

Man's Difficulty Concerning Prayer

by George MacDonald

The sermon explores the idea that God's plans can be altered in response to prayer, and that prayer can be a powerful tool for expressing love and concern for others.

Scripture: Psalm 34:17, Matthew 7:7, Luke 18:1, Romans 12:12, Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6, Colossians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, James 5:16, 1 John 5:14

Topics: "Prayer Life", "Gods Sovereignty"

Description

George MacDonald preaches on the power and significance of prayer, emphasizing the belief that God, being All-wise, is not limited by fixed plans but allows room for the free desires of individual souls. He challenges the notion that God's plans are unchangeable, highlighting the importance of prayer in aligning the hearts of His children with His. MacDonald explores the idea of praying for others, suggesting that while prayer may not alter God's plans, it can enhance the spiritual growth and communion between individuals. He delves into the concept of delayed answers to prayer, explaining that God's timing is perfect and that the process of prayer itself can bring individuals closer to Him.

Transcript

'--and not to faint.'--St. Luke xviii. 1.

'How should any design of the All-wise be altered in response to prayer of ours!' How are we to believe such a thing?

By reflecting that he is the All-wise, who sees before him, and will not block his path. Such objection springs from poorest idea of God in relation to us. It supposes him to have cares and plans and intentions concerning our part of creation, irrespective of us. What is the whole system of things for, but our education? Does God care for suns and planets and satellites, for divine mathematics and ordered harmonies, more than for his children? I venture to say he cares more for oxen than for those. He lays no plans irrespective of his children; and, his design being that they shall be free, active, live things, he sees that space be kept for them: they need room to struggle out of their chrysalis, to undergo the change that comes with the waking will, and to enter upon the divine sports and labours of children in the house and domain of their Father. Surely he may keep his plans in a measure unfixed, waiting the free desire of the individual soul! Is not the design of the first course of his children's education just to bring them to the point where they shall pray? and shall his system appointed to that end be then found hard and fast, tooth-fitted and inelastic, as if informed of no live causing soul, but an unself-knowing force--so that he cannot answer

the prayer because of the system which has its existence for the sake of the prayer? True, in many cases, the prayer, far more than the opportunity of answering it, is God's end; but how will the further end of the prayer be reached, which is oneness between the heart of the child and of the Father? how will the child go on to pray if he knows the Father cannot answer him? Will not may be for love, but how with a self-imposed cannot? How could he be Father, who creating, would not make provision, would not keep room for the babbled prayers of his children? Is his perfection a mechanical one? Has he himself no room for choice--therefore can give none? There must be a Godlike region of choice as there is a human, however little we may be able to conceive it. It were a glory in such system that its suns themselves wavered and throbbed at the pulse of a new child-life.

What perfection in a dwelling would it be that its furniture and the paths between were fitted as the trays and pigeon-holes of a cabinet? What stupidity of perfection would that be which left no margin about God's work, no room for change of plan upon change of fact--yea, even the mighty change that, behold now at length, his child is praying! See the freedom of God in his sunsets--never a second like one of the foregone!--in his moons and skies--in the ever--changing solid earth!--all moving by no dead law, but in the harmony of the vital law of liberty, God's creative perfection--all ordered from within.

A divine perfection that were indeed, where was no liberty! where there could be but one way of a thing! I may move my arm as I please: shall God be unable so to move his? If but for himself, God might well desire no change, but he is God for the sake of his growing creatures; all his making and doing is for them, and change is the necessity of their very existence. They need a mighty law of liberty, into which shall never intrude one atom of chance. Is the one idea of creation the begetting of a free, grand, divine will in us? and shall that will, praying with the will of the Father, find itself cramped, fettered, manacled by foregone laws?

Will it not rather be a new-born law itself, working new things? No man is so tied by divine law that he can nowise modify his work: shall God not modify his? Law is but mode of life-action. Is it of his perfection that he should have no scope, no freedom? Is he but the prisoned steam in the engine, pushing, escaping, stopped--his way ordered by valve and piston? or is he an indwelling, willing, ordering power? Law is the slave of Life. Is not a man's soul, as it dwells in his body, a dim-shadowing type of God in and throughout his universe?

If you say, he has made things to go, set them going, and left them--then I say, If his machine interfered with his answering the prayer of a single child, he would sweep it from him--not to bring back chaos, but to make room for his child. But order is divine, and cannot be obstructive to its own higher ends; it must subserve them. Order, free order, neither chaos, nor law unpossessed and senseless, is the home of Thought. If you say There can be but one perfect way, I answer, Yet the perfect way to bring a thing so far, to a certain crisis, can ill be the perfect way to carry it on after that crisis: the plan will have to change then.

