

What's Prayer Got To Do With It?

Tim Reddish

If we are honest, most of us do not find prayer to be easy. It is, after all, a spiritual discipline, and such practices require effort. We can also be disinclined to pray if we are not entirely sure what good it does.ⁱ Here are two reasons why this is so, one scientific and one theological.

There is the scientific reason. If, as literal thinkers, we imagine God to be *outside* of an ever-expanding universe, then God is perceived to be ultra-remote and becoming more distant all the time. In addition, if we have subconsciously absorbed into our worldview an image of a mechanistic universe, then this leads us to think of the cosmos as a *closed* system of pure cause-and-effect. For the modern mind, then, a strong emphasis on God's transcendence can lead to the difficulty of relating to a God who is beyond the bounds of a closed and expanding universe. It is no wonder God can seem both silent and distant.

Here is the theological reason. What is the point of bringing our prayer petitions to an omniscient God who knows all that can be known? Even worse, another of God's traditional attributes, impassivity, asserts that God cannot be affected by creation, including being influenced by our prayers. Some theologians respond by saying that although prayer does not sway God or alter the physical world, it changes *our* perspective. Prayer is therefore only for our psychological benefit. This is totally uninspiring! In addition, if we believe the future is already fixed in the mind of God, then prayer cannot modify what God has already decided. If this is the case, in what coherent sense can we honestly say that God 'responds' to our prayers?

We are left praying simply out of obedience, because we believe we should pray. Some even feel guilty for not praying. If we could better understand the process and potency of prayer, then we would be more motivated to pray. This requires us to change our view of both God and creation—and the relationship between the two.

Physicist-theologian John Polkinghorne states that there are two necessary criteria for theological coherence in prayer.ⁱⁱ The first is that prayer only makes sense *in a certain kind of world*. Prayer is illogical in the rigid framework of a clockwork universe. Although modern physics insists that our world is *not* closed like that, the legacy of that Newtonian paradigm lingers in our consciousness. That mechanistic worldview is officially dead; let us not resurrect it within our *theology* and so inhibit our view of God's capabilities and activities in the world. Instead, let us embrace a world that is open to new and emergent possibilities. Our universe is a mixture of regularity (laws of nature) and randomness (or chance); both elements are necessary to describe God's good creation. Another thing we must remember is that the physical universe is not a self-sufficient system. God has enabled creation to be the 'other' and given it room to become so, but its autonomy is relative to the Creator—who is the ultimate source, sustainer, and goal of all things. "If nature is an open, emergent, and transcendentally oriented set of physical systems, there is little reason to exclude the activity of God as a positive causal factor in the ways things go."ⁱⁱⁱ Second, prayer only makes sense with *a certain kind of God*. God needs to be *relational* and engaged with sequential events as we experience

them, rather than purely 'outside' of time. Only from this perspective of openness and relationality will we have the confidence to engage in the discipline of prayer.

Nevertheless, prayer is not magic and cannot change the facts of the present situation—just like the past cannot be altered. Neither can a prayer's effectiveness be proved or disproved logically. Just because a specific request was 'granted' does not mean that the outcome would *not* have been realized had we *not* prayed. We are bound by the arrow of time; we cannot go back and run through the exact same scenario again, this time without prayer, to see if the same result is achieved. We need not, unless we choose to, believe in the causal connection between the prayer and result. The effectiveness of prayer, like the significance of miracles, is a matter of faith. Consequently, prayer is a living expression of our relationship with God and his covenantal commitment to us.

