

The Efficacy of Prayer

Prayer is present in many cultures around the world and goes back to early times in human history. The Dictionary gives the definition of Prayer as: a solemn request for help or expression of thanks addressed to God or an object of worship. Originating from the Latin feminine – *precarious* – “obtain by entreaty”. Since it continues to be rather pervasive today it would appear many people find it efficacious and useful to our present time. While there are many forms and customs regarding prayer around the world I will be concentrating on eclectic understanding from primarily the Judaic Christian prospective.

It is also important to point out that this paper is not an attempt to prove anything about prayer. There are many areas of life that exclude the attempt for proof. So far no one has been able to prove the existence of God nor has anyone been able to prove that God does not exist. It seems as though, in many ways, life is more of an experience than something that we can always prove and prayer may fall into this category as well.

The History of Prayer

What people believe about prayer:

One common belief that links believers from many of the hundreds of theistic religions around the world is that one or more deities exist as a living, conscious person or persons concerned about individual humans and who can be approached through prayer. Belief in prayer, along with some expression of an Ethic of Reciprocity (The Golden Rule), are the two common features found in essentially all theistic faith groups. A common belief among Agnostics, Atheists, Humanists, some Deists, etc. is that there is, or probably is, no deity who listens or responds to prayers. Prayers are useful in that they can help the individual sort out priorities, and give them a sense of reassurance. But the still quite voice that people hear during prayer comes from within their own minds, not from any supernatural being. Prayers are also useful, in that people who know that they are the subject of other people's prayers often feel comforted. But their reassurance comes from knowing that they are being prayed for, not from any direct effect of the prayer. Scientists are at a loss to explain how prayer could work. None of the known forces or processes in the universe appears to be capable of linking a person's brain directly to a deity, even if such a supernatural entity could be found to exist. [<http://www.religioustolerance.org/prayintro.htm>]

Regular communal Jewish prayer began as a substitute for the sacrificial cult in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. The primary focus was on animal sacrifices. There were some accoutrements of biblical passages, extra biblical liturgies, and some Psalms were sung by choirs of Levites who aided the priests with temple services. The formative period of Jewish prayers, which gave Jewish prayer its structure and, in outline form at least, its contents, was that of the Tannaim, the rabbinic sages whose oral traditions of law and legend are gathered in the Mishnah (edited c. 200 C.E.) and some early collections of midrash. While the Talmud records refinements in the practice and content of prayer it is only in later records of Babylonia and their successors in North Africa and Europe that we find entire prayer books in circulation. [<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Prayer/History.shtml>]

Prayer in the Christian tradition according to scripture tells us to be devout in prayer and thanksgiving. The people of God are to include prayer in their daily lives in order to be closer to God. “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.” [Matthew 7:7-8 (NIV)] From the first moments in scripture, as the church was organized, prayer was clearly a part of their worship and was encouraged by the Apostles. One can see a variety of prayer throughout the Christian scriptures for every facet of life in personal and communal circumstances.

Categories of Prayer

The primary categories that may summarize types of prayer for us:

- Praise and worship
- Thanksgiving
- Confession
- Supplication or requests
- Meditative/Contemplative

Meditation is a very popular form of prayer and it was highlighted on PBS during one of the “Religion and Ethics” broadcast titled, “Faith and the Brain”. [<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/july-30-2010/faith-and-the-brain/6728/>] Here is a brief summary of one form of meditation in that video explained by Judy Fedor: *“Sa, ta, na, ma. The first two minutes the mantra is sung. The second two minutes the mantra is whispered. The third sequence is silence, back into the whisper and finishing with the song. After that it’s deep breathing, holding in, that’s done three times, body relaxes, and the mantra is completed. The minute I can start doing it and moving my fingers my body gets calmer. It’s very soothing. To me it gets almost in a passive mode, and then you have energy afterwards because you became so calm.”*

Posture in Prayer

There are many postures that people use when they are praying. Whether you are standing, walking, kneeling, lying down, folded hands, arms uplifted, and many others I know of no restriction or special posture that makes prayer more or less effective. Prayer is sometimes defined as conversation with God and, like conversation in general, we communicate in various ways, languages, and circumstances.

There are also forms of conversation and prayer that may become a part of our prayer life. There is formal or written prayers, conversational style, prayerful thoughts while reading scripture or something devotional, and just plain spontaneous when the spirit moves us to pray.

The Pervasiveness of Prayer

One of my former bishops now retired explains it this way, *“To say it briefly, prayer becomes something you are, not something you do. Your life and consciousness become the channel through which the meaning of God flows into human life. Prayer becomes the activity of opening your life to this deeper presence, this transcendent power we call God. Petition becomes the way you share life and love with others. Intercession becomes your willingness to be involved in causes of justice that help to build a world in which all people can live fully, love wastefully and be all they can be. Thanksgiving becomes the constant awareness of the way God changes lives. Meditation and contemplation become the means of spiritual growth and the development of a God consciousness and the praying person becomes deeply aware that God works through his or her life constantly. I think it is a beautiful vision. I am still living into it. I hope this helps.”* [John Shelby Spong – in a letter of response to a man in Texas about prayer, 8/5/2010 – from his web letter “A New Christianity for a New World”]