And as this crisis depends on a will, all cannot be in exact, though in live preparation for it. We must remember that God is not occupied with a grand toy of worlds and suns and planets, of attractions and repulsions, of agglomerations and crystallizations, of forces and waves; that these but constitute a portion of his workshops and tools for the bringing out of righteous men and women to fill his house of love withal. Would he have let his Son die for a law of nature, as we call it?

These doubtless are the outcome of willed laws of his own being; but they take their relations in matter only for the sake of the birth of sons and daughters, that they may yet again be born from above, and into

the higher region whence these things issue; and many a modification of the ideal, rendering it less than complete, must be given to those whose very doom being to grow or perish implies their utter inability to lay hold of the perfect. The best means cannot be the ideal Best. The embodiment of uplifting truth for the low, cannot be equal to that for the higher, else it will fail, and prove for its object not good; but, as the low ascend, their revelation will ascend also.

That God cannot interfere to modify his plans, interfere without the change of a single law of his world, is to me absurd. If we can change, God can change, else is he less free than we--his plans, I say, not principles, not ends: God himself forbid!--change them after divine fashion, above our fashions as the heavens are higher than the earth. And as in all his miracles Jesus did only in miniature what his Father does ever in the great--in far wider, more elaborate, and beautiful ways, I will adduce from them an instance of answer to prayer that has in it a point bearing, it seems to me, most importantly on the thing I am now trying to set forth.

Poor, indeed, was the making of the wine in the earthen pots of stone, compared with its making in the lovely growth of the vine with its clusters of swelling grapes--the live roots gathering from the earth the water that had to be borne in pitchers and poured into the great vases; but it is precious as the interpreter of the same, even in its being the outcome of our Lord's sympathy with ordinary human rejoicing. There is however an element in its origin that makes it yet more precious to me--the regard of our Lord to a wish of his mother. Alas, how differently is the tale often received! how misunderstood!

His mother had suggested to him that here was an opportunity for appearing in his own greatness, the potent purveyor of wine for the failing feast. It was not in his plan, as we gather from his words; for the Lord never pretended anything, whether to his enemy or his mother; he is The True. He lets her know that he and she have different outlooks, different notions of his work: 'What to me and thee, woman?' he said: 'my hour is not yet come;' but there was that in his look and tone whence she knew that her desire, scarce half-fashioned into request, was granted. What am I thence to conclude, worthy of the Son of God, and the Son of Mary, but that, at the prayer of his mother, he made room in his plans for the thing she desired? It was not his wish then to work a miracle, but if his mother wished it, he would! He did for his mother what for his own part he would rather have let alone. Not always did he do as his mother would have him; but this was a case in which he could do so, for it would interfere nowise with the will of his Father. Was the perfect son, for, being perfect, he must be perfect every way, to be the only son of man who needed do nothing to please his mother--nothing but what fell in with his plan for the hour? Not so could he be the root, the living heart of the great response of the children to the Father of all! not so could the idea of the grand family ever be made a reality! Alas for the son who would not willingly for his mother do something which in itself he would rather not do! If it would have hurt his mother, if it had been in any way turning from the will of his Father in heaven, he would not have done it: that would have been to answer her prayer against her. His yielding makes the story doubly precious to my heart. The Son then could change his intent, and spoil nothing: so, I say, can the Father; for the Son does nothing but what he sees the Father do.

Finding it possible to understand, however, that God may answer prayers to those who pray for themselves, what are we to think concerning prayer for others? One may well say, It would surely be very selfish to pray only for ourselves! but the question is of the use, not of the character of the action: if there be any good in it, let us pray for all for whom we feel we can pray; but is there to be found in regard to prayer for others any such satisfaction as in regard to prayer for ourselves? The ground is changed--if the fitness of answering prayer lies in the praying of him who prays: the attitude necessary to reception does

not belong to those for whom prayer is made, but to him by whom it is made. What fitness then can there be in praying for others? Will God give to another for our asking what he would not give without it? Would he not, if it could be done without the person's self, do it without a second person? If God were a tyrant, one whose heart might be softened by the sight of anxious love; or if he were one who might be informed, enlightened, reasoned with; or one in whom a setting forth of character, need, or claim might awake interest; then would there be plain reason in prayer for another--which yet, however disinterested and loving, must be degrading, as offered to one unworthy of prayer. But if we believe that God is the one unselfish, the one good being in the universe, and that his one design with his children is to make them perfect as he is perfect; if we believe that he not only would once give, but is always giving himself to us for our life; if we believe--which once I heard a bishop decline to acknowledge--that God does his best for every man; if also we believe that God knows every man's needs, and will, for love's sake, not spare one pang that may serve to purify the soul of one of his children; if we believe all this, how can we think he will in any sort alter his way with one because another prays for him? The prayer would arise from nothing in the person prayed for; why should it initiate a change in God's dealing with him?

