

## Does Prayer Change God's Mind?

Rev. Brian Bill

August 24-25, 2019

If our questions aren't addressed properly, it's easy to become confused. Listen to how some children answered a few Bible questions:

- The first three books of the Bible are Genesis, Exodus and Laxatives.
- Lot's wife was a pillar of salt by day, but a ball of fire by night.
- David fought with the Finkelsteins, a race of people, who lived in biblical times.
- Solomon, one of David's sons, had 300 wives and 700 porcupines.
- The greatest miracle in the Bible is when Joshua told his son to stand still and he obeyed him.

One of the most helpful websites related to answering questions about Christianity is gotquestions.org. One of their posts deals with the number of questions in the Bible: *"It is difficult to give a precise number because ancient Hebrew and Greek did not use punctuation...but Bible scholars estimate that there are approximately 3,300 questions in the Bible."*

I see three purposes behind questions in the Bible.

**1. Questions can create doubts.** The first question asked by the Serpent to Eve was designed to create doubt in Genesis 3:1: ***"Did God really say...?"*** It all goes downhill from there, and it all started with a little question.

**2. Questions can lead to discovery.** The first question asked by God is found in Genesis 3:9. After Adam and Eve sin they shrink away in shame, trying to hide their guilt when they hear God ask, ***"Where are you?"*** This question was for their benefit and shows how God seeks to restore their relationship with Him. Questions can help us discover truth as evidenced when God asked Job 70 of them in the final chapters of the book bearing his name.

**3. Questions can equip disciples.** Also, the Bible records men and women asking faith questions. After the disciples asked, ***"Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"*** in Mark 4:38, they experienced a tremendous miracle and an unforgettable display of compassion.

As we come to the end of our *Glad You Asked* series, I want to thank you for asking such deep questions about Christianity. I trust you've been equipped with answers to help you grow and go with the gospel to your family, neighbors, coworkers, classmates and friends. If you missed any of the messages, you can find them all in video, audio and full-text formats on the new and improved Edgewood mobile app. Simply search for "Edgewood QC" in the Apple App Store or Google Play...or you can ask Ben Huisman to help you download it.

Last week we asked the question, "*How do you explain election and free will?*" and summarized what Scriptures teaches, "*God is supremely sovereign **and** we are responsible to respond to Him.*" We concluded by reading Romans 11:33-36 to show doctrine must lead to doxology. In response to the message, an Edgewood attendee sent me an insightful email this week. I have his permission to share some of it.

*Isn't it wonderful how the Lord presents us with undeniable truths that we mere mortals are unable to reconcile completely in our finite minds? It's as if He offers us proof that His mind is infinite and He designs certain truths to be complex enough to humble us through our inability to fully grasp them. We are reminded through these things that He is God and we are not. God is the central (and only important) figure and His perfect plans and purposes are always fulfilled.*

Our question today is closely related to the one from last weekend: "*Does prayer change God's mind?*"

According to Revelation 22:13, God knows all things past, present and future because He has always been and He will always be: "***I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.***" 2 Samuel 22:31 says it is impossible for God to improve upon any plan He has made: "***This God—His way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true.***"

So, does prayer change God's mind? Here's my answer in a sentence: *Prayer isn't about changing God's mind; it's about changing my mind so my will lines up with His will.*

Let's go back to an event recorded in Exodus. While Moses was up on the mountain, the people made an idol, a golden calf, and went wild as they fulfilled their pleasures and immoral appetites. In Exodus 32:10, God warned Moses,

***“Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.”***

In response, Moses took on the role of a mediator and pleaded for God to show mercy in verses 11-12: ***“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? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘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.”***

Is it possible the prayer of Moses changed the mind of God? Listen to verse 14: ***“And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.”*** To make it a bit more complicated, Moses later wrote these words in Numbers 23:19, ***“God is not a man that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind.”***

J.D. Greear argues we need to hold some truths in tension. I’m going to borrow two of his points and add a third.

**1. God’s purposes are unchanging.** No change is possible in God, because God is absolute perfection. A.W. Pink captured it this way: ***“God cannot change for the better, for He is perfect; and being perfect, He cannot change for the worse.”***

According to Malachi 3:6, we can count on God’s constancy: ***“For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.”*** And in Isaiah 46:9-10, God declares: ***“For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’”***

I appreciate the insight of another Edgewood member who remarked: ***“Moses did not change God’s foreknown sovereign will. A human cannot change God’s will lest he be more knowledgeable and powerful than the Lord.”*** I’ll add we must be careful about declaring or demanding of God to do anything. God will not be manipulated or coerced by His creation.

