



**Anglican  
Fellowship of  
Prayer (Canada)**

# QUESTIONS PEOPLE HAVE ABOUT PRAYER

by

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## 1. What is prayer? What happens when we pray?

Prayer is effective communication with God: effective because it involves the release of energy and because it gets something done; communication because while it makes use of words it is more than words, and because it is not a monologue but a dialogue; with God because He not only supplies the energy which makes the entire process possible, but is also the party at the other end of the line.

Telephone conversation which includes both speaking and listening, and the wireless transmission of electric power (costly but possible) are good illustrations of the phenomenon of prayer.

Several things happen when we pray: we relate to God who is our one true environment (Acts 17:28); we project energy towards persons, situations and needs (Mark 5:30); we set in motion a unifying process within ourselves, between persons and between God and ourselves. In prayer we not only present our needs but also express our thanksgiving to God, who is personal, on a personal basis. This is why Jesus taught his disciples when they prayed to say: "Our Father."

## 2. Why should we pray?

Because we are told to (I Thess. 5:17)! Because human experience teaches us that it is a source of understanding and strength, a unifying source and a means of growth. Because by it we can help others (II Cor. 1:6), and because it is a way to the healing of minds, bodies, human relationships and the inner self. In prayer the center of living is shifted from ourselves to God.

### **3. How do we know that our prayers are being heard?**

A certain way of knowing that our prayers are being heard is by their results. The results of prayer include not only what God may do by way of His personalized, compassionate response, but also direct influence related to the outreach of prayer-power, and not infrequently new attitudes and understanding by the one who prays. In other words, the results of prayer fall into three kinds: they are "heard" when God intervenes, "productive" as the release of mental energy (a physically measurable event) affects situations, and "therapeutic" as change occurs within ourselves.

We should remember that God's concern is never less than our own (Matt. 6:8) and that, whatever may happen, we are never beyond the reach of God's personal love (Matt.6:26).

### **4. Why pray for healing, reconciliation, or for God to do good work in someone's life? Isn't that always God's will?**

In the Lord's prayer, we are taught to say: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." If God's will unfailingly were done on earth, this petition would seem unnecessary. God, for His own reasons, has given us free will, freedom even to make wrong, foolish and evil choice to our own harm and the hurt of others. Without this freedom, we would be mere puppets on the end of a string; but we pay a price for that freedom, including violating God's will to the injury of our selves and others. In His own wisdom, God also created what we call "Natural Law" (i.e. principles by which the universe operates such as gravity, displacement, aero-dynamics, etc.). Natural Law means that the universe is orderly; but, unfortunately, accidents, earthquakes, sickness, storms and even death are part of the structure. Heaven is heaven because there God's will is done. Not so on earth where human freedom and Natural Law may interfere with God's preference. God sometimes uses higher laws to set aside lesser laws, even as we use the laws of aero-dynamics to set aside the laws of gravity. When we pray for healing, reconciliation, etc., we add our small bit of creative power to God's well-ordering of His universe (II Cor.6:1).

**5. Is it proper to say, as the bumper sticker does, "Prayer Changes Things"?**

Yes, because it is true. "The earnest, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16). A word of caution: if you have a Christian bumper sticker on your car, be sure you drive like a Christian. Our Lord had some harsh things to say about those who advertised their piety but did not live up to it (Matt. 2:23). If your bumper sticker reads "Honk, if you love Jesus", don't blow in anger because the driver ahead is slow in taking off at the light.

**6. The Bible says that "Where two or three are gathered together" In His name Jesus will be in their midst (Matt.18:20). What about the individual praying alone? How effective is that?**

The two methods of prayer are not mutually exclusive. The same Jesus who talked about the two or three gathered together also said: "When you pray go into a room by yourself and pray to your Father in secret" (Matt. 6 :6). It is not a case of either/or but of both/and. Prayer power is generated in the group because the living Jesus is there (Matt.18:19); group prayer is especially effective in intercession, the laying on of hands, prayers for reconciliation and for healing. Individual prayer is also effective. Jesus said: "Everyone who asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened" (Matt.7:8). In studying Scripture, we need to compare Scripture with Scripture. Ideas which, at first, seem to conflict with one another, generally will be found not to be contradictory but complementary.

**7. In view of the bigness of the world and the smallness of the individual pray-er, how do you suggest that one pray about world situations?**

The answer is with confidence and with disciplined concentration. This feeling about the smallness of the individual is understandable. Voters feel the same way in a general election. Dr. Alexis Carrell reminds us "that prayer is power." Someone has said, "I am only one, but I am one!", and another has noted that "God and I are a majority."