The argument I know not how to answer. I can only, in the face of it, and feeling all the difficulty, say, and say again, 'Yet I believe I may pray for my friend--for my enemy--for anybody! Yet and yet, there is, there must be some genuine, essential good and power in the prayer of one man for another to the maker of both--and that just because their maker is perfect, not less than very God.' I shall not bring authority to bear, for authority can at best but make us believe reason there, it cannot make us see it. The difficulty remains the same even when we hear the Lord himself pray to his Father for those the Father loves because they have received his Son--loves therefore with a special love, as the foremost in faith, the elect of the world--loves not merely because they must die if he did not love them, but loves from the depths of divine approval. Those who believe in Jesus will be satisfied, in the face of the incomprehensible, that in what he does reason and right must lie; but not therefore do we understand. At the same time, though I cannot explain, I can show some ground upon which, even had he not been taught to do so, but left alone with his heart, a man might yet, I think, pray for another.

If God has made us to love like himself, and like himself long to help; if there are for whom we, like him, would give our lives to lift them from the evil gulf of their ungodliness; if the love in us would, for the very easing of the love he kindled, gift another--like himself who chooses and cherishes even the love that pains him; if, in the midst of a sore need to bless, to give, to help, we are aware of an utter impotence; if the fire burns and cannot out; and if all our hope for ourselves lies in God--what is there for us, what can we think of, what do, but go to God?--what but go to him with this our own difficulty and need? And where is the natural refuge, there must be the help. There can be no need for which he has no supply. The best argument that he has help, is that we have need. If I can be helped through my friend, I think God will take the thing up, and do what I cannot do--help my friend that I may be helped--perhaps help me to help him. You see, in praying for another we pray for ourselves--for the relief of the needs of our love; it is not prayer for another alone, and thus it comes under the former kind. Would God give us love, the root of power, in us, and leave that love, whereby he himself creates, altogether helpless in us? May he not at least expedite something for our prayers? Where he could not alter, he could perhaps expedite, in view of some help we might then be able to give. If he desires that we should work with him, that work surely helps him!

There are some things for which the very possibility of supposing them are an argument; but I think I can go a little farther here, and imagine at least the where if not the how, the divine conditions in which the help for another in answer to prayer is born, the divine region in which its possibility must dwell.

God is ever seeking to lift us up into the sharing of his divine nature; God's kings, such men, namely, as with Jesus have borne witness to the truth, share his glory even on the throne of the Father. See the grandeur of the creative love of the Holy! nothing less will serve it than to have his children, through his and their suffering, share the throne of his glory! If such be the perfection of the Infinite, should that perfection bring him under bonds and difficulties, and not rather set him freer to do the thing he would in the midst of opposing forces? If his glory be in giving himself, and we must share therein, giving ourselves, why should we not begin here and now? If he would have his children fellow--workers with him; if he has desired and willed that not only by the help of his eternal Son, but by the help also of the children who through him have been born from above, other and still other children shall be brought to his knee, to his fireside, to the plenty of his house, why should he not have kept some margin of room wherein their prayers may work for those whom they have to help, who are of the same life as they? I cannot tell how, but may not those prayers in some way increase God's opportunity for working his best and highest will? Dealing with his children, the good ones may add to his power with the not yet good--add to his means of helping them. One way is clear: the prayer will react upon the mind that prays, its light will grow, will shine the brighter, and draw and enlighten the more. But there must be more in the thing. Prayer in its perfect idea being a rising up into the will of the Eternal, may not the help of the Father become one with the prayer of the child, and for the prayer of him he holds in his arms, go forth for him who wills not yet to be lifted to his embrace? To his bosom God himself cannot bring his children at once, and not at all except through his own suffering and theirs. But will not any good parent find some way of granting the prayer of the child who comes to him, saying, 'Papa, this is my brother's birthday: I have nothing to give him, and I do love him so! could you give me something to give him, or give him something for me?'

'Still, could not God have given the gift without the prayer? And why should the good of any one depend on the prayer of another?'

