

Class 5; How Does Prayer Work?

"I wonder if this will work," I thought, steadily rubbing the beads dangling between my fingers. I wasn't holding my breath. Standing in the corner of a deserted terminal at O'Hare Airport in Chicago, I was lamenting (maybe even cursing) the storms in Germany driving my present distress. With my now useless standby ticket clutched firmly in hand, I had just watched all the booked passengers on the last flight of the day disappear down the jetway. The only other people in sight were the two friends with whom I was traveling.

Friends they might be, but I wasn't particularly interested in their company at the moment. Not that they cared. It made little difference to them where they made googly-eyes at each other. Who could blame them? They were in love, even if they weren't officially dating. I was a bit more perturbed than they at the prospect of spending the night in Chicago and doing this all over again. Weather forecasts going forward didn't bode well, and once again we wouldn't have guaranteed seats. Hence, the rosary.

I don't remember what decade I was on when I saw one of the gate agents emerge from the tunnel with a harried look on his face. Apparently I wasn't the only one stressed out by the number of people needing to get on that jet. Smiling through my angst as he passed by, I sardonically asked, "You wouldn't happen to have any more seats on that plane, would you?" To my shock, he stopped cold and practically yelled, "How many of you are there?" "Three!" I practically shouted back. "Grab your bags and follow me!"

Seized with excitement and waving like an overzealous prom queen, I screamed at my lovesick(ening) companions to follow. We rushed to the ticket counter, dragging more than pulling our luggage. Like a jackhammer, the agent's fingers pounded away on the computer keyboard taking our information. To my recollection, he never even looked at us, being so intent on the screen. After the fastest check-in ever recorded in airline history, we raced down the jetway, boarding passes waving wildly in hand. It was a miracle. The last three seats were ours. My prayers had worked! But it got even better.

Stepping aboard the huge airplane, we were promptly informed of the seating arrangements. "There are two seats together in coach and one in business class," said the stewardess. There was no question in anyone's minds who was going where.

"See you guys later," I said, heading toward the front of the plane. Smiles on the other two faces greeted my wave, and they happily trundled off to their adjoining seats farther back. Stowing my luggage in the overhead bin, I gratefully planted myself in the oversized leather seat next to another gentleman.

"Thank you, God!" I silently prayed, settling in. Moments later a flight attendant approached.

"Hello, gentlemen!" she said with a big smile. "I'd like to take your dinner order. The main course for our flight this evening is a choice between chicken and filet mignon." Looking at me, she asked, "Mr. Johnson?"

"Mr. Johnson couldn't make it," I replied with my own broad smile. "But Mr. Leonard will have the filet."

Whats the Point?

It's not easy to answer the question of exactly how prayer works. I've often found myself wondering about it - and not just when I'm trying to get on a flight. There are many facets to the question, but unlike the popularity of professional wrestling, it's not a pure mystery.

The first thing to realize is that prayer isn't magic whereby we manipulate God. It doesn't change the will of God. We can't somehow twist his arm and get him to do something simply by asking or going through some prayer ritual. The *Catechism* tells us God is "unchangeable" (202). Scripture agrees. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever," says Hebrews 13:8.

We also can't forget that God is the force behind everything. There is nothing that exists apart from him, and nothing happens except through his power. And I don't mean just big stuff. The fact that you can breathe, eat a jelly donut, or read this book is only because God gives you the ability. As Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5).

This raises an obvious question. If we can't change God's mind, and everything depends on him, then why in the world do we pray in the first place? The quick answer is that's the way God set it all up. It's how he designed our conversation with him. But let's take a deeper look.

Before we get to the heart of the answer, we need to talk about two complex topics: grace and freedom. I'm going to tell you right off the bat that these two are toughies, and it can be difficult to grasp exactly how they relate to one another. That relationship has been debated more hotly than the question of who is the best James Bond. (Sean Connery, of course). As finite beings, most of whom have

trouble with basic algebra, we have to accept there's a mystery associated with the interaction of grace and freedom. Nevertheless, there are some things we can nail down that will help us perceive the inner dynamic of prayer.

Grace

There are two types of grace: sanctifying and actual. Sanctifying grace is what saves us. It's the kind of grace we receive in the sacraments beginning with baptism, the indwelling of God in our lives, the seed of eternal life. Sanctifying grace is what we lose through mortal sin. Without it, we are spiritually dead.

