

# Prayer: God's Great Idea

## The Paradox of Prayer

**Scriptures:** Malachi 3:6; James 1:17; 4:2; 5:13-16; Numbers 23:19; Hebrews 13:8; Acts 2:23; Matthew 6:5-15; Mark 9:14-29; John 15:4-5.

1. Philip Yancey in *Prayer: Does it make a difference?* tells of a 41 year old lady, a Jewish believer, with extensive cancer who wrote to him of her experience and thoughts through her trial:

"... after sulking in silence for a period of days or weeks, I would come back to God slowly and reluctantly, a pout on my face, but recognising that I didn't know how to live apart from God . . . What is the point of praying for something to happen? I can understand the point of praying as a means of simply trying to establish communion with God. But why should I pray for someone to be healed, or for my husband to get a job, or for my parents to come to salvation? I pray for others because I often feel helpless to do anything else, and I cling to the hope that maybe, just maybe this time it will matter.

My spiritual leaders are always admonishing our congregation to spend hours in prayer, interceding for those in need. Why, if God has plans and knows what we want and need and what's best for us, should I spend hours asking him to change his mind? And how do I pray with faith when it seems that the kind of prayer I am lifting up rarely gets answered."

She then went on to tell of hundreds of people praying for her healing from cancer, and questioned whether their prayers mattered. She asked: "Am I more likely to get healed than my friend who also has cancer but has only a handful of people regularly praying for her?"

- ~ If she said this to you in a private conversation, how would you respond?
  - What do you make of her reaction to God? Can you relate to this?
  - If God has plans and knows what we need and what is best for us, why should we spend hours trying to change his mind?
  - What about her comment of hundreds praying for her to be healed, but her friend not getting the prayer support?

2. Third century Christian leader, Origen, spoke about the paradox of prayer: "... if everything happens according to God's will, and if what he wills is fixed, and if none of the things he wills can be changed, then prayer is in vain." Why is his view questionable?

3. Steve said that we don't need to understand the mechanics of prayer to enjoy a relationship with Father God any more than we need to understand the workings of a car's engine to be able to drive a car. What was his point and how might this help us over the paradox of prayer?

4. James 4:2 "You do not have because you do not ask God." Steve said: "There are some things God will do if we ask Him that He will not do if we do not ask Him." Thoughts?

5. Matthew 6:5-8. Since Jesus tells us that our Father knows what we need before ask him, why pray?" What do you make of Yancey's following statement? "Some see God's omniscience (that he knows everything) as a disincentive to prayer. Why pray if God already knows? In contrast, Jesus treated God's knowledge not as a deterrent but as a positive motivation to pray. We do not have to work to gain God's attention through long words and ostentatious displays. We don't have to convince God of our sincerity or our needs. We already have the Father's ear . . . God knows everything about us and still listens."

6. Read Mark 9:14-29. See v24. Is this often your response to Jesus? Share some examples when you might have said these words? How does John 15:4-5 help us understand what Jesus meant in Mark 9:29?

7. Take time to pray with each other, remembering: "The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results." (see James 5:16 NLT)