

Do my Prayers Make Any Difference?

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening folks, as has already been said, my name is Alistair. I have the privilege of being the assistant pastor here at the church and the privilege of tackling this very difficult topic for us this evening.

Now, if any of you know me well, you'll know that I love a good book. I read quite a lot. And recently I was reading this book called Joy in the Sorrow. And in this book, you hear stories of how people have been through some horrible situations in life.

And yet they still cling to their faith in Jesus Christ. In this book, you hear stories of parents losing a child at one year old. You hear stories of husbands losing wives, wives losing husbands, of families broken by the horrible reality and suddenness of death.

And all the while praying that God would intervene. All the while thinking, how on earth does this fit into God's good plan for his people?

One of the testimonies in this book is of a boy born with a body riddled with illness. For the first 10 years of his life, it was doubtful whether he would survive.

[1 : 18] And after many operations and many hospital visits, he was able to go home. But people prayed and prayed and prayed for this young man to be healed of his ailments.

So that he could live a normal life and enjoy life to the full. But all to no avail. Sure, the boy was able to go home and survive and he's a little bit older now.

But the reality is that his life expectancy isn't long. His body is failing him. Even after so many people prayed for him.

And you can imagine, can't you, in that situation. That after every single amen that was said, the parents and the boy were crying out. It doesn't matter.

I'm not seeing a change. I'm not healed. Is God even listening? Does he care for me? Or maybe they were thinking, well, if God is sovereign and this is God's will for him to be sick, why bother praying at all?

[2 : 33] Those are the difficult questions that many of us have wrestled with. And maybe you're still wrestling with them this evening. And that's the difficult question that we have before us this evening.

Do my prayers make any difference? It is a real question. It is a raw question. Because many of us ask this question in the midst of storms.

When we've got times of fiery trials. In times of immense suffering. And it is asked with hope in our eyes.

Please, let there be a difference. And it's a question that involves how we respond to the sovereignty of God. How we deal with God being in control and Lord over all things.

But before we can deal with this question, we need to ask two fundamental questions first. What is prayer? And what do I pray for? And only once we have an answer to these questions, will we be able to tackle this tough question before us.

[3 : 43] But let me start by saying that prayer does change things. It absolutely does. Because often in my own experience, I have found that prayer, whilst it may not change the situation I'm praying about.

It certainly changes my heart and my perception of what God is doing. Because it makes me run to God and depend on Him. So if all else is forgotten, that remains.

That through prayer, we have the privilege of entering the throne room of God Almighty and calling Him Father. That is enough for a reason to pray.

So let's dive in and ask that first question. What is prayer? Now in the busyness of life, the temptation is to reel off a shopping list style prayer, isn't it?

We get so distracted that we end up telling God all the things we want Him to do. And it's normally followed by exactly the way we want Him to fix our lives.

[4 : 52] But prayer is much more than us telling God what we want. We shouldn't treat God the way children treat Santa Claus. John Bunyan, the author of Pilgrim's Progress, said this about prayer.

Prayer is a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the heart or soul to God through Christ in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit for such things as God has promised.

Or according to His word for the good of the church with submission in faith to the will of God. At its most simplistic form, prayer is when a sinful but redeemed human being speaks with a holy and perfect God.

The Bible is how God speaks to us. In it we see His word revealed so that we can know Him and respond to Him rightly and call Him Father.

So in the Bible He communicates with us and in prayer we communicate with God. And the Bible tells us that the aim of every Christian is to grow in their likeness of Jesus Christ.

[6 : 11] It's the process that we call sanctification. Becoming more like Him every day. And prayer is one of the means that God by His grace has given us to help us in that growth, in that process of becoming more like Jesus.

It is our way of expressing our utter dependency on Christ. So prayer is not a shopping list. But it is the times when we speak to God and praise Him.

For the almighty and powerful God that He is. We give Him honour, worship and thanks. Because He has called us and set us apart. He has taken us from being dead in our sins and trespasses.

To being alive in Christ. When we look back over our lives and see how God has done that. Taken us from darkness to light. We can't help but thank God and praise Him.

Can we? Prayer also reminds us that everything we own. Everything we are. Everything we can see and touch belongs to God.

[7 : 27] Everything comes from Him. And when we remember that, there will be no end to our bowing down with thanksgiving to Him. And by God's grace we can do that.