Actual grace is the kick in the pants God gives us so that we'll move toward him, so we'll turn and receive sanctifying grace. Even after we receive sanctifying grace and are "right with God," we continue to receive actual graces from God. We get them until the day we die. They are little "holy helps" that lead us to perfection and help prevent the loss of sanctifying grace. I like to imagine actual graces as little arrows constantly bombarding my body, helping point me in the right direction.

It's a pretty sweet deal when you think about it. God not only offers us salvation through his grace, he even gives grace to help us receive grace. It's like taking a test where our hands are actually guided to mark the appropriate box while the answers are being whispered in our ear. "How come then," you wonder, "we aren't all getting straight As?" (I'm assuming that's a rhetorical question.) Read on.

Because we are free - and stubborn - we can still resist actual graces. But God continues to gently and patiently move us toward the right answer, toward himself. In fact, God has taken patience to a new level. Think about it. Any sin is an incredible offense against God. He hates it. But since we can do nothing without him, the only way we can commit sin is if he gives us the ability to do so.

Remember, without his grace we would simply cease to be. God is such a loving, patient Father that he allows us to offend him if we so choose. He patiently waits for us - and provides more grace - to realize our job is not resistance but cooperation with the actual graces he provides. Of course, this idea that we can resist God brings up some interesting stuff. As we've noted a couple of times already, we can't do anything without him. How we get to heaven is obviously no exception.

Augustine once said, "In the business of salvation all is the gift of God."¹⁵ That even includes our cooperation. There is nothing in the process of getting to heaven that is exclusively ours. If the origin of our power to commit even sinful actions

comes from God, how much more are the good works we perform finding their origin in him? There are no two ways about it. God is everything. And here's the kicker. Since he's the source of everything, God already knows what we're going to do from all eternity. He holds everything in existence and so has always known what is going to happen. He is the origin of everything, except evil.

"Wait a second!" you exclaim. (Keep it down, man, I'm right here.) "What about our free will? Can't we choose what we want or don't want?" The answer is "yes, in a sense." But don't forget that the only reason we have a free will is because God gave it to us. (Trippy, I know.) Created in God's image, we are free. It's one of the greatest gifts we've received. But just because we're free doesn't mean we're the *cause* of our freedom. A teenager may be free to go out on Saturday night with his buddies, but only because his parents allow him. They are more the cause of his freedom than he is. He just exercises it - until he's caught smoking with his buddies.

The actual graces God gives don't destroy our human liberty. God can gently move us without violating our free will because, as Thomas Aquinas says, he is closer to us than we are to ourselves.¹⁶ God didn't make us robots. Rather, he made us in his image and invites us to himself. He only wants our free response, which we can give through the help of the grace he provides. "We also work," says Augustine, "but we are only collaborating with God who works, for his mercy has gone before us" (CCC 2001).

Working/or a Living

This is pretty heady stuff, I know. But it's important to understand at least something of the topic of grace and freedom because it has direct consequences on how you get to heaven. While God is the power behind everything good and he wills that all be saved (see 1 Tm 2:4), that doesn't give us a license to simply go through life doing whatever we want. Salvation is a gift he freely offers, but we must work it out in "fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12). In other words, God isn't forced to fix us when we freely choose our own destruction, even though he often does. He created us with freedom and respects our choices, and there are consequences if we abuse it. Assuming he is going to save us no matter what we do is the sin of presumption. It would be like jumping into the deep end of a deserted swimming pool, clad with concrete boots, expecting someone to come to the rescue. Not a wise move.

Since we have that (kind of) straightened out, let's return to the original question. If

God doesn't change and everything good ultimately comes from him, through his power, why should we pray? It's actually a pretty easy answer: cause and effect.

We all recognize and accept that in the natural world God has set things up in a particular way, with certain rules that govern our existence. If you drop a rock, it will fall. If you eat too much candy, you'll get sick. To reap a harvest, you must first sow the seed. The same kinds of rules apply to the supernatural world. To reap a spiritual harvest, you must first*sow the spiritual seed. Prayer is that seed. It's a primary cause that produces effects of grace. It sets things in motion.

Prayer is necessary and efficacious because that's the way God wants it. It's a homage to his providence. In fact, prayer acknowledges that there is a God and that we are governed by a divine Being who is deeply interested in the affairs of our life. It seeks a power that is beyond that of men. Prayer can obtain and achieve that which only God can give. You just have to have a little faith.