For others, prayer is unnecessary because there is a fatalistic expectation that God will always do what is 'best' anyway. However, there are a myriad of complexities in an open world; this means it is far from likely there is *only one* 'best action' for God. Rather there is a range of creative alternatives open to God. Consequently, what is 'best' if we don't pray might well be different from what is 'best' if we do pray!^{iv}

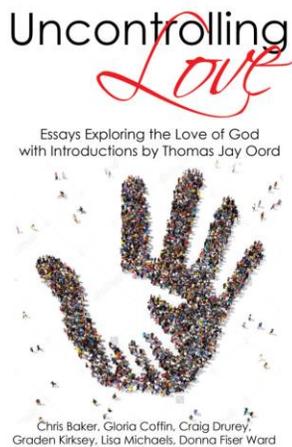
Returning to the earlier question, why articulate prayer if God already knows what we want and need? Yes, God may know what we want better than we do, but God only knows what we *request* if we actually request it. There is a difference between wishing and asking. We can wish for something without putting any conscious or physical effort into bringing that desire about. In contrast, to request something of God requires us to think of him, rely on his ability, and trust in his character. It is both an act of our will and our faith. This is why it is necessary for us to deliberately articulate our request in prayer, either aloud or silently, and not just hope that God might give us what we desire.^v

How God will respond to our requests we cannot say, since we do not know the constraints of the whole system or the involvement of others—not forgetting that they too have freewill. Nevertheless, in the complex web of possibilities within an open world, our prayers become part of the causal matrix. Consequently, prayer will *always* make a difference to the world—even if it does not expressly give us the outcome we desire.^{vi} Put another way,

Prayer makes a difference, but so do the necessary regularity of the world and every free choice humans and angels make. We have no way of knowing how the power of prayer intersects with these and other variables. We can pray with confidence, knowing our prayer is heard and makes a difference. But we can't pray with certainty that the difference our prayer makes will have the precise outcome we desire. In this sense we can't be certain our prayer will be answered.^{vii}

While I—as a scientist—value this logic and find that it encourages me to pray, I can appreciate that for others this rationale may seem cold, perhaps even disturbing! Regardless, as mentioned earlier, we need to have confidence in the power of prayer if we are to practice it. Moreover, the more we engage with God in prayer, the more it will become second nature, i.e., evidence of our dynamic relationship with Him.

Two further thoughts: Matthew tells us that Jesus taught his followers to ask for God’s “will to be done on earth, as it is in Heaven.”^{viii} We repeat this phrase all the time in the Lord’s Prayer to the point that we have forgotten what the words imply. That statement says that we should continue to pray for God’s kingdom to be established because what we see here and now is *not* all that God desires. Moreover, our prayers are, it seems, needed to help bring about God’s rule—his kingdom—here on earth. In fact, more than our prayers are needed. We also need to *act*—to be empowered by the Spirit and work to bring about the things God values. Saying “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” is, then, not merely an expression of eschatological hope—although it is that—but it is an affirmation of our commitment to partner with our Trinitarian God to further God’s kingdom. Second, it is quite legitimate to say that the Christian and the Spirit are “co-praying.”^{ix} As Princeton theologian Daniel Migliore says: “Prayer is the fundamental exercise of the new human freedom in *partnership* with the Spirit of God.”^x Since our prayers are in partnership with the Spirit, who is intimately involved in the divine dance with the Father and the Son, this adds significant potency to our prayers and provides a further powerful motivation for the believer to pray.



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A Short Essay by Tim Reddish in [Uncontrolling Love](#)

ⁱ See also, Tim Reddish, *Science and Christianity: Foundations and Frameworks for Moving Forward in Faith* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 138-143; David Wilkinson, *When I Pray What Does God Do?* (Oxford: Monarch, 2015).

ⁱⁱ John Polkinghorne *Science and Providence: God’s Interaction with the World* (West Conshohocken: Templeton Foundation Press, 2005), 84.

ⁱⁱⁱ Keith Ward, *Divine Action: Examining God’s Role in an Open and Emergent Universe* (West Conshohocken: Templeton Foundation, 2007), 178.

^{iv} Ibid, 161-2.

^v Ibid, 162.

^{vi} Ibid, 163, 169.

^{vii} Gregory A. Boyd, *Is God to Blame? Beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Suffering* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 134.

^{viii} Matt. 6:10 (NIV)

^{ix} See Rom. 8:26-27

^x Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 242; emphasis mine.