***Prayer isn’t about changing God’s mind; it’s about changing my mind so my will lines up with His will.*** God’s purposes are unchanging but we must hold this truth

in tension with a second truth.

**2. God's plans are unfolding.** I appreciate Greear's insight: The text of Exodus says God changed His course of action based on Moses' prayer. Here's the irony: God is the one who tells Moses to go down and see the situation in verse 7: ***“Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.”*** Moses didn't know about the people's perversion so God had to show him.

Furthermore, the very thing Moses pleads in prayer is God's own promise to the patriarchs in verse 13: ***“Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’”***

Do you see what's happening? *God* put Moses into a situation so he would see the problem *God* already knew about, remember *God's* promises, and petition *God* to change His course of action. Moses' prayer itself is a result of God's plan. God *wants* Moses to ask this, so He sovereignly puts him in a situation where he *will* ask for it. That's deep, isn't it?

*Prayer isn't about changing God's mind; it's about changing my mind so my will lines up with His will.* If God does not change and yet He tells us to pray, then somehow prayer matters.

**3. God's promises are unleashed when we pray.** This much is clear: *The intercession of Moses was instrumental in the ultimate answer God gave.* To say it another way: Without this prayer, the Israelites would have been incinerated. Exodus 8:13 is a staggering verse: ***“And the LORD did according to the word of Moses.”*** I'm reminded of James 4:2: ***“You do not have, because you do not ask.”*** And James 5:16 says, ***“Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”***

I appreciate how Greear applies this thought: *“God has sovereignly placed us in certain situations for the express purpose of praying His promises...Like Moses, God has ‘sent you down’ into a family, a group of friends, a neighborhood... You are placed where He wants you to be so you can obey and pray for the things He wants to do, to perceive the problem and believe the promise and release His*

*power into the situation.*” In light of this truth, Beth and I are praying for God to give us gospel opportunities Sunday afternoon during our annual neighborhood potluck.

Let’s go back to Exodus 32:14: **“And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.”** The KJV renders it like this: **“And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people.”** The Hebrew word *nacham*, sometimes translated as “repent” or “change one’s mind,” can also mean, “sorrow” or “relief from an undesirable course of action.” As an example, Genesis 6:6 says, **“And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.”** The wickedness of people brought grief to God, especially in light of how far He would need to go to restore them.

Another example is found in Jonah 3:10: **“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.”** It’s not that God changed His mind because He already knew they would repent. This is fleshed out in Jeremiah 18:8: **“And if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.”** When we repent, God relents.

David Platt puts it this way: *“We pray because we have a privilege we cannot forsake, we pray because we have a family we can’t forget, and we pray because we have a God we cannot fathom.”*

I’d like to give a word of caution at this point. In recent years, advocates of a theory called Open Theism have argued that God can and does change and our actions can cause that change. Some even go so far as to say God does not have exhaustive foreknowledge of future events. This is not Open Theism. This is *Open Heresy*.

Does prayer change things? *Yes*. Does God use prayer as a means to bring His purposes to pass? *Yes*. Does God invite us to pray? *Yes*. Does prayer change us? *Yes*. Does God change His mind when we pray? *No*.

God is sovereign, knowing the end from the beginning, *and* He tells us to pray. Prayer is a powerful way for us to participate in God’s plans and purposes because He works through the prayers of His people.

We’re called to pray and not give up according to Luke 18:1: **“...they ought**

*always to pray and not lose heart.”* 1 Thessalonians 5:17 tells us to **“pray without ceasing.”** 1 John 5:14-15 says when we pray according to His will, He hears us: **“And this is the confidence that we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of Him.”**

### Wanting What He Wills

*Prayer isn't about changing God's mind; it's about changing my mind so my will lines up with His will.* A prime example of this is found in Mark 14 where we see Jesus wrestling with the Father about whose will will ultimately win.

We see the Savior's struggle in verse 35: **“And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.”**

When Jesus sees and senses the sum total of all the sin in the world and the resulting penalty and punishment that awaits Him, He wants to take a pass.