Because of what Jesus did on the cross, we can come before God and pray to Him. Give Him praise and thanks. Give Him honour and worship. Confess our sins. And, yes, bring our needs before a God who loves us and who listens to us.

Prayer is ours communicating with our great Father in heaven. So there should be no such thing as a non-praying Christian.

The reformer Martin Luther famously said, To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing. Prayer is not a nice option that we can choose to take up and stop as we please.

But it is required. And we'd expect that of a healthy relationship, wouldn't we? Good communication. Imagine how my wife Sabina would feel if I came home from work one day and I just sat at the dinner table and all night, I didn't say a word to her.

[8 : 47] I just stared at her and listened. Or think of the other extreme. I open the door and before I've even taken my jacket off, I've rushed into how my day was.

The ups and downs and difficulties and joys. And then I go sit in front of the TV and I turn it on and as Sabina's in the other room, I'm screaming at her all of the things I want her to do and how exactly I want her to fix them.

Because that will suit me better. How do you think she'd feel? Now we can laugh and have fun.

But in reality, how often do we treat God exactly like that? How often do we simply ignore prayer at the one extreme or give God our shopping list of requests for that day on the other extreme?

Prayer is not magic. God is not our own personal blessing dispenser who has to grant every single desire of our hearts. Prayer should be leading us to run to God, to give Him thanks and praise Him and ask for His will to be done.

[10 : 05] Every Christian should want to pray and communicate with their wonderful Savior. And if we don't, then there is a problem in our hearts.

And when that is the focus of our prayers, that God would be glorified, then the question we have about whether or not they make a difference almost becomes secondary.

Because our main concern is that we are growing in the likeness of Jesus Christ and living in a way that glorifies God. So that is a really important backdrop to the answer of, do my prayers make any

difference?

What is prayer? And so if prayer is communication between the Christian and God, the next question is, what do I pray for? I think the first thing to know is that no amount of praying can twist God's arm or change His mind.

There are things that He has agreed in eternity that will come to pass and nothing, nothing will stop them. For example, every Christian in the world could gather in one place and pray that the Lord Jesus Christ would not return.

[11 : 24] And it would not make a difference in the slightest. Because God has ordained that it would happen. That Jesus will return as the Bible makes abundantly clear.

Could someone just get the back door, please? There are a number of places that we could turn to in Scripture where we find examples of prayer. And we can use them as guides or even as prayers that we recite together as a church family.

So for example, you have the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 or Romans 15, Ephesians 1, Philippians 1, Colossians 1. And we could go on and on of all the prayers in Scripture.

And in each of those passages, we find a prayer life that I think will be radically different from the one we are living out. You'll find petitions for spiritual maturity.

Prayers for God to be glorified, for Christians to be built up, for the church to be faithful, for teachers to remain faithful to God's Word and firm in their convictions, and for God to be the center of all things.

[12 : 34] But tonight, I'd like to turn your attention to Ephesians 3. And it would be helpful if you have that passage open in front of you. Ephesians 3, verses 14 to 21.

I've chosen this passage because in it, we see the Apostle Paul's prayer for the Christians in Ephesus. And because I am so challenged by this prayer, and how in reality my prayer is absolutely nothing compared to this standard.

So in these verses, Paul has two petitions, and you'll see those in verses 16 and 18, that the Christians in Ephesus would have power. But he isn't praying that they would have some kind of electrical boost, or mystical force running through their veins to carry them through the struggles of life.

He isn't asking that God would make them into the Duracell bunnies that we see advertised on TV, who can run longer than any other battery. This isn't just so that they can be seen as good Christian folks.

Paul prays all of this in light of God's glory. That these Christians would see God's glory revealed in their own lives, and praise Him for it.

[13 : 58] So Paul's desired result for his first petition is seen in verse 17. That Christ may dwell in their hearts. Meaning that Christ would be the unchangeable, immovable factor in the life of the Christian, and that they would grow in Him.

which will result in a life that is wholly dedicated to praising God. And then Paul's desired result for his second petition in verse 18, is that Christians would grasp how high, how wide, how deep, and how all-encompassing the love of Christ is.

that they would see that it is beyond, far beyond human comprehension. That's what Paul is praying for these Christians.

When was the last time you prayed that for somebody? Being honest, I think my prayer life is nowhere near this. And notice how Paul ends his prayer.

In verses 20 to 21, the very reason for his praying, is so that God would be glorified. And so he breaks into this magnificent praise of God, who can do immeasurably more than we can even ask, or even think.

