

# Don't fear that your prayers don't make a difference

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**Q. I am struggling with the idea that prayer does anything. I mean, if God really cared about us, why would he need us to ask for anything before he gave it to us? I understand thanking God, but how do our prayers make any real difference?**

**A.** First off, I need to tell you what a great question that is. It shows that you are really taking prayer seriously and not just going through the motions. If prayer is going to be significant, then it should “do something.” But if God is good, wouldn't he already be planning on doing that thing in the first place?

This question is so deep that it goes all the way to the very identity of God and the nature of the universe.

We can sometimes fall into the mistaken notion that God is in control of everything. And I acknowledge that, in a general sense, that is kind of true. Everything that exists either comes directly or indirectly from God. We readily acknowledge that God is the “ground of Being”; without him nothing at all would exist. But that is not the same thing as saying that God is “in control” of everything or that everything that happens is a “part of his plan.”

In choosing to create a universe that operates according to certain rules, God has willed to abdicate his power to a certain extent.

In the Christian perspective, God is all-powerful, but God is also Reason. Reason is part of the very nature of who God is. Therefore, when God willed to create the universe, he was free to create it to operate somewhat “independently” of himself.

God is certainly still the Primary Cause, but he has created a universe that has both “laws of nature” and is also filled with free beings.

Because of the laws of nature, there are things like physics through which we can deduce that “for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” Unless there is a suspension of this law, it will happen every time, both when a baseball player hits the ball to deep center field as well as when a stray ball hits a child in the temple.

God is not the “cause” of either occasion except for the fact that he created a world based on physical laws.

God created chemistry, but he does not control a campfire or cause a wildfire; the fire burns because of the “secondary cause” of reason or science (the laws of nature).

And God has also created a universe with free beings. These beings are truly free, therefore they are free to act as “secondary causes.”

Human beings are part of this kind of causality. This is why we have thieves, liars and kidnapers. But it is also why we can have doctors, nurses, judges and teachers. Human beings are free to choose to act or not to act. And in choosing, we become causes ourselves.

## How prayer works

When it comes to prayer (and how prayer works), it might be helpful to consider this reality. Christians believe that God exists and that God cares and acts in this world. But we also know that there are an

abundance of secondary causes at work.

For example, none of us would think it would be a sign of mental health if a person said, "I don't have to go to work in order to have money for food; if God wants me to have food, he will give it to me." Absolutely not!

We may be completely convinced that God loves us and still know we have to work for our daily bread.

C.S. Lewis gives the example of asking whether any of us would leave the house in a rainstorm without an umbrella under the idea that "If God doesn't want me to get wet, he won't let the rain fall where I am." All Christians go through their day counting on God's care while simultaneously making choices that make a difference. We are accustomed to being secondary causes!

In the Bible, God has revealed that he wants prayer to operate in a similar way. There are many times when the Bible teaches us that prayer makes a difference. In fact, it is one of the ways in which we cooperate with God's will. In the same way your choice to give to a person in need is one way you can cooperate with God's will to care for the poor, your decision to pray for a person is another.

When you care for a sick person, are you changing God's will? No. Are you making a real difference? Yes. What you are doing is fulfilling God's will. You are doing your part in God's will to make this world more and more the way he wants it to be.

Along these same lines, when you pray for another person, are you changing God's mind? No. But your prayers make a difference because they are fulfilling what is needed for God's will to be done. When you pray, you have become a "cause."

In fact, that is something that has been taught for a long time. Blaise Pascal once declared, "In calling us to pray for one another, God has extended to us the dignity of becoming causes."

This reveals a great deal about the nature of God. It reveals that God is the opposite of a tyrant. In Christianity, God is not a dictator, but a father who wants to work with us.

Consider the parent who makes a child do chores at home and help out around the house. At first glance, you might be tempted to think that this was because the mom or dad wanted to "lord it over" their children. But on further reflection, you realize that it would be a lot easier for mom to just clean the room herself or for dad to take out the trash himself than trying to teach the kids how to do it.

But, good parents will bring their children in on the chores of the household because this is one way children become full-grown. A parent who never makes children contribute is more likely to see those children stunted in their development. That parent is "soft," but a soft tyrant, because they have kept all of the strength for themselves.

God shares his strength with us.

God shares his power with us.

When he calls us to pray (and that prayer actually makes a difference), God makes us into something even more than children: He allows us to be co-workers with him.

And when we pray, when we work with God, we are drawn into even more intimate relationship with him. And that kind of prayer and relationship definitely changes something else: It changes us.

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