In the midst of all Jesus is going through, I love how He addresses the Almighty in verse 36: **“And he said, ‘Abba, Father, all things are possible for you...’** He's literally saying, *“Daddy, Father.”* *Abba* speaks of relationship and *Father* is a term of respect. Romans 8:15 says we receive the Holy Spirit who makes us children of God, **“and by Him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’”**

In the middle part of verse 36, Jesus gets specific in his request: **“Remove this cup from me.”** The word **“cup”** in the Bible is figurative for God's blessings (Psalm 23:5) and is also used to describe the Almighty's wrath (Psalm 75:8). The cup contained joy and judgment, redemption and wrath. Jesus is saying, *“If there's another way, let me do it that way.”*

As Jesus anticipates the cup of sin, suffering, sacrifice, separation and salvation, He verbalizes His submission to the Father's plan in the last part of verse 36: **“Yet not what I will, but what you will.”** The phrases **“not what I will”** and **“but what you will”** are both emphatic. Jesus is resolutely and voluntarily lining up His will under the Father's will. Isn't this the ultimate goal of prayer? We come to God with our desires, our longings, our preferences and then we must say, *“Yet not what I will, but what you will.”*

His prayer is slightly different the second time according to Matthew 26:42: **“My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”** The first time

He prayed, *“If it be possible,”* and now He prays, *“If this cannot pass.”* In his first request He longs for the cup to be taken from Him; now He mentions drinking it. In the first plea, He says, *“Yet not as I will”* and in the second He declares, *“May your will be done.”*

Henry Blackaby says instead of asking God to bless our plans, we need to commit ourselves to His plans. We’re to figure out where God is moving and join Him in that. We could say it like this: *“God show me your plans and bless me as I make them my plans.”*

There are two instructional elements to Jesus’ prayer.

- HE STATED HIS OWN DESIRE - *“This is what I want!”*
- HE SUBMITTED HIS DESIRES TO THE FATHER - *“Not My will, but your will be done.”*

I like how Spurgeon pulls this together: *“Let it be as God wills, and God will will that it shall be for the best.”*

Having seen how Jesus prayed, let’s learn from the prayer Jesus taught His disciples to pray.

### **Praying the Lord’s Way**

Some of us have attended churches where the Lord’s Prayer was recited every Sunday. I knew it as the “Our Father” and grew up saying it so much it became rote for me. I was instructed to repeat this prayer as penance way too many times to count. Since I often associated this prayer with punishment, I know I missed its magnitude for many years. But that changed once I took a deeper look.

This prayer is poetic and beautiful and yet profound and brief. One of the submitted questions had to do with this prayer, specifically why there are different versions of it.

- One simple reason is because there are different versions found in the Gospels. Matthew 6:9-13 is slightly longer than the one recorded in Luke 11:2-4.
- The KJV uses the word “debts” instead of “trespasses.”

- Some manuscripts contain the doxology, “*For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever.*” Romans Catholics do not include this as part of the prayer.

The model for prayer Jesus gave to His followers can be divided into two parts. The first three (hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done) deal with *God’s glory*. The second four (give us our daily bread, forgive us our debts, lead us not into temptation, deliver us from the evil one) deal with *our good*.

If we want to pray like Jesus prayed, let’s learn along with His disciples from Matthew 6:9-13.

### Requests for God’s Glory

After acknowledging God as our Father, Jesus gives three God-centered requests that have to do with His glory.

**1. Worship:** “*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.*” To hallow means, “to make holy” or to set apart. We are to treat His name differently from all other names. He is *intimate* like a Father **and** He is *infinite* in holiness. Don Carson points out this is a good corrective for evangelicals who often show way too much irreverence, shallow theology and experience-oriented worship: “*When believers pray ‘Our Father in heaven,’ they cannot but be hushed and humbled.*”

While we have a relationship with Him we must also revere Him. He is our friend but He is also a consuming fire as Hebrews 12:29 says. He is personal and He is powerful. He is mine and He is majestic. He is immanent and exalted. Do you praise and prize God’s name? Are you committed to spread the fame of His name? One way we hallow His name is by not being shallow!

**2. Welcome:** “*Your kingdom come.*” The word “*kingdom*” in the Greek means “rule” or “reign.” This is a prayer where we welcome God to take up reigning residence in the hearts and lives of those who are in rebellion.

Can you imagine what would happen if we were preoccupied with the coming of God’s kingdom? Just think about what would take place in this community if we were determined to pray that God’s kingdom rule would make itself known in the lives of our neighbors and co-workers and classmates! Can you imagine how our

church would be different if each of us was more concerned about God's kingdom than our own?

**3. Will:** *“Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”* When we pray this part we are really saying, *“Almighty Father God, take control of my life and do what you will for your glory.”* Prayer is not asking God to do my will. It is bringing me into conformity with His ways and His ways. John MacArthur suggests a literal translation: *“Your will, whatever you wish to happen, let it happen immediately.”*

*Prayer isn't about changing God's mind; it's about changing my mind so my will lines up with His will.*

### **Requests for our Good**

We're halfway through the prayer before Jesus allows us to ask for anything for ourselves. We move now from God's glory to our good.

