

QUESTIONS AT THE CROSSROADS OF FAITH:  
DOES PRAYER MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE?  
Matthew 26:36-46

March 24, 2002  
Dr. J. Howard Olds

According to a most recent Gallop Poll, three out of four Americans pray regularly. At special times, the numbers rise to nine out of ten. Fifty percent of patients want their doctors to pray, not just for them, but with them. Interest in prayer is back, if in fact it ever went away. To pray or not to pray is not the question.

The question you asked me to answer at the crossroads of faith is “Does Prayer Make Any Difference?” Is prayer power or placebo? Is prayer wishful thinking or divine intervention? Does prayer change things or change us? When Palm Sunday fades into Passion Week we find our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane and there he falls on his face in prayer and this is what he says:

*“O my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.”*

Deep prayer, agonizing prayer, life and death prayer. Many of you have been there. Some of you are there today. What is possible in prayer?

Isn't it interesting that the first petition of Jesus poses the question of possibility? *If it is possible, let this cup pass from me.* What is possible in prayer?

Let me say a couple of things. In the first place, relationship is possible. Prayer is not so much religious activity as it is a relationship with God. *O my Father.* “O” says it is urgent. “My” says it is personal. “Father” says it is family. And Jesus says, in this brief agonizing moment of his life, “Dad, we’ve got a serious family matter to discuss here. The cup is bitter and I’d rather pass. We need to talk.” My friend, Steve Harper, says the real purpose of prayer is not acquisition from God but intimacy with God.

Deep prayer will bring that to you. Maybe more than any other religious ritual prayer creates an intimacy between you and your Lord that is deep, vital and abiding. Prayer is developing a relationship.

Prayer is bringing to life the resources that are available to us. The great Yogi Berra was catching a baseball game and the score was tied, two out in the bottom of the 9th. The batter from the opposing team stepped into the box and made a sign of the cross across home plate with his bat. Berra, a Catholic himself, called time out, wiped the plate clean from the sign of the cross and reportedly said to the batter, “Why don’t we just let God watch this game from the stands?”

That may be good advice in baseball but don’t play the game of life that way. God

does not want to watch us from a distance. God wants to embrace us in a fellowship. God wants to come to us right where we are. The resources of heaven and earth are available to us and with all of heaven working and a host of people praying for the best possible outcome, we discover potential we never imagined and peace that passes all understanding. Jesus said, “*Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened.*” The potential is there. Will we tap the resources that are ours? Those are the possibilities of prayer.

But I must be perfectly honest with you. There are some things that we cannot expect from prayer. Prayer is not magic. Prayer is not manipulation. There are some things that God, by his very nature, cannot do. God will not always please you. God will not always give you your first request. “O my Father, I pass on this.” God replies to his own son, “I’m sorry, but that’s not possible. We need to work further on this.” Most of you have lived long enough to discover this to be. Ann Landers printed this prayer in her advice column a few years ago. “Dear God, help me be a good sport in this game of life. I don’t ask for an easy place in the line up. Put me any where you need me. I only ask that I can give you 100% of everything I have. If the hard drives seem to come my way, I thank you for the compliment. Help me remember that you never send a player more trouble than he or she can handle. And finally, God, if the natural turn of events goes against me and I’m benched for sickness or old age, help me accept that as a part of the game, too. Keep me from whimpering that I was framed or got a raw deal. And when I finish the final inning, let me rest in retirement with you, in the blessed assurance that I played the game as well as I possibly could.” Prayer will not always please you. Prayer will not always protect you from all harm. It just won’t do it.

Phillip Yancey opens his book *Disappointment with God*, by telling the story of Richard, a seminary student, who lost his faith in God. Richard became a Christian in college and frequently attended church meetings where there were great testimonials about God’s protective care. Unfortunately, Richard experienced none of that care in his life. His fiancée, who introduced him to Christ, dumped him. His parents divorced. A prospective employer duped him. In fact, the four years Richard was a Christian things had gone from bad to worse. Finally one night in a seminary dorm room, Richard and God had it out. “I don’t want to tell you how to run your world,” said Richard, “but you need to give me some evidence that you exist.” God said not a word. “After four hours of waiting,” said Richard, “I stood up and said I will forget God and live my life in my own way. I was converted that night. I was converted not to God but from God.” I’ve met my share of Richards in life. People disappointed, hurt, caught down in the struggles of some particular pain and doubt who picked up their faith and walked away from God. There are some things that prayer will not do.

