

Prayer Changes Things

Well so good to see you guys. If you have a bible, turn with me to Exodus 32. We're gonna flip around and take a look at a lot of *different* passages this morning, but we'll at least start off there in Exodus. If you're joining us for the first time, we are in week three of a series called *Formation*, where we're exploring how the Holy Spirit uses our *habits* or *practices* to grow and change us over time. Specifically, we're looking for five straight weeks at how the habit of *prayer* accomplishes that. On that note, there are a number of ways we've set up for you to put prayer into practice throughout this series. I won't do that whole schpil again this week, but you can find all those details at citychurchknox.com and find out how to participate with us in that.

But in each week's *teaching*, we've talked some about the ins and outs of prayer: what it is, how to practice it, and some of the things that keep us *from* practicing it. So today, I want us to go to work on one major obstacle that *I* have always had when it comes to prayer, and from my experience, a lot of other people have had too. To see what the *objection is*, I want you to look with me actually at Matthew 6:7-8—e'll actually put it on the screen since you're already in Exodus:

[7] *"And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. [8] Do not be like **them**, for [and here's why you shouldn't pray like that...]* your Father knows what you need **before you ask him**.

The reason we don't need to heap up empty phrases in prayer is because "our Father knows what we need before we ask him." **God already knows what we need, so there's no reason to impress him with the words we use asking him for it. We can just ask.** That's fantastic.

But at the same time, I want you to pay very careful attention to where your mind goes when you hear that verse. When you read the words "God knows what you need before you ask him," what does the cynical side of you wonder? Does anybody else in here hear that and think, "well then why do I need to ask him?" Anybody else feel that at all? *I do*. I mean, if it's true that God already knows everything I need *before* I ask, why do I need to ask?

And I think that question is actually part of an even *deeper* theological hornet's nest that *a lot of us* have felt, which is "if God's gonna do what God's gonna do, why should I pray?" I won't make you raise your hands, but anybody willing to admit they've wondered about *that* one? Yeah, it's so easy to wonder that. And for a lot of people, this creates *major barriers* when it comes to prayer. It makes us feel like prayer doesn't actually matter all that much. Kind of like it's just a formality. I think Dallas Willard articulates the problem well when he says:

*The idea that everything would happen exactly as it does regardless of whether we pray or not is a specter [~~definitely had to look up what that word means—it means like a "ghost"~~] that **haunts the minds** of many who sincerely profess belief in God. It makes prayer **psychologically impossible**, replacing it with dead ritual at best.*

He says believing that "God is gonna do what God is gonna do, whether or not I pray," makes prayer "*psychologically impossible*." I think that's such an accurate depiction of where a lot of people are at in

regards to prayer. Where a lot of *us* are at in regards to prayer. We get so discouraged, so paralyzed by this belief that our prayer isn't really gonna have much effect at all, that we often just don't pray to begin with. So what exactly should we do about that hang-up?

Well I would suggest that we *first* examine whether the premise of that hang-up is *true* or not. Is it true that "God is going to do, what he's going to do, whether or not I pray"? Is it true that prayer doesn't really change much of anything? Is it true that my prayer doesn't actually have much of an effect on what God does or doesn't do? **As a church, we always want to start by examining whether the conceptions we have of God are based on the bible, or based on something else. We always start with the question *who is God, according to the Scriptures?* Because it just might be the case that some caricatures we've developed of God, have eclipsed the *true* God from the Scriptures.** And in *this* case, when it comes to how God responds to our prayers (or doesn't), I believe that is precisely what has happened. **All my cards on the table, I do not think this picture of God is an accurate one. I do not think it is true that our prayers don't ever change what God does or doesn't do.** So what I'd like to do this morning, at least for most of our time together, is show you why I believe that.

So I'll just kick things off with a big thesis statement for our time together. And this statement will probably seem like common sense to *some* of you, and to some of you it may very well challenge a notion you have of who God is. But either way, I'll state the idea, and then I'll spend some time this morning showing my work on it. We'll walk through the Scriptures and let you draw your own conclusions from it all. But here's my thesis in very simple terms: ***prayer changes things.*** That's it. Prayer *changes* things. Put another way, I believe that ***God does some things in response to prayer that he wouldn't have done otherwise. I believe that, at least at times, God changes what he does in response to our prayers.*** I believe that with everything in me, and I would argue the bible bears that idea out on a number of occasions. So for the next little bit, I'd like to show you that.