**1. Provision:** *“Give us this day our daily bread.”* This request has more to do with the totality of our physical life. The word bread is a broad term representing all of our physical needs. This request is for *“this day.”* In the first century, bread had to be made on a daily basis. Like manna that came once a day, God provides one day at a time. The point of the prayer is not for us to get what we want, but to receive what we need.

**2. Pardon:** *“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”* A debt is something owed that must be paid back. Sin is a debt only God can free us from. Notice Jesus immediately gives us a caveat – He assumes we've released others from their debts. This verse teaches it is wrong to ask from God what we are not willing to give to other people.

**3. Protection:** *“And do not lead us into temptation.”* Did you hear the Pope changed this part of the prayer in June? This is a big issue because he actually changed the words of Jesus! Albert Mohler writes: *“I was shocked and appalled. This is the Lord's Prayer. It is not, and has never been, the Pope's prayer...It is not only deeply problematic, it's almost breathtaking.”*

Let's be honest. Some of us aren't all that terrified of temptation. But we need to be because we never know when sin is coming to enslave us. Genesis 4:7: *“...sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.”*

**4. Power: “*But deliver us from evil.*”** Satan is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour so we must continually be on the alert so we don’t fall into evil.

## **Prayer Practices**

Some people think of prayer like a parachute – they’re glad it’s there but hope they never have to use it. Let me suggest some practical ways to put this prayer into practice.

**1. Pray the Lord’s Prayer every day this week.** It’s only about 65 words and can be prayed in under a minute.

**2. Use this prayer as a pattern for prayer.** It’s good to recite this prayer and it’s also good to use it as a pattern for prayer. Start with worship, then welcome His kingdom and then make sure you’re surrendered to His will. After that, pray for God’s provision, pardon, protection and power.

**3. Share with someone one thing you learned today.** *Prayer isn’t about changing God’s mind; it’s about changing my mind so my will lines up with His will.*

Next weekend we’ll be focusing the entire service on prayer. In honor of Labor Day, we’re calling it, “*Laboring in Prayer.*”

An unknown author put together a convicting summary of the Lord’s Prayer.

- *I cannot say “our” if I live only for myself.*
- *I cannot say, “Father” if I do not endeavor each day to act like His child.*
- *I cannot say, “hallowed be your name” if I am playing around with sin.*
- *I cannot say, “Your kingdom come” if I am not allowing God to reign in my life.*
- *I cannot say, “your will be done” if I want my way all the time.*
- *I cannot say, “Give us this day our daily bread” if I am trusting in myself instead of in God’s provision.*
- *I cannot say, “Forgive us our debts” if I am nursing a grudge or withholding forgiveness from someone else.*

- *I cannot say, “lead us not into temptation” if I deliberately place myself in its path.*

If you have a special need for prayer related to a health issue, an emotional situation, a habit you can't break, a relational difficulty, or any other need, I invite you to come up front while we sing *“What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”* After we're done singing, I'll pray for you using the Lord's Prayer as an outline.

### **What a Friend We Have in Jesus**

*“Our holy heavenly Father, we bow before Your majestic presence, recognizing that as we come before You, our sins threaten to consume us. You are holy, holy, holy and the whole earth is full of Your glory. We praise You and prize You because of Your transcendent holy name. We hallow Your name because you are high and lifted up and we hallow Your name by striving to live holy lives. Help us to always treat You as holy. We pray that Your kingdom, not ours, would come through conversions, through our commitment to Your kingship, and we look forward to the glorious day of Your appearing as You consummate history and usher in Your eternal kingdom. Enable us to be kingdom oriented in the way we live so we will honor You with our lives, and fire us up to do Your will always, for what we want is Your will to be done and Your glory to be on full display.*

*We desire to have You triumph as King in our lives and we lean on You to provide for our physical needs. We pray for healing right now for those pummeled by pain, for those filled with fear and discouraged by disease. If it weren't for Your provision, we would have nothing. What we do have is a gift from You. And so we choose to trust You for our daily bread, every day so that we might grow in our relationship with You as we see You provide in ways we never thought possible. Thank You that we live as forgiven sinners without any fear of condemnation. Give us the courage and humility to make things right with others by owning our sins and by cutting others some slack so we can give them the same gift of mercy that You've given to us. And when we're faced with the temptation to trample Your holiness in our thoughts, words, and actions, lead us on right paths and deliver us from the evil one. We ask this for You glory and for our good. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. In the name of Jesus, Amen.”*

Let's recite the Lord's Prayer reverently as we close.

*“Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

*For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”*