The youthful David was hardly an impressive challenger of the giant Goliath (I Sam.17: 42), but it was David who prevailed. Moses and many of the prophets voiced their doubts about the significance of the individual and of themselves in particular (interesting references include: Ex. 4:10-12, Judges 6:15, 7:2ff, Isaiah 6:5-8, Jeremiah 1:6-8, Amos 7:12-15).

Older readers will remember a dark Sunday morning at the beginning of World War II when Joseph Stalin was in the process of making up his mind whether to support the Allied or the Axis powers. It was a decision that could affect the outcome of the war. and it was his alone to make. There was, that same morning, an anonymous person ,who believed intensely in prayer as a force which can be projected to influence persons and situations (See Brown, UNDER FIRE, pp.23ff). This lone person spent that morning in intense, concentrated space-obliterating prayer. As the hours went by, he became conscious that a decision to throw the weight of Russia's power to the Allied side had been made, a decision announced by Moscow later that day. That anonymous pray-er believes to this day that, while probably he was not alone in his prayers, his concentrated projection of prayer power had something to do with Stalin's decision.

**8. Some teaching seems to indicate that we should pray once about something and have faith that there will be an answer. Other teaching encourages continually imploring God with repeated prayers. Which is correct?**

This is another one of those questions the answer to which is not either/or, but both/and. The New Testament both tells us to “pray without ceasing” (I Thess. 5:17) and “warns that we shall not be heard for “our many words” (Matt.6: 7). Both statements are valid. Medicine may give us a clue:

- a) In an acute situation, we have a one-time treatment and then forget it; it may be a tetanus shot or a bone that needs setting;
- b) In a chronic situation, (e.g. hypertension, an ulcer or diabetes) long term treatment is required; or
- c) Intensive care may be indicated in the case of an accident, a heart attack or internal bleeding.

The procedure in prayer, as in medicine, is determined by the circumstances. In many areas: a one-time petition is adequate a special task: the day’s business or an immediate and special decision. Such matters may be commended to God and then forgotten as we go about our business. Ongoing prayer generally is indicated in our intercessions for others: sickness, national concerns, family problems. Then there is the immediate and critical situation which calls for what is called “praying around the clock”: major and uncertain surgery, a relapse, a grave moral decision. Here we should continue to pray until the matter is resolved. We may have to pray to the point of exhaustion, but the scales often are tipped by such intensive prayer (Ex.17:8-13).

**9. How can we avoid wandering minds in our prayers? Trying to concentrate makes it seem worse.**

First we must ask how deeply we are concerned about the objective of our prayers. Persons engaged in the exhausting business of intensive prayer for a situation in which they have a personal concern usually have no such problem. It is in the

ordinary everyday, "garden variety" of prayer that our attention wanders. The best way to deal with the problem is:

- a) Relax; if we make too great an effort to concentrate, we become more interested in the conflict than in the result;
- b) Remember that the problem is not unique;
- c) Treat it lightly; the parable of the Empty Mind (Luke 11:24-26) is not without a humorous overtone; the evil spirit had been driven out, but the household of the man's mind was left vacant with the result that all the friends and relatives of the evil spirit, discovering the emptiness, moved in; this leads us to
- d) Make an act of your will: reach out, grab your mind, bring it back forcibly and put it to work.

## **10. How can we clear our minds so that we can hear God?**

By asking God's help (Collect 59, Book of Common Prayer, page 832, is especially appropriate); by an act of the will in which we deliberately empty our minds; by keeping our mind open, still and receptive; and by patient, passive listening, giving God an opportunity to speak. Prayer is a two-way conversation in which we should give God at least equal time.

## **11. In what ways can we "hear" God in answer to our prayers?**

There are many ways in which God makes Himself and His will known. The concern of this question seems to be whether or not one literally can "hear" God. The answer is yes. Ordinarily He speaks through our minds, but on occasion He quite unexpectedly makes Himself known through our eyes and ears. The experience, which is not common, may be one in which others share, or it may be ours alone (Acts 9:7). It is not an experience we should seek; whether or not it happens must be left entirely to God. When it does happen, what is seen or heard probably will be something of a surprise (Psalm 18:26-27).

## **12. Why do our prayers often seem to go unanswered?**

There are several reasons:

- a) because we have made up our minds in advance as to what the answer should be, and that answer does not come;
- b) because of our preconceived idea as to what the answer should be, we fail to recognize it when it does come;
- c) because the answer we seek may be contrary or inappropriate to God's will and plans;
- d) because our prayer may infringe upon the rights of others;
- e) because our human situation, Natural Law, free will or evil (however identified) may contravene God's will (I Peter 5:8, Rev.12:12);
- f) because our prayer-power may be inadequate in a given situation, just as medical treatment may be ineffective in a particular illness; and
- g) because the need may be such that only an intimate, personal appeal to the compassion of Christ may be effective (Matt. 14 :14, et al).