First, let's take a look at Exodus 32. *Just to warn you, we are going to turn to a lot of passages today. So if you want to just follow along on the screen, we'll also put the passages in their entirety up there.* Exodus 32. So leading up to this passage, God has led his people out of slavery in Egypt via a guy named Moses. If you're *older* in the room, Charlton Heston. If you're *younger* in the room and just happen to like really terrible movies, Christian Bale. So God has led his people out of a horrible situation in Egypt, he has provided for them as he leads them out of danger and into a place called the Promised Land. And you'd *think* that *because* of all that God had done for them, the Israelites would now become just this extremely grateful, joyful, *delightful* people as a result of what had been done for them. You, however, would be very wrong ~~in thinking that~~. To be honest, they end up kind of acting like spoiled brats about 98% of the time. They're complaining about everything, they're doubting and accusing God and Moses of things they didn't do at nearly every turn—they're basically just being horrible human beings in most every way they can.

So in *response* to all this, God calls Moses to come talk to him up on the mountain, and basically tells Moses "these people are next-level crazy, I've patiently been bearing with them for a very long time, and I'm about ready to be done with them." (That's a paraphrase, by the way. But it's not far off.) Now I know God saying something like that might bother some of us, and I get that. But let's keep in mind this is not God just being easily fed up. This is God bearing with people, providing for them at every turn over years and years, and them choosing to acknowledge pretty much none of that. The bible describes God as being "slow to anger," and he demonstrates that by how long he's willing to put up with all this mess. But

saying God is “slow to anger” doesn’t mean he *never* angers. There are some things well worth being angry *about*, and the Israelites are trying their hardest to *be* one of those things. So God says to Moses, “I’m about ready to be done with these people.”

And that’s where it starts to get interesting. Because once God says, “I’m ready to be done with Israel,” here’s what Moses says back to God—Exodus 32, v. 11:

[11] But Moses **implored** the Lord his God and said, “O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? [12] Why should the **Egyptians say** [meaning, why should *others* say about you, God...], ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? **Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people.**

Bold strategy, right? Moses says “hey God, instead of doing what you said you want to do, and instead of doing what you probably *should* do, how about instead, you just *not* do it?” That’s a bold prayer. And Moses goes on talking about God’s purposes and character towards his people. He prays and asks God *not* to be done with the Israelites. That’s essentially his *prayer*: “don’t do what you were going to do. And instead, do something else.” Now look at God’s *response*. And, warning: this is where it will start to mess with some of us a little. Down in v. 14:

[14] And the Lord **relented** from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

In response to Moses’ prayer, God *relented*. Okay, so what does *relent* mean? Well, most literally, it just means to “change your mind.” It’s actually the same word that is translated “*repent*” in other parts of the Old Testament, when it refers to human beings. So it means God *relented*—he *changed his mind* about what he was going to do, and did something else instead. **He changed his *mind* in response to Moses asking him to. God was going to do one thing, and then Moses spoke to God—essentially, he *prayed*—and God did a different thing.** Y’all see that in your bibles right? You see that I’m not making that up?

Okay, so those of you in the room that know your bible fairly well, you might be thinking “but aren’t there places in the bible that say God *doesn’t* change his mind?” And the short answer to that is *yes*, it does. And I realize how confusing that seems. So here’s what we’re gonna do. I don’t want us to get too tangled up in all that today, but we’re gonna release a short podcast this week that helps make sense of this apparent tension. So if you legitimately have a theological hang-up with what I’m saying today, that’ll be a good resource for you. Because it actually isn’t as much of a contradiction as it seems like it is. But some of you can go and grab that podcast later this week. I’m sure some of you are gonna absolutely love that—others of you are like “I lost you two minutes ago.” No worries.

For this passage, here’s all I want you to see: it would appear, from this passage, that at least sometimes, prayer *actually changes* things. That at least sometimes, **God does things *in response to prayer that he wouldn’t have done *without* it.*** I just don’t know of any other way to read that passage than to say that **at least sometimes, prayer actually changes what God does or does not do.**

But it's not *just this* passage, it's others too. Turn with me (if you'd like) to 2 Chronicles 7. So, just **as general a bible reading tip, we always want to be careful that we're not taking one particular way that God acts at one point in the bible, and assuming that it's the way he *always* acts.** Sometimes, God interacts in a unique, one-time, special kind of way with certain people and the bible makes it clear that he won't go about things that way.¹ So I do want to make sure *we're* not getting the wrong idea today from Exodus 32. What I want to show you is that this idea—that God does some things in response to prayer that he wouldn't have done otherwise—actually occurs semi-frequently in the bible. Sure it doesn't happen every *single* time, but it does happen fairly often. So for starters, I want you to see what it says in 2 Chronicles 7, starting in v. 13. Here's what God says to the people of Israel:

*[13] When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, [14] if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, **then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.** [15] Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place.*

Okay, before we go any further on this passage, I first need to make sure we all know that this passage is not about the United States of America. We good on that? I know there are a lot of politicians and fundamentalists who want you to believe that it is. I know there's a lot of memes online with an American flag in the background and this passage in the foreground. But this passage *is not about America*. It's about *ancient Israel*. Until you see locusts consuming large parts of our country and God telling you audibly that it's because of our collective sin, let's just assume this was about people *back then*, and not about people today. And even then, maybe run it by somebody else first before you begin to believe that. We all good there?

Okay, but with that out of the way, do look at the principle at work in this passage. God says "if my people humble themselves and *pray*, and repent of their sin—then God promises to forgive their sin and heal their land. Which sure does make it *sound like* if they *don't* humble themselves and pray and repent, God—*what?*—**won't respond that way. That he won't do those things.** Isn't that what it seems like it's saying? If God's people *pray* and seek his face, he *will* do this. If they *don't*, he *won't*. To me, that sure does make it sound like **prayer changes things**. It seems like God is saying **he will do certain things in response to prayer, that he wouldn't have done otherwise**. So there it is again.

Okay, let's do another one. For this one, let's move over to the *New Testament*—Mark 9. So in this story, Jesus' disciples have just gone out and attempted to perform a miracle on their own—specifically, casting a demon out of a person—and they were not able to. Now I know the very idea of casting out demons seems weird and foreign to a lot of us, and that's understandable. But for our purposes today, I just want you to take a look at the conversation the disciples have with Jesus have after this happens. So after they are unsuccessful at performing this miracle, they all get back to the house together to debrief, and here's what happens, chapter 9, v. 28:

[28] And when he [Jesus] had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" [29] And he said to them [very matter-of-factly], "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

¹ For one example of this, see Joshua 10:1-14, and specifically v. 14.

Jesus says, and I quote, “this kind can’t be driven out by anything but *prayer*.” I don’t know how you read that, but to me, it sure does sound like Jesus is saying, “this didn’t *happen* because you didn’t *pray*.” Meaning “if you would’ve *prayed*, it would’ve worked. But because you *didn’t* pray, it *didn’t* work.” I know it’s easy to get distracted by the whole idea of demons, but if you take that out of the equation, this is actually a pretty simple statement Jesus makes, right? That makes it sound like **God does some things in response to prayer, that he doesn’t do otherwise. Like prayer *changes* things.**

Okay last one: James 4. You guys doing okay? You alive? And this one is really, *really* straightforward—no demons *or* locusts in this one. James, if you didn’t know, is most likely the half-brother of Jesus. And in many ways his teachings in this book are just him sort of riffing on a lot of Jesus’ *own* teachings. In the part we’re about to read, he’s talking about interpersonal conflict, and then shifts for a second to talk about prayer. And he’s about to say something, very *plainly*, about how prayer works. Look with me at chapter 4, v. 2:

[2] *You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.* [Now look at this last sentence...] **You do not have, because you do not** [what’s that next word?] **ask.**

“You do not have, because you do not *ask*.” To me, that makes it sound a *lot* like prayer *changes* things. That **God does things (or in this case, *gives* things), that he wouldn’t do or wouldn’t give otherwise, because people ask him to do it. Prayer *changes* things. Does *that* one make sense?**

Okay now let’s come up for air. There are *more* examples of this from the Scriptures²—these so far to me are just some of the most obvious ones. So we could do this all day and show you this from all over the bible. But I don’t want us to *be here* all day and hopefully I’m getting my point across by now. My point is that **God often works this way. My point is that prayer really does at times have an impact on what God does or doesn’t do.** So I’m not sure *where* we got the idea that “God is going to do what God is going to do, whether or not we pray.” I’m not sure where we got the idea that our prayers don’t really affect what God does or doesn’t do. But I don’t think we got it from the bible. Or at least, not from the bible *as a whole*. The God we read about in the bible is *relational*, he’s *responsive*, he’s *attentive* to prayer on a semi-regular basis. Do you see that from these passages?