[15 : 26] Friends, that is who we're praying to. God is not some distant, far-off, cold-hearted, deaf deity, but He is our Father.

And the focus of our prayer should be His glory. We should be praying to see the glory of God in each other's lives, so that we can point each other to God, to Christ, and praise His holy name. Praying that way, praying for the things that Scripture tells us to, will keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. It will keep the glory of God as our main focus, an aim in life, and it will mean, that we want our prayers, to be in accordance with the will of God.

Now we don't know the entirety of God's will. Sure, we know some things, that have been revealed to us in the Bible. That God will build His church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against her.

That sinners will be called from darkness to light, and that Jesus Christ will return. We don't know when that will happen.

[16 : 41] But we're called to pray for people to hear the gospel. We're called to build each other up, and we're called to witness, and be witnesses of the glory of God.

Therefore, pray these things, and see God's name lifted above every other name. So if that is what prayer is, and if that is what we should pray for, then we come to our final question of, does it make a difference?

Why would we ask this question? Maybe because our prayers are going unanswered, or we think they're going unanswered. Maybe because we believe in the sovereignty of God, and are trying to reconcile in our minds, how our petitions and prayer requests, fit with God's sovereignty.

It's a good question to ask. Or maybe you're asking this question, because you're hurting. This is a real question, and often people ask it when they're struggling.

Often, as Christians, we pray for some very difficult situations. Sometimes it can feel that our prayers do go unanswered, and that can be tremendously difficult.

[18 : 06] But the important thing is how we respond in those situations. How do we respond when God, in His sovereignty, doesn't seem to be answering our prayer?

Does it make us run away from God, because we didn't get what we wanted? Or does it make us run to Him, and depend on Him, because He knows what's best for us?

It's also important to recognize, that when people ask this question, they're asking it from a good place. And by that, I mean, that they're asking the question, from the position of being a Christian, and trusting in God.

And in His sovereignty. Now maybe you're thinking, well, Alistair, how is our understanding of the sovereignty of God a good thing, when it comes to our prayer lives?

Well, it's important, because in prayer, we are throwing ourselves on the God of the universe, who is almighty, who is powerful, who can work wonders, and who is good, and faithful, and trustworthy.

[19 : 11] I personally find, the sovereignty of God, such a relief, because it means, that things don't happen, based on my prayer life.

And thank goodness for that. I know that God is in control, so the hinges of the universe, are not fixed on my prayer life. How much of a mess, would the world be, if that were the case?

The sovereignty of God, shouldn't make us question, the importance of our prayers. But it should give us, a greater reason to adore God.

Because we have the privilege, by His goodness, grace, and mercy, to come before Him, and praise Him, and thank Him, for all He has done. Once we come to God, with that attitude, and that understanding, of what prayer is, that it is not just, a shopping list of needs, but we trust God, because He is sovereign, then our question, of whether or not, our prayers make a difference, becomes secondary, because our focus, is the glory of God.

But we do need to be honest, about this question, and say that we, really will never know, how prayer, and God's sovereignty, work together. Yes, many of us do have, the joys of answered prayer.

[20 : 36] Some of us, will have our prayers, answered in a way, that we didn't expect. And some of us, will have a long, long list, of prayers, that seem to be unanswered.

But what remains, is that we trust, in a good God. And He commands us, to pray, and all of His commands, are for our own good. That is why, that we can trust, and rely on Him.

Because of His nature, as a wonderful Father, and a great Savior. We also need to recognize, that it isn't necessarily wise, to speculate, why prayers, aren't being answered.

There are, certain indications, why prayers, could be hindered, in scripture. And we do need to be real, and question, our own hearts, and motives, for why we're praying, certain things.

And we need to see, if our lives, match up with our words. But the main thing, is to rest in God, because friends, He is God, and we are not.

[21 : 43] He is the almighty, powerful God, who has a plan, and purpose, for all things. And He knows, the whole story, from beginning to end. We only get a short snippet, of that, in this world.

But I can still see, questions out there, on your minds. About how prayer works, and I'd like to just, give you two examples, that, to show us, how our prayers, are both important, and necessary.

Regardless, of the outcome, of the situation. So the first example, is how our prayers, is about our prayers, of confession, and how as Christians, they are always, always, an answered prayer.

Every single day, we go out into life, in this broken world, and we sin. We feel crushed, and burdened, by temptation. We fail, and we disobey, God's words.