I can only answer with the return question, 'Why should my love be powerless to help another?' But we must not tie God to our measures of time, or think he has forgotten that prayer even which, apparently unanswered, we have forgotten. Death is not an impervious wall; through it, beyond it, go the prayers. It is possible we may have some to help in the next world because we have prayed for them in this: will it not be a boon to them to have an old friend to their service? I but speculate and suggest. What I see and venture to say is this: If in God we live and move and have our being; if the very possibility of loving lies in this, that we exist in and by the live air of love, namely God himself, we must in this very fact be nearer to each other than by any bodily proximity or interchange of help; and if prayer is like a pulse that sets this atmosphere in motion, we must then by prayer come closer to each other than are the parts of our body by their complex nerve--telegraphy. Surely, in the Eternal, hearts are never parted! surely, through the Eternal, a heart that loves and seeks the good of another, must hold that other within reach! Surely the system of things would not be complete in relation to the best thing in it--love itself, if love had no help in prayer. If I love and cannot help, does not my heart move me to ask him to help who loves and can?--him without whom life would be to me nothing, without whom I should neither love nor care to pray!--will he answer, 'Child, do not trouble me; I am already doing all I can'? If such answer came, who that loved would not be content to be nowhere in the matter? But how if the eternal, limitless Love, the unspeakable, self-forgetting God-devotion, which, demanding all, gives all, should say, 'Child, I have been doing all I could; but now you are come, I shall be able to do more! here is a corner for you, my little one: push at this thing to get it out of the way!' How if he should answer, 'Pray on, my child; I am hearing you; it goes through me in help to him. We are of one mind about it; I help and you help. I shall have you all safe home with me by and by! There is no fear, only we must work, and not lose heart. Go, and let your light so shine

before men that they may see your good things, and glorify me by knowing that I am light and no darkness'!--what then? Oh that lovely picture by Michelangelo, with the young ones and the little ones come to help God to make Adam!

But it may be that the answer to prayer will come in a shape that seems a refusal. It may come even in an increase of that from which we seek deliverance. I know of one who prayed to love better: a sore division came between--out of which at length rose a dawn of tenderness.

Our vision is so circumscribed, our theories are so small--the garment of them not large enough to wrap us in; our faith so continually fashions itself to the fit of our dwarf intellect, that there is endless room for rebellion against ourselves: we must not let our poor knowledge limit our not so poor intellect, our intellect limit our faith, our faith limit our divine hope; reason must humbly watch over all--reason, the candle of the Lord.

There are some who would argue for prayer, not on the ground of any possible answer to be looked for, but because of the good to be gained in the spiritual attitude of the mind in praying. There are those even who, not believing in any ear to hear, any heart to answer, will yet pray. They say it does them good; they pray to nothing at all, but they get spiritual benefit.

I will not contradict their testimony. So needful is prayer to the soul that the mere attitude of it may encourage a good mood. Verily to pray to that which is not, is in logic a folly; yet the good that, they say, comes of it, may rebuke the worse folly of their unbelief, for it indicates that prayer is natural, and how could it be natural if inconsistent with the very mode of our being? Theirs is a better way than that of those who, believing there is a God, but not believing that he will give any answer to their prayers, yet pray to him; that is more foolish and more immoral than praying to the No-god. Whatever the God be to whom they pray, their prayer is a mockery of him, of themselves, of the truth.

On the other hand, let God give no assent to the individual prayer, let the prayer even be for something nowise good enough to be a gift of God, yet the soul that prays will get good of its prayer, if only in being thereby brought a little nearer to the Father, and making way for coming again. Prayer does react in good upon the praying soul, irrespective of answer. But to pray for the sake of the prayer, and without regard to there being no one to hear, would to me indicate a nature not merely illogical but morally false, did I not suspect a vague undetected apprehension of a Something diffused through the All of existence, and some sort of shadowiest communion therewith.

There are moods of such satisfaction in God that a man may feel as if nothing were left to pray for, as if he had but to wait with patience for what the Lord would work; there are moods of such hungering desire, that petition is crushed into an inarticulate crying; and there is a communion with God that asks for nothing, yet asks for everything. This last is the very essence of prayer, though not petition. It is possible for a man, not indeed to believe in God, but to believe that there is a God, and yet not desire to enter into communion with him; but he that prays and does not faint will come to recognize that to talk with God is more than to have all prayers granted--that it is the end of all prayer, granted or refused. And he who seeks the Father more than anything he can give, is likely to have what he asks, for he is not likely to ask amiss.

Even such as ask amiss may sometimes have their prayers answered. The Father will never give the child a stone that asks for bread; but I am not sure that he will never give the child a stone that asks for a stone. If the Father say, 'My child, that is a stone; it is no bread;' and the child answer, 'I am sure it is bread; I want it;' may it not be well he should try his bread?