Faith

There was a guy in my high school who started to lose his hair early. He stated during a prayer service that his hair would come back because he had faith God would heal his cue-ball-esque appearance. All he needed, he thought, was enough faith. After all, he reasoned, Jesus told the disciples they could move mountains if they had enough faith (see Mt 17:20; Mk 11:23). Not surprisingly, he is balder today than he was twenty-five years ago.

On the other hand, there are plenty of examples from Scripture where God rewards a person's faith. In Matthew's Gospel, two blind men approach Jesus seeking to be healed. "'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' They said to him, 'Yes, Lord.' Then he touched their eyes, saying, 'According to your faith let it be done to you.' And their eyes were opened" (9:28-30). Similar scenes include the healing of the hemorrhaging woman (see Mk 5:25-34), the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter (Mt 15:21-28), the healing of the ten lepers (Lk 17:11-19), and the list goes on. All asked for healing and received it based on their faith. So what's the deal? How does faith work?

Can You Hear Me Now?

The *Catechism* tells us "faith is a gift of God, a supernatural virtue infused by him" (153). It's a gift solely given through grace. We may not be able to conjure it up on our own, but we sure do know how to squash it. How many times have you heard someone say, "Well, all we can do now is pray," as if it's the last resort? Rather than the last thing we do, it should be the first. "But why," you ask, "doesn't God

always answer? In fact, there are lots of times when I pray and get no response."

Isn't it interesting that we never wonder if God hears our adoration and praise, but we always question whether he heard our latest request because we don't see immediate results, or results at all. It's pretty silly when you think about it. We're basically treating God as if he's a divine egomaniac who only hears what strokes him.

On the other hand, we have to admit it's sometimes hard to believe God has heard our petitions because we're so geared for empirical data. We want visible results, hard facts. Rain down some fire! Shake the earth! Show me the money! And even when that happens, we often don't believe. The Israelites cried out to God for deliverance, and through a most incredible series of events including plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, the destruction of the entire Egyptian army, pillars of cloud and fire, and more, he did as they requested. Even after all that, they thought he was going to leave them to starve to death in the wilderness. So he gave them manna, bread from heaven, every day for forty years. Even so, the Israelites' story (and ours) is one of constant lack of faith. We find it so hard to believe he's going to come through yet again.

Regardless of what God has often demonstrated for all to see, at its core "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). Faith is supernatural, going beyond this visible world. As such, it frequently tests us. God often requires patience. (He's never late, but he's seldom early.) In fact, sometimes what God asks us to believe appears downright nuts in the eyes of the world, and maybe ours, too.

The first example would be good old Noah and his ridiculous-looking ark. We all know that story. But imagine what the Canaanites manning the parapets of the fortress city of Jericho thought when they saw the Israelites marching around the city in the Book of Joshua, Chapter 6. Through Joshua, God had ordered them to circle the city once a day for six days. The only thing to be heard was the blowing of trumpets by the seven priests who led the procession. The people weren't even to speak. If there was any trash-talking, it only came from the soldiers in the city. ("Hey, Israelite! You walk like an Egyptian!" Cue The Bangles.) You can't blame them, I guess. What else did they have to do? What kind of a siege was this, anyway?

Shockingly, given their track record, the Israelites did exactly what God wanted

them to do. The results were spectacular. On the seventh day, per God's instructions, the people joined their voices to blaring trumpets, shouting to the Lord. The rest is history, familiar to everybody. Even Elvis (before he left the building) sang: "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho. And the walls come tumbling down." (Thank you. Thank you very much.)

The bottom line is: When we are faithful to what God asks, he delivers. It's that simple. "But," you say, "there's this one thing I've been asking about for a long time, and it still hasn't happened. Why not?"

One of the reasons we don't always get what we want is because often we're asking for the wrong things. That sweet new car or coveted promotion may look good, but are they good for you? Perhaps you'll become unbearable to others as you obsess over your car - like guys who use a Q-tip when applying the finishing touches to a wax job. Maybe that new job you really want will have you working so hard you forget where you live. Perhaps that's why our hot line from heaven has yet to ring.

God's not going to do anything that isn't good for us. Like any good father, he is always seeking what's best for our eternal salvation, not just happiness in the here and now. Ask yourself if you're requesting the right things. In fact, go beyond that. Examine your motive for asking.

If you ever turn on a television, odds are you'll come across a crime drama in your channel-surfing. Set locations differ, but they're all essentially the same. A bad guy did something bad, and the good guys have to figure it out and catch him. Looking at potential suspects, the lead cop inevitably turns to his team and declares, "We need a motive, people!"