Therefore, every day, we run back, to our heavenly Father, and say, God, I am sorry, I have sinned, again, and again, and again. And the wonderful news, is that every single day, we pray that prayer, of confession.

[22 : 57] Jesus says, paid. Prayer answered. Sin gone. Isn't that mind-blowing, wonderful news?

That there is always, an answered prayer, every single day, because we stand here, forgiven. Now, let me give you, another example, of this question, from my own personal life, and see how, I've come to realize, that regardless, of whether my prayers, are answered or not, I can trust God.

So in 2013, in the October, I began to have, a severe, constant migraine. The doctors, can't understand it, medication, doesn't help.

And it means, that I am in, constant severe pain, every minute, of every day. And it affects my life, quite a lot. This means, I can't sleep. I'm always tired.

I'm always in agony, and I am suffering. Every single day, since that began, I have prayed, for healing. Sabina, my wife, has prayed, for healing.

[24 : 06] My family, have prayed, for healing. And many Christians, have prayed, for healing. But nothing has changed. In fact, it's actually, just got worse. Have I asked myself, do my prayers, make any difference?

Or asked God, why are you not, healing me, from this suffering? Well of course I have. I'd be lying, if I said I haven't. But the reality is, that this illness, may never go away.

And so I have, two options. One, I can let this, make me angry at God, and cry out, injustice. Or I can make it, force me to run, into the hands of my Savior, who gives me strength, to live life.

Friends, the second option, is far better, and far more freeing, in life. Having that second response, requires a change, of heart, which comes from, a result of trusting, in God.

Because only he knows, what's best. He knows the reason, why. And somehow, he knows, that this will glorify him. One of the biggest things, that my prayers, over these last, six years of suffering, have done, is change my heart, in response, to this whole situation.

[25 : 36] And the reality is, that if I stop, praying for healing, then somehow, somehow, I have this messed up idea, that I'm strong enough, to live without God.

That I can do it, by myself. Friends, if we answer the question, do my prayers, make a difference, with, well God is sovereign, therefore I don't need, to pray.

That's what we're saying. We're saying, that we don't need God, and we can do it, by ourselves.

And that is, categorically, not true. Even after, such a long period, of suffering, in my own life, it seems, that my prayers, unanswered.

It doesn't mean, that I give up praying. It means, that I try to live, as best I can, in my situation, to praise God, and glorify Him, in every way I can.

And I leave, the outcome to Him. Because He, is the one, who knows what He's doing. He is in control, and He knows, why this is happening. And maybe, there will be a day, where I understand it all.

[26 : 47] And even if there isn't, it doesn't matter, because, it's for His glory. And I'm called to trust, and glorify Him, in everything. The good times, and the bad times.

This illness, has been used, in my life, to teach me, that wonderful truth, that Graham, ended his sermon, with a few weeks ago, in Ecclesiastes. That quote, from Charles Spurgeon, that says, I've learned, to kiss the waves, that throw me, up against the rock of ages.

Our trials, and our sufferings, that remain, unanswered prayers, in our lives, are an invitation, for us, to trust, and depend, more on God.

They are not a reason, for us to turn, and walk away from Him. So do my prayers, make a difference? Yes. God is sovereign, and His plan, will not change, but the things, will change, according to His will, and by His grace, we're involved, in that somehow.

God's sovereignty, means that He is, working things, according to His purpose, and our prayer, should be, that that happens, that His will, is done. No one ever, had a deeper understanding, of God's sovereignty, than Jesus, and yet, no one ever prayed, more than He did.

[28 : 14] Even as Jesus, sat and prayed, in the garden of Gethsemane, God, if this be possible, take this cup, away from me. He still bowed, His head, to the Father's will, and walked to the cross, and was crucified.

And because of that death, because of His resurrection, we now have the privilege, of coming unhindered, before the throne of God, bringing Him, our adoration, our confession, our thanksgiving, and our prayer requests, to a God who loves us, to a God who listens to us, because of Jesus Christ, the perfect Lamb of God, who takes away, the sins of the world.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you, that your word, tells us, the wonderful truths, of who you are.

And we thank you, for all the commandments, that we find, in your word, and we know, that they are good. Father, help us, in our times of difficulty, to pray.

Help us, in times, when things are going well, to pray. And help our prayers, revolve around, and be for your glory, for the growth, of your kingdom, and for the renown, of your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose holy, and precious name, we pray.

[29 : 46] Amen.