

Scripture Reading for July 17th, 2022

1 Kings 18:22-30, 33-39

²² Then Elijah said to them . . . ²³ “Get two bulls for us. Let Baal’s prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. ²⁴ Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire—he is God.” Then all the people said, “What you say is good.”

²⁵ Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire.” ²⁶ So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. “Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. ²⁷ At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” ²⁸ So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. ²⁹ Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

³⁰ Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which had been torn down. . . . ³³ He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, “Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.” ³⁴ “Do it again,” he said, and they did it again. “Do it a third time,” he ordered, and they did it the third time. ³⁵ The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

³⁶ At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. ³⁷ Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.” ³⁸ Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. ³⁹ When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!”

Isaiah 55:8-9

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Sermon: Problems and Myths About Prayer¹

The great 20th century preacher Martyn Lloyd Jones once commented, “Everything we do in the Christian life is easier than *prayer*.” And while that may be sound like a shocking confession, I think there’s a lot of truth in that statement. So if we find prayer difficult and, if we are honest, most of us do, we should be encouraged that we’re in good company. And for those who disagree and who do find prayer easy, let me encourage you to pray *more* because the world needs it!

Now some people think that the reason why prayer is so difficult is because they haven’t yet found the right *form* that suits them. We have experimented with praying at various times of the day, from getting up early to praying last thing at night. We have tried praying standing up, lying down, sitting down, on our knees, and while walking. We have tried praying out loud, in silence, on our own, and in a group. We have tried lighting a candle, holding a cross, beads, or a Bible, or listening to the sounds of nature. We have folded our hands together, raised our hands, and held hands with others. We have tried prayer journals, web resources and apps, or praying in special holy places. Let me say *any* of those postures, places, and forms of prayer are as *effective* as any other. The real issue is not *how* we pray but *why* we pray, *and what we think God does when we pray*. And that’s what I’d like to explore for a couple of weeks. However, I *won’t* be providing definitive answers as to *how* God answers prayer or why some prayers are answered to our satisfaction and others are not. But we can take a serious look at some of the issues and, I hope, the outcome will result in *greater confidence to pray*. Let’s begin by considering two major problems that many people have with prayer.

First there’s the problem with “the *predictable* world of science.” Many people think the scientific “laws” that govern the universe leave no place for a creator God. Newton’s laws of motion and gravity result in well-ordered planetary motion that is entirely predictable, as if the universe is clock-work mechanism that God wound up at the beginning of creation. Some would add to that description the theological view that a *perfect* God would create a *perfect* world that wouldn’t need mending. God therefore does himself out of a job and so becomes divorced from creation. After all, if God were to “intervene” in the world to *fix* something, isn’t that an admission that God made a mistake and creation is not as good as Christians’ claim? Putting these scientific and theological ideas together results in unwarranted conclusions, one being that God *can’t unilaterally* act in the world and what we commonly called miracles *cannot possibly* occur. Consequently some theologians treat the Bible’s miracles stories as myths.² If this were true, then it would be *pointless* to pray for a miracle. Instead, prayer can *only change us* through influencing our minds.³ For example, through prayer, our fears can be transformed into peace. And that also means God can *only work* in the world *through* you and me.

¹ This short sermon series is inspired by David Wilkinson’s *When I Pray What Does God Do?* (Monarch, 2015).

² Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) promoted this view and was remarkably influential. (It also aligns with Deism.)

³ This projects God’s activity into something (that is currently deemed) mysterious: the complex workings of the human mind (mind-body/brain dualism). This flawed view is part of the “God of the Gaps” fallacy; see also Reddish, *Science and Christianity* (Wipf & Stock, 2016), 75, 77-78.

Now there are *half-truths* being revealed here. God *can* indeed influence our minds by inspired, timely thoughts that seemingly come from nowhere to more dramatic ways, like visions. And prayer *can* result in a change of perspective – even a U-turn. And the things God wants to see happen in the world *can – and usually do* – arise though *our actions*. However, the problematic word above was “*only*”; we need to be careful in too quickly placing handcuffs on God. The trouble with this restrictive perspective is that it based on an out-dated view of physics. Newton’s laws of motion don’t work in the world of atoms, nuclei, and fundamental particles. Instead of certainty we have *probability*.⁴ And *probability* opens the door to *possibility*! Another discovery is that of “chaos.” You probably have wondered why weather forecasters often get it wrong. That’s because of the so-called “butterfly effect.”⁵ The internal motions of our planetary atmosphere *do* follow well-established “laws,” but small differences in the initial parameters can result in hugely different outcomes, hence the word “chaos.” This means that in complex dynamical systems, predictions are not totally reliable. The cosmos is, then, *not* clock-work.