But now for another point in the parable, where I think I can give some help--I mean the Lord's apparent recognition of delay in the answering of prayer: in the very structure of the parable he seems to take delay for granted, and says notwithstanding, 'He will avenge them speedily!'

The reconciling conclusion is, that God loses no time, though the answer may not be immediate.

He may delay because it would not be safe to give us at once what we ask: we are not ready for it. To give ere we could truly receive, would be to destroy the very heart and hope of prayer, to cease to be our Father. The delay itself may work to bring us nearer to our help, to increase the desire, perfect the prayer, and ripen the receptive condition.

Again, not from any straitening in God, but either from our own condition and capacity, or those of the friend for whom we pray, time may be necessary to the working out of the answer. God is limited by regard for our best; our best implies education; in this we must ourselves have a large share; this share, being human, involves time. And perhaps, indeed, the better the gift we pray for, the more time is necessary to its arrival. To give us the spiritual gift we desire, God may have to begin far back in our spirit, in regions unknown to us, and do much work that we can be aware of only in the results; for our consciousness is to the extent of our being but as the flame of the volcano to the world-gulf whence it issues: in the gulf of our unknown being God works behind our consciousness. With his holy influence, with his own presence, the one thing for which most earnestly we cry, he may be approaching our consciousness from behind, coming forward through regions of our darkness into our light, long before we begin to be aware that he is answering our request--has answered it, and is visiting his child. To avenge speedily must mean to make no delay beyond what is absolutely necessary, to begin the moment it is possible to begin. Because the Son of Man did not appear for thousands of years after men began to cry out for a Saviour, shall we imagine he did not come the first moment it was well he should come? Can we doubt that to come a moment sooner would have been to delay, not to expedite, his kingdom? For anything that needs a process, to begin to act at once is to be speedy. God does not put off like the unrighteous judge; he does not delay until irritated by the prayers of the needy; he will hear while they are yet speaking; yea, before they call he will answer.

The Lord uses words without anxiety as to the misuse of them by such as do not search after his will in them; and the word avenge may be simply retained from the parable without its special meaning therein; yet it suggests a remark or two.

Of course, no prayer for any revenge that would gratify the selfishness of our nature, a thing to be burned out of us by the fire of God, needs think to be heard. Be sure, when the Lord prayed his Father to forgive those who crucified him, he uttered his own wish and his Father's will at once: God will never punish according to the abstract abomination of sin, as if men knew what they were doing. 'Vengeance is mine,' he says: with a right understanding of it, we might as well pray for God's vengeance as for his forgiveness; that vengeance is, to destroy the sin--to make the sinner abjure and hate it; nor is there any satisfaction in a vengeance that seeks or effects less. The man himself must turn against himself, and so be for himself. If nothing else will do, then hell-fire; if less will do, whatever brings repentance and self-repudiation, is God's repayment.

Friends, if any prayers are offered against us; if the vengeance of God be cried out for, because of some wrong you or I have done, God grant us his vengeance! Let us not think that we shall get off!

But perhaps the Lord was here thinking, not of persecution, or any form of human wrong, but of the troubles that most trouble his true disciple; and the suggestion is comforting to those whose foes are within them, for, if so, then he recognizes the evils of self, against which we fight, not as parts of ourselves, but as our foes, on which he will avenge the true self that is at strife with them. And certainly no evil is, or ever could be, of the essential being and nature of the creature God made! The thing that is not good, however associated with our being, is against that being, not of it--is its enemy, on which we need to be avenged. When we fight, he will avenge. Till we fight, evil shall have dominion over us, a dominion to make us miserable; other than miserable can no one be, under the yoke of a nature contrary to his own. Comfort thyself then, who findest thine own heart and soul, or rather the things that move therein, too much for thee: God will avenge his own elect. He is not delaying; he is at work for thee. Only thou must pray, and not faint. Ask, ask; it shall be given you. Seek most the best things; to ask for the best things is to have them; the seed of them is in you, or you could not ask for them.

But from whatever quarter come our troubles, whether from the world outside or the world inside, still let us pray. In his own right way, the only way that could satisfy us, for we are of his kind, will God answer our prayers with help. He will avenge us of our adversaries, and that speedily. Only let us take heed that we be adversaries to no man, but fountains of love and forgiving tenderness to all. And from no adversary, either on the way with us, or haunting the secret chamber of our hearts, let us hope to be delivered till we have paid the last farthing.

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