The Science of Prayer

As I said in opening remarks, this paper is not an attempt to prove anything about prayer. For some years now Quantum Physics and the possible implications of some of their experiments and equations have intrigued me. Life as we are coming to know it has an uncanny way of suggesting and imaging a reality that we still do not fully comprehend. Particles that are at great distances from each other from their size perspective demonstrate an interrelationship that, to me, may allude to personal relationship between human beings as well. The following paper is one of those examples:

“A paper written by Einstein, Podolsky, and Rosen (EPR) in 1935 described a thought experiment which, the authors believed, demonstrated that quantum mechanics does not provide a complete description of physical reality, at least not if we accept certain common notions of locality and realism.” [<http://>

www.mathpages.com/rr/s9-05/9-05.htm] In an experiment conducted with photons noting that when an electron and a positron are sent in distant directions their spin is in opposite directions from each other. No matter the distance, when the spin direction of one changes the other changes in its direction to be opposite to maintain their spin in opposite directions. "Thus if we assume the numbers x_1 and x_2 are independently and freely selected, and there is no communication between the twins after they are separated, then there is no "locally realistic" way of accounting for this non-linear correlation. It seems as though one or both of the twins must have had knowledge of his brother's numbers when writing down his own number, despite the fact that it is not possible to infer anything about the individual values of x_2 and y_2 from the values of x_1 and y_1 or vice versa." [<http://www.mathpages.com/rr/s9-05/9-05.htm>] Could this suggest what may be happening in prayer?

Prayer can be like the Hubble Telescope – if you point it at a place in the universe that seems to be empty for a period of time you are likely to find answers and new ideas for making changes in your thinking and life experience. Perhaps prayer can be like it? If you pray and keep your mind open to new things and open to new truths you may make discoveries you never imagined were possible. Here is a video from YouTube that causes me to feel this way:

<http://www.flixxy.com/hubble-ultra-deep-field-3d.htm>

Essentials in Prayer

When I was younger, I remembering seeing a lot of signs with the slogan Prayer Changes Things. This may still be the popular concept of prayer for some but it does not have much support in scripture. Simply petitioning God for something that we want or wish we had, even for what we need, is not the core value of prayer. Supplications or petition is not even on the top of the traditional category list above. Prayer for me is much more than simply asking for things we need or want.

As I quoted one of my bishops previously, *"To say it briefly, prayer becomes something you are, not something you do. Your life and consciousness become the channel through which the meaning of God flows into human life. Prayer becomes the activity of opening your life to this deeper presence, this transcendent power we call God."* As we become faithful people of God – 'faith filled' – we become consciously aware of that Divine Presence that enables us to be fully human. **Faith** [Finding Authenticity In Today's Happenings] becomes an operative source that flows in and through our lives as we are becoming authentic. As our lives become more acquainted with **Grace** [God's Recreational Activity Causing Excellence] prayer becomes something we are that empowers us to excellence. **Prayer** [Perusing Reasonable Alternatives Yet Expecting Resolve] is the means by which we move forward in various new ways to bring resolve and new hope.

Hope is not a wish or a nice feeling but another gift from God for the way we function. **Hope** [Habitually Open to Productive Exploration] is the driving spirit of energy and process that gives us the courage to continue to explore. As people of God we become more fully **Alive** [Always Learning Inspired Vital Engaged] because we are inspired to learn and become involved. Through inspired learning we grow in vitality and become fully engaged with new possibilities. This is the process that is often referred to as being **Holy** [Habitually Open to Learning and Yearning]. Being holy was never meant to be a status symbol as many religious people use it, but a way that we ought to live. We need to make it a habit to always be open and progressive and to have a yearning to love God, everyone, and ourselves as we are loved. Prayer then changes us and we make things change and not the other way around.

When we remember that God is **Love** [Limitless Offerings Veraciously Expended] then we have the power to begin to act as God's people. This is the only way we are enabled to become an offering in the way Jesus freely offered himself for all people, in all time, and in all places. We become true followers of Jesus the Christ when we too are willing offer ourselves veraciously, in honesty and truth, to expend and live our lives for others and not ourselves alone. We need that love in our lives because we cannot give away

what we do not have. When we are filled with this loving presence of God in every facet of our being we are able to overflow with caring and sharing. What does it mean to care? **Care** [Constantly Appreciate and Respect Everyone].

So many people love the “Lord’s Prayer” and use it as a prayer in worship and other occasions but do not realize the fullness of its meaning. “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”. When we learn to conform our daily life actions to the intent of this prayer and not just say the words we will begin to see the Kingdom or Realm of God come among us as it is in heaven. Just saying the words is not really a prayer at all. We all know that “actions speak louder than words”, but too often we just talk. When we “walk the talk” the fullness of God’s love and grace will be among us. When we coordinate our words with our actions we may be following the advise of scripture to “pray without ceasing”.

May the caring peace of God that goes beyond human comprehension, declare God’s love for you in your heart and mind as we see it in Jesus Christ; and may the blessing of God, loving Creator, gracious Liberator, and life giving Spirit keep you steadfast now and always. Amen.