Consequently, and in addition to the free choices *we* humans make,⁶ this inherent *uncertainty* within nature may be understood as providing “space” for God to work in the world without violating the so-called “laws of nature.”⁷ God *sustains* the regularity of creation while having some freedom to act. In our Old Testament reading, we heard the famous account of Elijah’s contest with the prophets of Baal.⁸ Incidentally, this needs to be compared with Moses’ contest with the Egyptian Pharaoh and the resultant ten plagues.⁹ In Elijah’s case, one could understand the climax as a lightning strike. In which case, the *physical* explanation is well understood. However, the *theological* explanation is revealed in its *timing*, namely an apparent “coincidence” as a response to Elijah’s prayer in the context of demonstrating which “God” is the true God. We therefore need to be careful to *not* make God too small or too simple, or as I said last week, to “*underestimate* the power of God.”¹⁰ Using theological language; things are *not* as predestined as some Christians think. There is both law and grace, order and generosity.¹¹ In short, if God granted some freedom to human beings and for physical processes, it would be difficult to fathom why God wouldn’t also preserve some freedom for God’s own action. That being the case, I suggest *prayer* is the meeting place where God can collaborate *with us* and *with creation* to form surprising expressions of new creation, including inspiration, healing, and resurrection.

The second - and for many the more challenging - problem we have with prayer is *the seemingly trivial acts of God*. You may have heard stories of people praying for a parking space as they drive into a full

⁴ Instead of things being entirely predictable, we have indeterminacy.

⁵ This is nothing to do with quantum mechanics, but complex large-scale Newtonian systems (fluids), like the atmosphere.

⁶ The God-given freewill that is, I believe, part of being made in the “image of God.”

⁷ This tries to address the concern of “intervention” and the quest for theological *consistency* in divine action. Add to this God’s relationship with *time*, which I also believe is dynamic, and God’s hands are not tied as many are prone to think.

⁸ 1 Kings 18:22-39.

⁹ See Exod 7:14 - 12:32.

¹⁰ Mark 12:24; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/We-Look-Forward-to-the-Future.pdf>.

¹¹ Moreover, God is transforming creation into new creation.

car park and suddenly a vehicle exits a space, and your “prayer” appears to be instantly answered! I have said and experienced such prayers myself! The far more serious and personal problem is why, if God answers such frivolous requests, doesn’t God respond to much more consequential prayers, like for Ukraine or for healing for someone in serious pain or with cancer? I have prayed for someone who medically was expected to die, and yet they made a surprising recovery. I admit, it’s hard to pray in *confident faith* for healing in a situation like that because a peaceful death may be the appropriate thing to seek. And I have also prayed with conviction and faith for someone to be healed and they later died. You will no doubt have had similar experiences. Moreover, sometimes a recovery seems quicker than expected and at other times occurs slowly, and after a few false starts and complications. Do we give God any credit in such situations? And does God just ignore some prayers?! If we say that God is *able* to act but doesn’t, then does that mean God doesn’t *want* to act for a specific good in response to our prayers?¹² People of faith seem to have a real problem here.¹³ As critics have pointed out: Either God is not as *good* as we proclaim, or God is not as *capable* as we think! Maybe we ought to have a closer look at the Bible and consider the experience of the individuals within it concerning prayer.¹⁴ We will consider that next week, today we will consider some common myths or caricatures concerning prayer.

First, there’s the “*slot machine God*” view of prayer. Even Christians who are opposed to gambling sometimes consider prayer in this way. This perspective believes that God *can* do something very dramatic in our lives *if we pray often enough*. Nevertheless, we appreciate that the chances that God might do such a thing are very low, but if we put enough faith into the slot machine and pull the handle of prayer often enough, we *may* get lucky.¹⁵ Such a view of God’s response to prayer has a number of fundamental weaknesses. A slot machine is a mechanical device, with a random nature that gives a payout that’s carefully controlled to favor the casino rather than the gambler. God in this myth is therefore merely a machine whose response to prayer is biased *against* the person who prays, and any answer comes just from frequency and luck. God is *not* relational, personal, or on the side of human beings! We ought to be aware of our view of prayer because it tells us something about ourselves, and our view of God, and the way God works in the world. This is also a myth which puts *us* - as the person who prays - at the center of it all. We are *instigating* the prayer *so that* God will then act in the way that we have asked for. Such prayers can be quite prescriptive and centred entirely on our own desires.¹⁶

¹² Whether individual or collective. (And does having more people praying make any difference?)

¹³ I have addressed this at length in Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Cascade, 2018). See also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Why-Doesn%E2%80%99t-God-Do-Something-II.pdf> ; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Why-The-Death-of-John-the-Baptist.pdf> .

¹⁴ We can also consider the teaching of Jesus on prayer too, noting that he routinely practiced prayer and his disciples noted that fact and asked him how to pray. See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Content-of-the-Lord%E2%80%99s-Prayer-Part-1.pdf> ; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Content-of-the-Lord%E2%80%99s-Prayer-Part-2.pdf> .

¹⁵ Some people argue that that the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8) supports this view; see: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Context-of-the-Lords-Prayer.pdf> .