And please know that I don’t say any of this just to spark a theological debate about how God works, or anything like that. If you guys know me, you know that most theological debates make my eyes want to roll back in my head. **The reason I wanted to walk you through all of that today is because I think believing that God *doesn’t* respond in any significant ways to our prayer is one thing that keeps a lot of us *from* praying. I think a lot of us don’t pray very often because we don’t actually think it has any impact.** But the entire thrust of the Old and New Testament would seem to say it *does*. It all paints us a vivid picture of a God who hears, and acts, and moves in response to, his people’s prayers. **God has decided that sometimes, the way he will move and act in the world is *in response* to his people’s prayers.**

² Some would be 2 Kings 20 and Matthew 8:5-13.

Now if you're analytically minded like me, knowing all this, might raise *more* questions in your mind. Questions like "does that mean if I ended up not praying for something, that thing wasn't God's will to do it after all?" Or "does that mean if God wants to do something, and he wants me to pray for it, and I don't pray for it, he like *influences somebody else* to pray for it instead of me?" Or things like "what does that mean if I forgot to pray for something God wanted me to pray for—did I just throw off the space-time continuum of the universe somehow? Are Marty and Doc Brown gonna have to come back in a DeLorean and make sure I pray for what I should've prayed for?" (That's mostly for you who are a little older in the room). But all sorts of questions, right? And I get all of that.

But with all due respect to us analytical thinkers in the room, I think those are actually missing the point a little bit. One theologian from the 19th century draws a parallel about all this that I think is really helpful. It goes something like this: he says, "does God know the day you'll die?" For followers of Jesus in the room, what's the answer to that? *Yes*. Scripture says he has *numbered our days*³—that means he knows how long we'll live. So, in light of that, can we do *anything* to *change* how long we'll live, according to the bible? *No*. Okay, then why do we eat? Well, we eat so that we *live*—if we *don't* eat, we'll die. But what even is the purpose of eating if God has already numbered your days? Shouldn't we all just eat nothing because God has already determined when we'll die anyway? And yet pretty much all of us still eat." And to all this, this theologian says, ever so gently, "stop asking stupid questions and just eat." **Eating is a God-ordained way that we live, and praying is a God-ordained way that God acts in the world.** At some point, with all due respect to the analytical parts of us, we might want to stop getting caught up in questions like this and *just start praying*.⁴

Because **at some point, all the minutia is actually keeping us from a very simple task: asking God to move in our lives and in our world.** One thing is very simple: *God moves when his people pray*. Charles Spurgeon said that "prayer moves the arm that moves the world." I think that's a fantastic way of putting it: prayer moves the arm that moves the world. So you know what we should do? We should ask him to do *just that*. And you know what? I bet he *will*. And sometimes, I bet he'll do something in response to prayer that he *wouldn't* have done otherwise. Because that's what he does.

Now, that *doesn't* mean that God *always* answers prayer the exact way that we *want* him to. It doesn't mean that he *always* responds immediately the way we *envisioned* him responding. Next week, we're going to spend a lot of time talking about the idea of unanswered prayer—what we do about that reality. So none of this means that God is always going to respond right away, in exactly the way we wanted him to. If he only ever did things that way, he wouldn't be *God*. Remember, God is also a good father. Which means that there are going to be times when he knows things we don't, when he sees things from a better vantage point than we do, and sometimes that's going to mean he responds differently than how thought he would.

But none of that should make us *hesitant* to ask him for things—it should make us all the more *eager* to ask him for things! If God can be trusted to sift through the things we ask and separate them into things that *are* what we need, and things that *aren't* actually what we need, that should give us an *immense* amount of confidence to just ask him for anything and everything.

³ Psalm 139:16, among others.

⁴ Adapted from Charles Ryrie, who stole it from A.A. Hodge's *Evangelical Theology* (1890), 92-93.

