

Does Prayer Change God's Mind?

Exodus 32:7-14

1) Back in the Old Testament book of Exodus, there is a moment when God is so angry with His people that He was ready to destroy them. He says to Moses about them,

"They are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."
(Exodus 32:9-10)

Who could blame Him? The people deserved it. Justice demanded it. How could they mock God after all He had done for them?

- The Lord had etched the Ten Commandments on stone tablets, but before Moses could even deliver them, the first two had already been broken.
- At the people's request, Aaron had taken their gold and fashioned an idol – a calf, like one of the statues they'd seen the Egyptians worship. Then they mocked the holy name of God by daring to worship the golden calf.
- They even had the gall to say that this statue was responsible for their newfound freedom!

How ungrateful they were! God's anger boiled over.

2) Moses was taken aback. He didn't want to see his family and all the people of Israel destroyed. But what could he do? The God of the universe had spoken. Still, Moses couldn't help himself. He prayed a desperate prayer of intercession on behalf of the Israelite people, hoping against hope that he could change God's mind.

"O Lord," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'" (Exodus 32:11-13)

a. It was gutsy. Who was Moses to think he could alter the mind of God? But the Bible reports an amazing thing – Because of the prayer of Moses, God changed His mind. The next verse says it simply:

"The Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened." (Exodus 32:14)

b. God is sovereign and certainly doesn't have to change his mind, but the Bible says he did, and the Scripture is full of other examples of God's changing his mind – with Abraham, Elijah, and Hezekiah, just to name a few.

c. James tells us that the prayer of a righteous person is

"powerful and effective." (James 5:16)

It's not just a mirage – prayer has real power.

3) This amazing story presents a challenge to those who believe that God predestines everything that happens. I don't know exactly how to reconcile God's foreknowledge with the free will of man, but the Bible says clearly that God changed his mind as a result of Moses' prayer.

a. One possible way to help us to understand this mystery is to consider what some theologians have called "middle knowledge." God not only knows the future, but he knows all possible futures.

- I think one reason the three *Back to the Future* movies captured our imaginations was the way every little change affected the future. Each decision, each action, created an "alternative time line" in addition to the one that would have existed had another action been taken.

b. This simple analogy can help us to understand that although God knows which "possible future" is going to be the real one – prayer can truly make a difference. God is so powerful that he can allow us to affect the future with our prayers, yet still work out his ultimate plan for this world because he not only knows the future, he knows all possible futures.

- God knows all possible time lines. In determining which time line he will allow to be the real one, He considers the prayers that we offer.

4) Some people who accept that God can answer our prayers get the mistaken idea that prayer is therefore some kind of dictation to God. When they pray, they act as if they're telling God what to do, and he is supposed to do it. God is not a genie to whom we go for hocus-pocus solutions.

- a. John Stott, author and once chaplain to Queen Elizabeth, said,
"Prayer would place an impossible strain on every sensitive Christian, if he knew he was certain to get everything he asked for."

Imagine the burden you would carry if every prayer you uttered was answered by God immediately! Imagine the ridiculous nature of our world if God granted every request. For our own good, we live in a world governed by certain basic scientific laws that are only interrupted on rare occasions, and then by a God who sees all, knows all, and cares about his children.

- b. Yogi Berra was once catching in an important game for the Yankees. The score was tied in the bottom of the ninth inning. The pitcher crossed himself, then the batter stepped into the batter's box and crossed himself. Both were obviously seeking divine intervention for the next pitch to go their way. Yogi quipped to the batter, "How about we just let God watch this one."

- c. Because God is all-powerful and all-knowing, and a God of love, He is not going to give us everything we ask for. He takes into account our immaturity and limitations. No matter how much we think we know what's good for us, God sees the bigger picture and is interested in what is best for us. God's Word says,

"In all things God works for the good of those who love him." (Romans 8:28)

- d. Jesus Himself was not a dictator in His prayers. In the Garden of Gethsemane He prayed,

"Not my will, but yours be done." (Luke 22:42)

5) Prayer is not dictation, but neither is it mere submission. Some folk go to the opposite extreme and contend that God already has everything mapped out in advance, so prayer is simply meant to be submission of your personal will to His predetermined plan.

- a. We have all heard the stories of some Christians who will pray for healing, but refuse to take their children to the doctor when they get injured or sick. Their reasoning goes something like this: "Who are we to dictate to God how His world is to be run? It's already predetermined – prayer is just getting in tune with God's will."

b. God does see and control the future, but we are not puppets on strings. The Bible assures us that prayer changes things. God doesn't have everything about this world preprogrammed. God is sovereign, but that doesn't mean God rules over every detail to the extent that we are helpless.

c. Some things are predetermined.

- The time and place where you would live. (Acts 17:26)
- The plan for your redemption. (Galatians 4:2-5)
- The time of Christ's return. (II Thessalonians 2:6)
- And many other significant events.

But prayer can dramatically change a multitude of daily events and circumstances.

6) Prayer is our teaming up with God, joining our strength with his power. One of His spiritual laws is that his power is released through prayer. When we pray, we make it possible for his power to be released for our benefit. When we fail to pray, we limit God's blessing by our own weaknesses. James said,

"You do not have, because you do not ask God."

(James 4:2)

7) Prayer changes God's mind because He loves us. God did not create us solely to be His servants. He created us to be His children. He wants a fatherly relationship with us, and he communicates as much when He allows us the power to change His mind.

a. There are a lot of names for God in the Old Testament, but Jesus introduced a revolutionary, more intimate concept of God. He said,

"When you pray, say: 'Father.'" (Luke 11:2)

b. We know God loves this name because it's the one Jesus used the most. More than two hundred times the gospel writers recorded Jesus' referring to God as "Father." Jesus wants you to understand that when you come to God with a need, you are petitioning a loving father. He said,

"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!"

(Matthew 7:9-11)

I love that verse and I understand it because I have a gentle, loving, patient, generous father. If you weren't as blessed, you still instinctively know how a father should be.

8) Patrick Morley, in his book *The Man in the Mirror*, tells a story about a father's love for his son. After a day spent salmon fishing in Alaska, three men and a twelve-year-old boy got in a small plane and headed for home. Apparently one of the skis of the plane had been punctured and had filled with water, causing the plane to crash shortly after takeoff. All four people survived the crash. Two of the men, both strong swimmers, were able to reach the shore exhausted. The third man, the father of the twelve-year-old boy, saw his son was unable to swim against the strong current. He swam back to his son.

The father tried desperately to save his son, but he couldn't pull his own weight and the boy's as well. Unable to pull his son to safety but unwilling to leave him, he cradled him in his arms as they were both swept out to sea. The father could have made it to shore by himself, but he loved his son too much to let him die alone.

9) That's the kind of Father God is. The only difference is – He didn't perish with us. He died for us. He died so that we could live. Paul says,

"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

The apostle John put it this way:

"Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13)

Listen again to what Jesus said:

"If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!"
(Matthew 7:11)

Prayer can change God's mind, because God is a Father who loves His children.