¹⁶ Related to this myth is the pious Christian who believes that prayer is one of those things that must be done regularly. Discipline is clearly no bad thing, however if you oversleep one morning or for some other reason you forget to pray, you can live with a sense of guilt and fear that you have not demonstrated enough spiritual commitment for the prayer request

Second, there is “*the indulgent-parent God*” view of prayer, who responds positively to a person’s request as long as they act nicely. An indulgent parent completely focuses on their child’s wishes to the exclusion of everything else, so much so that the parent’s own identity is wrapped up with their child’s. Perhaps one of the most overused Christian words is that of “blessing.” Often, we pray to be “blessed” and that usually means “to be healthy, wealthy, and happy!” You can certainly find some biblical verses that lends support to this “prosperity Gospel.” Now while it’s true that God doesn’t desire anyone to be poor, sickly, and miserable, that doesn’t mean the opposite is automatically true! The God of the Bible is loving but not indulgent. God takes delight in human beings but doesn’t need to be needed. And because God is good, God is not so easily manipulated or domesticated to our own whims or wishes. We need to be careful not to roll together Jesus with Santa Claus, and as long as we’re not naughty *but nice* then expect presents from God to be automatically on their way!

Third, there’s another view of prayer that’s *all* about asking God for a *miracle*. And sometimes the rhetoric is heightened by using the language of “claiming a miracle” or “asking God for the impossible.” In other words, *the way* God acts is deemed to be *outside* of our normal experience of the world and, as I mentioned earlier, even breaking what is commonly called the “laws of nature.”¹⁷ In Psalm 19:1, we read that “The heavens declare the glory of God,” and the first pictures this week from the James Webb telescope can be interpreted in such a way. However we can’t have it both ways; if we use the evidence of the order and harmony within nature as pointing to the existence of a Creator God, then we can’t use the breaking of that regularity as also the evidence for God. Moreover, if *all* our prayers are essentially asking for a miracle, that reveals our obsession with miracles rather than our relationship with God, as well as a lack of appreciation that *by definition* such things are *not* usual. And that last point must be emphasized, because *only* asking for miracles will inevitably result in disappointment with God.

The fourth myth is that *prayers are only answered with the right attitude*. The lack of desired result is often equated with a lack of *faith*. Faith in this context is equated with a person’s inner belief or conviction, and it’s meant to be something we *possess* and are apparently deficient. Often the lack of answered prayer is blamed on the victim! No; the *quantity* of faith is irrelevant because an essential *quality* of faith is a willingness to take risks and to trust, and in the case of prayer to trust *in God*. Related to having the correct attitude is using the right prayer *formula*, which includes praying “in the name of Jesus” or praying in tongues. If God gave you the gift of wisdom, as in the case of King Solomon, but not the gift of tongues then you’re out of luck! And if you forgot to mention the name [or authority] of Jesus, your prayers simply bounced back off the ceiling. Let me make it clear: There is *no formula* for prayer; there is *no* incantation that automatically gives the result we want! That’s called “magic”! Linked to this myth is the perception that *prayers are only answered if the right person prays*. People

to be answered. If you think about it, this portrayal of God is again mechanical and contractual. Now it’s true that the God of the Bible makes covenants with people, but these covenants always begin with God’s undeserved favor – God’s grace.

¹⁷ This appeal to the miracle is also meant to be a definitive argument – a “proof” - for the existence of God!

sometimes think their minister's prayers will be more effective than their own, or that we are more likely to be healed if prayed for by a person with a public reputation for healing, like a TV evangelist. However, it's not about *our faith* or *the words we use* or *the merits of the person* who prays but our reliance on *God's character and grace*, regardless of what happens.

My fifth and final myth is that *God is too mysterious* to make sense of prayer. "God moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform," says the hymn-writer – perhaps echoing the words of Isaiah we heard earlier. I suggest this appeal to divine mystery is intellectually lazy and even dangerous. Now there's certainly a right place for mystery for finite minds. But shrouding the topics of prayer and suffering in fog and throwing that mystery *upon God* is unhelpful and unwise. Instead we should first say "*We don't know*; let's talk more about this." Second, we must recall what God *has* revealed about *his character* in the person of Jesus Christ who we believe, as we heard a few weeks ago, is "the image of the invisible God."¹⁸ We are *not* then totally ignorant about God's nature. And that means we must balance mystery with revelation. I suggest we locate the mystery *not* in God's nature or character but in the *way* God works *in the world*. Science can be helpful here in that studying the creation reveals something of the Creator. For example, we witness the regularity within nature, as well as the role of disorder and chaos. Both seem to be necessary for creative new possibilities; yet as we all know, the process can result in unwanted suffering, even for faithful followers of God. Nevertheless, the ministry of Jesus reveals God's care *for individuals* as well as Jesus being the Savior of the *whole* world. The question we have to ask ourselves is this: "Can we live with this degree of mystery and are we willing *to trust in God's good character*?" If we can say "yes" to both, then we have the basis for meaningful prayer.¹⁹ Amen. Let us pray.

¹⁸ Col 1:15; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/We-Believe-in-Jesus-Part-1.pdf> .

¹⁹ See also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Prayer-In-An-Open-World.pdf> .