Motives aren't just relevant in crime solving. They're vitally important in the spiritual life, too. As Christ says in the beatitudes, "Blessed are the pure in heart" (Mt 5:8). God wants to give us good gifts, but he wants us to ask for the right reasons. He doesn't desire divided hearts (see Jas 4:4). Before asking God for something in prayer, ask yourself why you're asking. Check your motive.

"I hear you. I need to check my motive and ask for the tight reason. But that's just it. Sometimes my prayer wasn't answered even when I prayed for something I knew was good." I know. It's happened to me, too. There are times we're asking for something that seems right and we still don't get what would appear to be the best answer from a natural perspective. For five years I continually prayed for a miraculous healing of my mom's cancer to no avail. She suffered terribly and eventually

passed away. For a time, I struggled with why God didn't answer my prayer. The fact of the matter is he did, just not the way I wanted. In his perfect will, it was his time to go "home." I had to reconcile myself to the fact that God's answer is always best, even if it doesn't appear that way.

Look at Christ. Facing a horrific crucifixion, Jesus himself asked the Father to "let this cup pass from me" (Mt 26:39). His humanity recoiled at the thought of what was coming and naturally desired to be spared. We'd all be praying the same thing, I'm sure! And yet, he wasn't delivered.

"Well," you point out, "he had to go through with it. Otherwise we wouldn't be saved!" Easy to say that now, isn't it? We have the benefit of looking back and knowing from divine revelation what it was all about. God has that benefit all the time. He always sees the big picture. He answered his Son's prayer, just not in the manner most comfortable for Jesus' humanity. He knew what was best from a divine perspective for our eternal salvation.

The key to getting the "right" answer every time we pray is pretty simple: Learn to pray for the things God wants. Immediately after asking the Father for deliverance, Jesus prayed, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Mt 26:39). Like the Son, we have to get to the point where we accept that Father knows best. Just look at the results of his (lack of) response to Jesus: eternal salvation for the world! While from a human perspective it seems unconscionable he would let his Son suffer and die, the Father was preparing the greatest gift he could possibly give the world and the greatest glory for his Son, whom he "highly exalted" and gave "the name which is above every name" (Phil 2:9).

This brings up an interesting point. Often we don't ask for enough when we pray. We're thinking too small. But our Father in heaven "desires to do something even greater" than what you want says the *Catechism* (2737). This doesn't just apply to huge issues, but even the most ordinary of life's events. I only prayed for a seat on the plane to Europe, the bare minimum. I'd have gladly taken one right by the bathroom next to the one-year-old twins cutting teeth. But God gave me a quiet seat more comfortable than the recliner in my living room, and a great dinner to boot. And if he cares that much about my getting a seat on a plane, how much more does he care about the deeper needs and issues in life?

Thy Will Be Done

If you're anything like me, it's more likely you're asking for the wrong thing instead of not enough. That's why conforming our will to God's is so important.

But sometimes in so doing we forget the bigger picture. Some people spend a lot of time trying to figure out what God wants them to do in every little situation. They fret and fuss and worry about spiritually unimportant matters. ("O Father in heaven, should I buy the red one or the blue one?") Not only will this never get anything done, but it isn't necessary. Why? First of all, God isn't some vindictive cuss waiting to whack us upside the head when we make a "wrong" decision. Rather, he's our Father who loves us. Not every decision is life or death.

If we're really trying to do his will, not only is God going to respect our decision; he's going to make it work. For "we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). God is always willing to write straight with our crooked lines. So we can relax, especially when we're dealing with issues that aren't intrinsically good or evil.

Should I take that new job? Should I buy that other car? Butterfinger or Snickers? Talk to God if necessary and make your best choice. (Butterfinger every time.) And if you want to have the best chance of knowing what God wants - how to write with the straightest line possible from the very beginning - there's one simple rule that works every time: get close to God. It's that easy - and that hard! I can yell at the top of my lungs for my kids to clean their rooms, but if they've conveniently left the building with Elvis, they can't hear my voice. As our Father's children we have to get close so we can hear what he's saying. If you put your relationship with God first, you'll be more tuned in to what he desires for your life. You'll be able to hear what he's telling you to do. And nobody else is looking out for your interests the way he is.

Ultimately, we know our prayers work because of Jesus Christ. God hears us because Christ "prays in us and with us" (CCC 2740). We can boldly go to the Father because we are "sons in the Son," adopted children united to Christ through the sacraments. As long as we're joined to him, Jesus makes our prayers work for our eternal good.