind us that they proceed from his hand. (Book 3, chapter 20, section 3)

Prayer, like everything else in the Christian life, is for God's glory and for our benefit, in that order. Everything that God does, everything that God allows and ordains, is in the supreme sense for his glory. It is also true that while God seeks his own glory supremely, man benefits when God is glorified. We pray to glorify God, but we also pray to receive the benefits of prayer from his hand. Prayer is for our benefit, even in light of the fact that God knows the end from the be-

ginning. It is our privilege to bring the whole of our finite existence into the glory of his infinite presence.

One of the great themes of the Reformation was the idea that all of our life is to be lived under the authority of God, to the glory of God, in the presence of God. Prayer is not simply soliloquy, a mere exercise in therapeutic self-analysis, or a religious recitation. Prayer is discourse with the personal God himself. There, in the act and dynamic of praying, I bring my whole life under his gaze. Yes, he knows what is in my mind, but I still have the privilege of articulating to him what is there. He says, "Come. Speak to me. Make your requests known to me." And so we come in order to know him and to be known by him.

There is something erroneous in the question, If God knows everything, why pray? The question assumes that prayer is one-dimensional and is defined simply as the prayer of supplication, or intercession. On the contrary, prayer is multidimensional. God's sovereignty casts no shadow over the prayer of adoration. God's foreknowledge or determinate counsel does not negate the prayer of praise. The only thing it should do is give us greater reason for expressing our adoration for who God is. If God knows what I'm going to say before I say it, his knowledge, rather than limiting my prayer, enhances the beauty of my praise.

My wife and I are as close as two people can be. Often I know what she's going to say almost before she says it. And the reverse is also true. But I still like to hear her say what is on her mind. If that is true of man, how much more true is it of God? We have the matchless privilege of sharing our innermost thoughts with God. Of course, we could simply enter our prayer closet, shut the door, let God read our mind, and call that prayer. But that's not communion, and certainly not communication.

We are creatures who communicate primarily through speech. Spoken prayer is obviously a form of speech, a way for us to commune and communicate with God. There is a certain sense in which God's sovereignty should influence our attitude toward prayer, at least with respect to adoration. If anything, our understanding of God's sovereignty should provoke us to an intense prayer life of thanksgiving. Because of such knowledge we would really see that every benefit, every good and perfect gift, is really an

expression of the abundance of his grace. The more we understand God's sovereignty, the more our prayers will be filled with thanksgiving.

In what way does God's sovereignty negatively affect the prayer of contrition, of confession? Perhaps we could draw the conclusion that our sin is ultimately God's responsibility, that our confession is an accusation of guilt against God himself. Every true Christian knows that he cannot blame God for his sin. I may not understand the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, but I do realize that what stems from the wickedness of my own heart may not be assigned to the will of God. So we must pray because we are guilty, pleading the pardon of the Holy one whom we have offended.

But what about intercession and supplication? It's nice to talk about the religious, spiritual, and psychological benefits (and whatever else might derive from prayer), but what about the real question, Does prayer make any difference? Does it really change anything? Someone once asked me that question, only in a slightly different manner: "Does prayer change God's mind?" My answer brought storms of protest. I said simply, "No." Now, if the person had asked me, "Does prayer change *things*?" I would have answered, "Of course!"

The Bible says that there are certain things that God has decreed from all eternity. Those things will inevitably come to pass. If you were to pray individually or if you and I were to join forces in prayer or if all the Christians of the world were to pray collectively, it would not change what God, in his hidden counsel, determined to do. If we decided to pray for Jesus not to return, he would still return. You might ask, though, "Doesn't the Bible say that if two or three agree on anything, they'll get it?" Yes, it does, but that passage is talking about church discipline, not prayer requests. Second, we must take all the biblical teaching on prayer into account and not isolate one passage from the rest. We must approach the matter in light of the whole of Scripture, resisting an atomistic reading.

Again, you might ask, "Doesn't the Bible say from time to time that God repents?" Yes, the Old Testament certainly says so. The book of Jonah tells

us that God "repented of" the evil he had planned for the people of Tarshish. In using the concept of repentance here, the Bible is describing God, who is Spirit, in what theologians call "anthropomorphic" language. Obviously, the Bible does not mean that God repented in the way we would repent; otherwise we could rightly assume that God had sinned and therefore would need a savior himself. What it clearly means is that God removed the threat of judgment from the people. The Hebrew word *nacham*, translated "repent" in the King James Version, means "comforted" or "eased" in this case. God was comforted and felt at ease that the people had turned from their sin, and therefore he revoked the sentence of judgment he had previously imposed.

When God hangs his sword of judgment over people's heads and they repent and he then withholds his judgment, has he really changed his mind, like a chameleon?

The mind of God does not change; God is not a thing. *Things* change, and they change according to his sovereign will, which he exercises through secondary means and secondary activities. The prayer of his people is one of the means he uses to bring things to pass in this world. So if you ask me if prayer changes things, I answer with an unhesitating "Yes!"