Tim Keller says it this way:

*God will either give us what we ask [in prayer] or give us what we **would have asked** if we knew everything he knows.*

To me, that's such a helpful way of thinking about it. When we pray, God will either give us precisely what we ask for, *or* he will give us what we *would've* asked for if we knew everything he knows. **This is actually a lot what the bible means when it talks about the Holy Spirit "interceding" for us: that no matter what we pray, the Spirit does the hard work of sifting through what is good and needed and what *wouldn't* be good and what *isn't* needed, and He supplements our prayer with all of that.**

Here's the way Romans 8 puts it:

*In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. **We do not know what we ought to pray for** but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit **intercedes for God's people** in accordance with **the will of God.***

So here's the incredible thing about being a follower of Jesus: **your prayers to God are perfect, whether you pray them perfectly or not.** If you are a follower of Jesus, meaning if you have accepted the reality that Jesus has made you right with God through his death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit is *interceding* for you every single time you pray. **He is making your prayers perfect as you pray them.** I think in the midst of all of our hang-ups with prayer, we can forget that Jesus' perfect prayer life stands in our place when we pray. For all the things in the Christian life we know we *don't* have to be perfect in, sometimes we end up functionally believing that we have to get prayer *perfect*. We don't. The Holy Spirit is working as we pray to make our prayers perfect through Jesus. So we get to just *pray*. We get to just *ask*.

Now, that doesn't mean we shouldn't be concerned with asking for good, biblical things. *We should*. And ideally, what happens is that the longer we follow Jesus, God guides us into asking for more and more of the right things. More things that are in line with his purposes for the world. But it *is to say* we don't need to be *paralyzed* by the fear of always asking for precisely the right things. We don't need to nitpick our way through our prayers before we pray. **Ask, trust that the Spirit intercedes for you, and then listen for anything that he might adjust or correct as you go.** But don't stop *asking*. Does that make sense?

Because the fact is that *prayer changes things*. This is evident all throughout the bible—we've seen much of it today—and so let's see to it that we *pray as if* it has the potential to change things in us, in our city and in our world. Because according to the bible, it has precisely that ability.

Okay, just like we did last Sunday, let's spend some time before we're done today putting prayer into *practice*. Here's what I want us to do specifically today. Everything we've just talked about has been how we *don't* need to feel like "God's gonna do, what God's gonna do, whether or not I pray." And how instead, we should believe that our prayers actually have the potential to move the arm that moves the world. That God desires to move in response to our prayers. Not every time, not in every way just as we expected him to, but still, he desires to do that.

So in light of that, I'd love for you to just think of the things that feel most "immovable" to you. I want us to just think of some things that to us, seem completely immovable. Things that just seem like they are the way they are, and that there's no way they will ever be different. And this morning, I want us to pray for those things. I want us to pray and ask God to move them. Not because he's guaranteed to, not because he's obligated to. But simply because he is a God that moves when his people pray.

So feel free to close your eyes, bow your head if you'd like, and I'll just give you two categories of things to pray through:

- **First, let's pray about some things that feel *immovable* in your own life.** What are the things that feel the most *immovable* in your life, personally? Maybe it's a sin you struggle with that you feel like you just can't get anywhere in fighting against. Maybe it's an addiction that you feel like you absolutely cannot shake. Maybe it's a interpersonal relationship with someone that is busted and broken in a dozen different ways and feels like it won't ever be restored, but you'd really love for it to be. Maybe it's a person that you work with, you go to class with, and you just really want them to become a follower of Jesus. You want them to get to experience the hope, the joy, the freedom that you have in Jesus, but you just can't envision that ever happening for them. **What are the things in your life personally, that feel immovable right now?** I want you to just spend some time, and ask God to move them. *Go for it.*
- **And second, let's pray for some things that feel immovable in our world.** So what are the things, not so much in your life personally, but in the world around you, the world at large—that feel immovable? So maybe that's the foster care system right here in Knox County. Maybe that's broken school systems in our country. Maybe it's an unreached people group that has never heard the gospel. Maybe for you, it's the state of the Church in America. Maybe you're just super burdened by how the Church at large doesn't represent Jesus well in a lot of ways and you don't see how that's ever gonna change. What is it? What's the thing in our world that feels the most immovable to you? Let's spend some time there and just ask God to *move*. Go for it, do that.

Father, thank you that you hear our prayers. Thank you that you hear us when we ask you for things. And thank you that we can just pour out our requests with you and that we can trust you to sort through them. That you can be trusted to tell us when our prayers don't align with your vision for the world. But thank you that we can just ask everything and trust you to do all that.

So God there are surely some things that have been asked of you in the last few minutes that we'd just really, really love to see you do. We'd love to see you work and move in the midst of some of these seemingly immovable things. So God, we ask you to do just that. We come to you in the perfect name and reputation of Jesus and we ask: make things right in our world that aren't right. Make things right in us that aren't currently right. God we know that is what you want to do and so we're joining with you and saying "us too." We want it to be made right too. Would you do it?

In Jesus' name and reputation we pray. Amen.