*O my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.* So I’ve learned over the years to pray that prayer of serenity. “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to

know the difference.” *O my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass away.*

But that is not the end of the prayer. Jesus comes back a second time saying, “*O my Father, if this cannot pass from me, then may your will be done.*” Ultimately all prayer ends there. *May your will be done.*

Let me say a few things about the will of God. There is a will of God. The will of God is not as hidden as we sometimes make it out to be. It is the will of God that the world would be saved. It is the will of God that his kingdom would come on earth even as it is in heaven. It is the will of God that not one of his little ones should perish. It is the will of God for good to overcome evil. It is the will of God for justice to roll down like rivers and righteousness like a mighty stream. It is the will of God that you and I learn to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. It is the will of God that you and I hear the cry of the needy. Come to think of it, I know a lot more about the will of God than I am usually willing to follow. God’s will is not a mystery. It is a lack of determination of my will that makes following difficult.

While circumstances may prevent God’s intentional will from taking place, the ultimate will of God will reign forever and ever and ever. There is a will of God.

Furthermore, the will of God can be known. What is God’s will for me? That is the wrong question. Phrase the question this way: “What is God proposing to do where I am?” “How may I fit into that plan?” I don’t know about you, but I usually ask of God a road map. I want every turn and every move mapped out for the rest of my life. God does not work that way.

God is not interested in a road map; God is interested in a relationship. I keep saying to God, “Could you give me some directions? I need to know where to go.” And God keeps saying to me, “Why don’t you climb in; let’s go for a ride. You don’t have to drive, just ride.” I keep saying to God, “Show me the way. Give me some direction.” Jesus keeps coming back to me saying, “Just follow, just follow.” I keep saying, “What’s it going to be like somewhere down the road?” Jesus keeps saying to me, “It’s just one step at a time, Howard. It’s just one step at a time.” Here is the next step. There is a will of God and the will of God can be known.

There is another thing about it, the desire to please God, pleases God. You won’t always get it right, but if you get your heart right, if you move in the right direction, God will honor your willingness to follow.

I have a son coming up for ordination in June. It causes me to remember about 32 years ago when I was ordained into this ministry. Roy Short was the Bishop then. I suppose he did in Tennessee what he did in Kentucky. He had a most unorthodox way of ordaining people. There was not a lot of pomp and circumstance to his services. He just said, “Ya’ll come down here to the altar” and he’d lay his hands on us. Then he would say, “You spouses back there in the

congregation, you come on down here, too.” While they were coming he would always start singing:

There’s surely some where, a lowly place,  
out in earth’s harvest field so wide,  
where I may labor for life’s short while,  
for Jesus the crucified.  
So trusting my all unto his care,  
I know that he loves me.  
I’ll do his will with a heart sincere,  
I’ll be what he wants me to be.

Then the Bishop would crank it up on the chorus and everyone would begin to sing:

I’ll go where you want me to go, dear Lord,  
over mountain or plain or sea.  
I’ll do what you want me to do, dear Lord,  
I’ll be what you want me to be.

I just want to tell you folks today after 32 years, a desire to please God, pleases God. I have never gone anywhere where I thought I would go but I have always wound up where I needed to be. That is true in your life, too, my friends. When you get ready to pray to God, “Lord, whatever you want and where ever you want it, whenever you want to, that’s what I want, too.” When you are ready to surrender like that, you will be set free. I believe that with all my heart.

There is a will of God and the will of God can be known. The desire to please God pleases God. God will never desert his own.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for thou art with me.*

At the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, Derek, the 26 year old son of Jim Redmond, was favored to win the 400 meter race. Halfway through the semi-final heat Derek crumpled to the track with a torn hamstring. Pain soared through his body, but somehow he managed to get back to his feet. As he limped toward the finish line, there was a big burly man who pushed through the crowd. He had a tee shirt on that said “Have you hugged your kid today?” He had a baseball cap on that said “Just do it.” Jim Redmond rushed to the field and when he got to Derek he took him in his arms and said, “You know you don’t have to do this, Son.” Derek said, “Oh, yes I do.” With that Jim said to Derek, “Then we’ll do it together.” Taking him on his arm, the two of them hobbled across the finish line to the applause of the crowd.













God has not promised skies always blue  
Flower strewn pathways, all our lives through.  
God has not promised sun without rain  
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.

But God has promised strength for the day  
Rest for the labor, light for the way  
Grace for the trials, help from above  
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.

You see, it is no accident that on the cross on Good Friday, Jesus finally says,  
*“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”*

I leave you today with a phrase that has shaped my life. My mother gave it to me  
a long time ago. “The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God will  
not keep you.” That my friends makes all the difference. Amen.