Whatever answer we may or may not receive, we should remember that we are never beyond the reach of God's knowledge and love (Matt.6:26).

## **13. How long should we continue to lift a person or situation in prayer? How long should we keep someone on our prayer list?**

- a) Until the need is resolved or stabilized;
- b) Until contact is lost with the need or person that prompted our prayers in the beginning;
- c) as long as the need continues;
- d) as long as our intercession seems advisable;
- e) as long as our own prayer schedule permits.

These questions, which are interrelated, remind us that prayer lists should always be kept up to date. Agreement to pray at



another's request should include an understanding that we will be kept informed of what develops. To go on praying for a sick person only to discover he has died – or, more happily, that prayers for thanksgiving are in order - is disturbing. Not to keep a prayer list current is to suggest that prayer is not very important after all.

**14. What are some of the ways people receive guidance from God concerning decisions they are praying about?**

- a) External circumstances sometimes give us a clue;
- b) sometimes God speaks to us through other persons without their being aware of our need;
- c) If we read our Bibles regularly, we may find an answer unexpectedly in the course of our regular reading;
- d) God makes His will and plans known to us by way of our minds; and
- e) On occasion, but not often, God speaks to us in such a way as to be heard, seen or sensed in other ways. In such instances, the message usually consists of a few, simple, direct and unmistakable words. See Question 11.

**15. How do we know how long to wait for an answer when we are seeking guidance?**

There are a number of developments which may tell us we have waited long enough:

- a) when the lack of any clear-cut directions seems to be a negative answer;
- b) when new circumstances change the original situation and we may need to start over again, in which case, we may find the obvious answer;
- c) when a sense of direction seems to have emerged;
- d) when all doors but one are shut and, by a process of elimination, there is only one answer; and

e) when the time has come, answer or not, that a decision must be made.

God can use even a poor decision, if honestly made, for his purposes and our well-being.

## **16. It has been said that confession is the doorway to intercession. What does this mean?**

It means that if there is something wrong in our lives it will get in the way of our praying effectively. The principle is as old as the tragedy of Cain (Gen.4:5-7), reiterated by Isaiah (Is.1:10-18) and again by Jesus in his somewhat humorous story about the man with a "two by four" in his eye trying to remove a speck of sawdust from the eye of his neighbour (Luke 6: 42) .

Sin separates us from God and so is a barrier to effective intercession. Confession results in the restoration of right relationships with God, with others and within our own lives, and so gets rid of whatever blocked communication with God. It cleans up the terminals of our spiritual batteries so that once more the current can flow freely. Confession is a Biblical way of getting rid of sin. The frequency with which one goes to Confession depends upon the individual. Many make it a monthly, and some a weekly, rule. Unless some unanticipated situation demanding immediate action should arise, a good rule for the average person might be three times a year (before Christmas, at the beginning of Lent and again before Easter.) Many persons find the Prayer Book General Confession adequate except perhaps for once a year. There are no hard and fast rules.

Remember, it is God, and not the priest, who forgives. The priest is God's minister; his role is that of physician to the soul. Under an obligation of absolute confidentiality, he acts as a "go-between", not to separate but to make a connection. The sacrament of Reconciliation of a Penitent is not a court of justice but an exercise in love. You will find the service on page 447 of the Book of Common Prayer.

**17. We are told (by William Law for one) to give thanks in all things. How can I be thankful that my son has a fatal disease?**

You can't. William Law was quoting the Epistle to the Ephesians, "Giving thanks always for all things" (Eph.5:20). Sometimes we give thanks because of and sometimes we give thanks in spite of. In the latter case, we are able to give thanks because we know that God understands our grief (Is.54:4) and that nothing is beyond the reality of His love. (Rom.8:35-39). Remember that "giving thanks" is the technical name for the "breaking of bread" or Holy Communion. From the beginning, Christians have learned to "Eucharistize" (i.e. "give thanks") for all things in spite of persecution, hunger, peril, pain, distress and death itself. This trust is ours.

**18. What is the difference between the prayer of praise and the prayer of thanksgiving? My attempts at praise always end up by being "thank you's".**

In praise, we thank God for who He is. In thanksgiving, we thank God for what he does.

**19. You remember the story about Gideon in the Book of Judges and his laying out a fleece to determine God's will concerning a decision to be made (Judges 6 :37). What do you think about laying out a fleece?**

Not wrong, but not desirable. Jesus said, 'Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God" (Matt. 4: 7) and warned against sign-seeking (Matt. 12 :38-39). The trouble with "fleece-laying" is that it does not build lasting trust, and in spite of whatever promises we make at the time, we find ourselves doing it again and again. The Jesus way is to trust God (Luke 12:29-31).



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