It is impossible to know how much of human history reflects God's immediate intervention and how much reveals God working through human agents. John Calvin's favorite example of this was the book of Job. The Sabeans and the Chaldeans had raided Job's donkeys and camels. Why? Because Satan had stirred their hearts to do so. But why? Because Satan had received permission from God to test Job's faithfulness in any way he so desired, short of taking Job's life. Why had God agreed to such a thing? For three reasons: (1) to silence the slander of Satan; (2) to vindicate himself; and (3) to vindicate Job from the slander of Satan. All of these reasons are perfectly righteous justifications for God's actions.

God's purpose in allowing Job's animals to be stolen was to vindicate himself and Job from the slander of Satan—a righteous reason. Satan's purpose in stirring up these two groups was to cause Job to blaspheme God—an altogether wicked motive. But we notice that Satan does not do something supernatural to accomplish his ends. He chooses human agents—the Sabeans and

Chaldeans, who were evil by nature—to steal Job’s animals. The Sabeans and Chaldeans were known for their thievery and murderous way of life. Their will was involved, but there was no coercion; God’s purpose was accomplished through their wicked actions.

The Sabeans and Chaldeans were free to choose, but for them, as for us, freedom always means freedom within limits. We must not, however, confuse human freedom and human autonomy. There will always be a conflict between divine sovereignty and human autonomy. There is never a conflict between divine sovereignty and human freedom. The Bible says that man is free, but he is not an autonomous law unto himself.

Suppose the Sabeans and Chaldeans had prayed, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” I’m absolutely certain that Job’s animals would still have been stolen. But I’m equally certain that the Sabeans and Chaldeans would not have been responsible because their prayer would have altered the entire situation. There is freedom within limits, and within those limits, our prayers can change things. The Scriptures tell us that Elijah, through prayer, was given power to command the rain. He was not dissuaded from praying by his understanding of divine sovereignty.

No human being has ever had a more profound understanding of divine sovereignty than Jesus. No man ever prayed more fiercely or more effectively. Even in Gethsemane he requested an option, a different way. When the request was denied, he bowed to the Father’s will. The very reason we pray is because of God’s sovereignty, because we believe that God has it within his power to order things according to his purpose. That is what sovereignty is all about—ordering things according to God’s purpose. So then, does prayer change God’s mind? No! Does prayer change things? Yes, of course!

The promise of the Scriptures is that **“the prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects”** ([James 5:16](#)). The problem is that we are not all that righteous. What prayer most often changes is the wickedness and the hardness of our own hearts. That alone would be reason enough to pray, even if none of the other reasons were valid or true.

In a sermon entitled **“The Most High, a Prayer-Hearing God,”** **Jonathan Edwards** gives us two rea-

sons why God requires prayer:

With respect to God, prayer is but a sensible acknowledgement of our dependence on him to his glory. As he hath made all things for his own glory, so he will be glorified and acknowledged by his creatures; and it is fit that he should require this of those who would be subjects of his mercy ... it is a suitable acknowledgement of our dependence on the power and mercy of God for that which we need, and but a suitable honor paid to the great Author and Fountain of all good.

With respect to ourselves, God requires prayer of us.... Fervent prayer in many ways tends to prepare the heart. Hereby is excited a sense of our need ... whereby the mind is more prepared to prize the mercy we seek. Our prayer to God may excite in us a suitable sense and consideration of our dependence on God for the mercy we ask, and a suitable exercise of faith in God’s sufficiency, so that we may be prepared to glorify his name when the mercy is received.

All that God does is for his glory first and for our benefit second. We pray because God commands us to pray, because it glorifies him, and because it benefits us.

Because He Lives, We Live Forever

The event central to the life of Jesus Christ and to the New Testament is His resurrection. Not only does this event underscore the radical character of the uniqueness of Christ, but it sets Him apart from all other earthly religious teachers. Buddha is dead. Confucius is dead. Gandhi is dead. Mohammed is dead. Jesus and Jesus alone has returned from the grave. So astonishing is this event that it, more than any other event in the Bible, has provoked controversial interpretations of modern scholarship which have attempted to recast or remold it to fit the twentieth-century mindset. Today, the radical announcement of the resurrection of Jesus has been neutralized and relativized.

In [1 Corinthians 15](#), Paul attempted to answer those who in his day saw the Resurrection as a non-historical, figurative event. Paul believed strongly

that without a real, historical resurrection, the Christian faith is only an exercise in futility. To give oneself in total commitment and sacrifice to a dead man is foolishness. Paul says that the Christian faith stands or falls with the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And Paul backs his belief with evidence. Paul tells us that these things were set forth in Scripture many centuries before. He knew that Christ had been raised from the dead not because he believed in myths or fairy tales, but because Christ appeared visibly to Peter, then to the Twelve, then to 500 people at one time. Then He appeared to James and all apostles, and “last of all He appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born” (1 Corinthians 15:7). Paul is saying that on the basis of the testimony of these witnesses he is persuaded that Christ, in fact, has come back from the dead.

