

How Do Our Prayers Affect God's Actions in the World?

Sometimes people claim that prayer only affects us and makes no difference in the actions of an all-sovereign God. But the Bible gives many examples where God actually seems to change his actions in response to human prayer. This presentation will argue that belief in God's sovereignty is consistent with a conviction that God really does act in response to our prayers.

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Introduction

I. Numerous passages in Scripture indicate that God changed his actions in the world in direct response to human prayer.

(Therefore the purpose of prayer is not just to change us, though that is also a result.)

A. Old Testament examples

1. Moses: Exodus 32:9-14
2. Amos: Amos 7:1-6
3. Abraham regarding Sodom: Genesis 18:22-33
4. Hezekiah with the letter from Sennacherib: 2 Kings 19:14-20

B. New Testament examples

1. Early disciples in Jerusalem: Acts 4:29-31
2. Cornelius: Acts 10:31
3. Peter in prison: Acts 12:5-11
4. Early Christians: James 5:16: "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." (note context)

II. Prayer and God's immutability: does God change his purposes when he answers prayer?

- A. More accurate to say: God changes his present actions in the world
- B. Also: God changes his present attitude toward the situation (Exodus 32:14)
- C. I would also affirm that God *ordained* that Person A would pray for X *and* that God would then grant X to person A

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, (Ephesians 1:11)

III. Prayer and God's sovereignty: if God ordained my prayer, then does my prayer really make any difference?

- A. Hadn't God already ordained that he would change his present action at that time?
-- then what difference did my prayer make?

B. But my prayer is still an important part of what God had planned

C. And Scripture repeatedly asks us to believe that God really does respond to my prayer

1. This requires us to affirm the reality of secondary causes
2. It gives us the significance of genuine causality in the events of the world (amazing, given the sovereignty of an omnipotent God)
3. It gives us the amazing significance of a genuine interpersonal relationship with God himself
4. Yet we must also keep in mind that we are only able to have the dignity of genuine causality with good results when it is God who works in us, "both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13)

IV. What kind of prayers does God respond to?

(Note: I list these factors here but not intend to discuss them at this session)

- A. Praying according to God's will (1 John 5:14; Matthew 6:10; Matthew 26:39; John 15:7; Act 4:25; James 1:5-8; 2 Colossians 12:9-10)

- B. Praying with faith (Matthew 21:22; Hebrews 11:1; James 1:6; Mark 11:24: Compare: Joshua 8:1)
- C. Obedience (Psalm 66:18; Proverbs 15:8; 1 Peter 3:12; 1 John 3:21; Ephesians 2:13)
- D. Confession of sins (Matthew 6:12; 1 John 1:9; Psalm 19:12; James 5:16)
- E. Forgiving others (Matthew 6:12; Matthew 6:14-15; Isaiah 59:1-2)
- F. Humility (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5; Matthew 6:5; Luke 20:46-47)
- G. Continuing in prayer over time (Luke 6:12; Luke 5:16; Mark 14:39; 2 Corinthians 12:8; Mark 14:36; Mark 14:39; Matthew 6:7; 1Thessalonians 5:17; Colossians 4:2; Acts 6:4)
- H. Praying earnestly (Hebrews 5:7; Daniel 9:19)
- I. Waiting on the Lord (Psalm 27:14; Psalm 38:15; Psalm 130:5-6)
- J. Praying in private (Daniel 6:10; Luke 5:16; Matthew 6:6; Acts 12:5; Acts 12:11-12)
- K. Praying with others (Matthew 18:19-20; Acts 4:24; Matthew 6:11-13)
- L. Fasting (Nehemiah 1:4; Joel 2:12; Acts 13:2-3; Acts 14:23)
- M. What about unanswered prayer?
 1. God keeps hidden his own wise plans for the future
 2. We do not always know how to pray as we ought (Romans 8:26)
 3. We do not pray according to God's will (James 4:3)
 4. We do not always ask in faith (James 1:6-8)
 5. We think that one solution is best, but God has a better plan (Genesis 37:23-36; Genesis 50:20)
 6. We should continue to pray (Romans 8:28; 1 Peter 5:7; Hebrews 13:5; 1 Samuel 1:19; 2 Corinthians 12:8)

V. Is it possible to know when our prayer is prevailing with God?

- A. Disclaimer: I am a novice in this area

B. Examples:

1. “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16 ESV)
2. D. M. MacIntyre, *The Hidden Life of Prayer*, “Pray until you pray.”
3. P.T. Forsythe, *The Soul of Prayer*: “Prayer is will against will.”

C. This seems to be the best explanation of Mark 11:24

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

διὰ τοῦτο λέγω ὑμῖν, πάντα ὅσα προσεύχεσθε καὶ αἰτεῖσθε, πιστεύετε ὅτι ἐλάβετε, καὶ ἔσται ὑμῖν.

D. See also Philippians 4:6-7