The resurrection of Christ is the most difficult truth in the New Testament because it is as axiomatic in our culture as it was in the first century—that the one thing that is absolutely final is death. Once a person is dead, that person stays dead. That is the law of all laws. Show me a faith healer who has been successful practicing his or her trade in the local cemetery. Yes, there are stories of people who have been resuscitated after being left for dead, but there are no substantiated stories of people who have come back from the dead after being in a grave for three days. Three days after Christ screamed on the cross, “**My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?**” God screamed back and shook the earth to bring His Son back from the tomb.

If Christ is indeed raised from the dead, that means that last miserable enemy—death itself—has been vanquished. Christ’s resurrection means our resurrection. Because He lives, we live forever.

Paul concludes his case in [1 Corinthians 15](#) with this statement: “**Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain**” (v. 58).

Paul says, “Be steadfast.” Do not be blown about by every wind of doctrine. Don’t cave in at

the first sign of trouble. Run the course until the end of the course. We are to be steadfast because God is steadfast. We can be steadfast and immovable because Christ is risen from the dead. Paul then says, “Always abound in the work of the Lord.” We are not to casually every now and then throw in a moment’s commitment. Our lives ought to demonstrate an abundance of work for the things of God. Why? “Because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” Your labor in Him is not an exercise in futility.

Do you understand that everything we do—every word we say, every breath we take—counts for something. No one can ever tell you that what you are doing today is futile. We ought to take every human act seriously because every human act has eternal significance. This is the Good News. And at the heart of the Good News is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. “He is risen.” This message has been proclaimed from city to city and from nation to nation. “He is risen” was the very first proclamation of the Gospel in the early church. It is still the most important proclamation of our faith. “He is risen.” “He is risen.” Because He lives, we live forever.

CORAM DEO (Before the face of God)

The real question here is whether or not we are faithful in secret prayer, in tithing and alms-giving, and in fasting. If you are not engaged in these things, take steps to change your life pattern today. For example, your pastor can help you discover the freedom and joy of tithing. Don’t delay to put into practice the constitution of the kingdom!

Doctrine in Capsule

Why pray?

Why pray? What is the point of prayer when God knows the future and is already in control of everything. If we cannot change God’s mind, why should we pray?”

For the Christian, praying is like breathing. It is easier to do it than to not do it. We pray for a variety of reasons. For one thing, prayer is a form of serving God ([Luke 2:36-38](#)) and obeying Him. We pray because God commands us to pray ([Philippians 4:6-7](#)). Prayer is exemplified for us by Christ and the early church ([Mark 1:35](#); [Acts 1:14](#); [Acts 2:42](#); [Acts 3:1](#); [Acts 4:23-31](#); [Acts 6:4](#); [Acts 13:1-3](#)). If Jesus thought it was

worthwhile to pray, we should also. If He needed to pray to remain in the Father's will, how much more do we need to pray?

Another reason to pray is that God intends prayer to be the means of obtaining His solutions in a number of situations. We pray in preparation for major decisions ([Luke 6:12-13](#)); to overcome demonic barriers ([Matthew 17:14-21](#)); to gather workers for the spiritual harvest ([Luke 10:2](#)); to gain strength to overcome temptation ([Matthew 26:41](#)); and to obtain the means of strengthening others spiritually ([Ephesians 6:18-19](#)).

We come to God with our specific requests, and we have God's promise that our prayers are not in vain, even if we do not receive specifically what we asked for ([Matthew 6:6](#); [Romans 8:26-27](#)). He has promised that when we ask for things that are in accordance with His will, He will give us what we ask for ([1 John 5:14-15](#)). Sometimes He delays His answers according to His wisdom and for our benefit. In these situations, we are to be diligent and persistent in prayer ([Matthew 7:7](#); [Luke 18:1-8](#)). Prayer should not be seen as our means of getting God to do our will on earth, but rather as a means of getting God's will done on earth. God's wisdom far exceeds our own.

For situations in which we do not know God's will specifically, prayer is a means of discerning His will. If the Syrian woman with the demon-influenced daughter had not prayed to Christ, her daughter would not have been made whole ([Mark 7:26-30](#)). If the blind man outside Jericho had not called out to Christ, he would have remained blind ([Luke 18:35-43](#)). God has said that we often go without because we do not ask ([James 4:2](#)). In one sense, prayer is like sharing the gospel with people. We do not know who will respond to the message of the gospel until we share it. In the same way, we will never see the results of answered prayer unless we pray.

A lack of prayer demonstrates a lack of faith and a lack of trust in God's Word. We pray to demonstrate our faith in God, that He will do as He has promised in His Word and bless our lives abundantly more than we could ask or hope for ([Ephesians 3:20](#)). Prayer is our primary means of seeing God work in others' lives. Because it is our means of "plugging into" God's power, it is our means of defeating Satan and his army that we are powerless to overcome by ourselves. Therefore, may God find us often before His throne, for we have a high

priest in heaven who can identify with all that we go through ([Hebrews 4:15-16](#)). We have His promise that the fervent prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much ([James 5:16-18](#)). May God glorify His name in our lives as we believe in Him enough to come to Him often in prayer.



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