The Power of Prayer

Can Prayer Really Change Anything?

A sermon by Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf

God himself has given prayer its significance and has bound himself to the prayers of his children, so that the course of events can be changed. Examples: Ezek 22:29-31; Ps 106:23; Exod 32:10-14. In Ezekiel's day there was no one to intercede. Missing prayer has negative consequences. Prayer would have held back the judgment. Moses prayed, and the judgment was averted.

Jesus and prayer: God's will is not done on earth. At least not everywhere. That is why we are to pray that his will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Prayer helps God's will to be done – more than if we do not pray for it.

John Wesley put it somewhat strongly: "God does nothing but in answer to prayer." God answers the prayers of his people in extraordinary ways, for example Moses at the Red Sea, or Hezekiah's extended life. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective! (Jas 5:16)

The necessity of communication between God and humans: God wants to be in a personal relationship with us. That is only possible through communication – just as there is no fellowship between people without communication. God has made the world in such a way that much of what happens has to do with our communication with him.

Prayer and morally responsible authority: God has made the world in such a way that he not only influences us, but we also influence him. God wants his will to be done on earth. He acts through representatives: human beings, made in his image, are to rule the earth. ***Prayer is a spiritual, an invisible and a provisional form of ruling – we pray for things that are to happen here on earth. It is a ruling together with him when we agree with him in prayer.***

The urgency of prayer: God takes prayer seriously; he binds himself to it just as he binds himself to freedom of choice and to the stability of the world. It really is true that much depends on whether God's people pray or not – some things happen only if they pray. God himself has arranged it so that prayer is a decisive variable that determines what God can or cannot do in a particular situation.

Urgency and limitation: One can draw the wrong conclusion from this, as if everything depended on our prayer. We need a balance in how we exercise our responsibility. It is the same in ordinary life. We could pray for a million things, but our time is limited. So it is even good to pray about what we should concentrate our prayer on. ***We need a balance between the assumption that everything depends on our prayer and the assumption that nothing depends on it.***

Why are there unanswered prayers? We pray, and God answers within an unimaginably complex creation that is suffering under a cosmic war. ***Prayer makes a difference there.*** But prayer is not the only thing that shapes the world. There are also the many angels and humans who have an irrevocably free will, and the laws of nature that guarantee a stable world. God respects this; he wanted it this way. But we have no idea how the variable of our prayer

relates to these others, that is, how God deals with them in response to our prayers. Our prayers will be answered, but often not in the way we imagine.

Variables that influence the effectiveness of prayer – rules that God himself gives:

God's will: This is not the only variable, but the most fundamental one. Asking according to his will is the precondition for an answer (1 John 5:14; Matt 26:39; 2 Cor 12:7). But God's will does not always mean God's ideal will or his perfect plan. The thorn in the flesh was not ideal, but it was better for Paul to have it. It kept him from pride! Are some of our prayers not answered because the answer would make us proud? The reason prayers are not answered need not lie in God's will (if a person I pray for does not turn to God, God does want that person to turn to him, but he respects that person's no).

The faith of the person being prayed for: Because of the unbelief in Nazareth, Jesus could do only a few miracles there (Mark 6:5-6). Several times Jesus said to those he healed: "Your faith has healed you" (Matt 9:22; Mark 10:52; Luke 17:19). But we cannot turn this around and generalize: if healing does not happen, it is not necessarily due to a lack of faith. There can be many reasons we cannot fathom why a prayer was not answered. But the faith of the person being prayed for is a variable!

The faith of those who pray: Luke 5:20: the paralysed man lowered through the roof; Matt 8:13: the centurion; but also Mark 9:14-29: the disciples cannot drive out the demon. See also Jas 1:6-7. As a rule, however, an unanswered prayer does not mean that one had no faith. It is a principle that faith makes prayer more effective, but not a rule that it will always be answered.

Persistent prayer: In visible life there are tasks that need perseverance and time. It is the same in the life of prayer (Luke 11:5-8; 18:1). Prayer is not magic, but spiritual work. We are to pray as though we needed something very urgently. Without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17). If a prayer is not answered, it does not necessarily mean that we prayed too little. Nor is it a guarantee that it will be answered if we pray for a long time. It is a principle, not a guarantee of fulfilment – because so many factors play a role.

The number of people praying for something: Some tasks in the natural realm cannot be done alone, or they would take far too long. It is the same in the spiritual realm. That is why we ask the church to pray for something. Two or three agree (Matt 18:19); the assembly prayed (Acts 4:24). The number gives prayer yet another dimension than when one prays alone. Not a rule, but a principle.

Human free will: Hell is the solemn proof that God takes the human will seriously. He created people in such a way that they decide for themselves, and God respects this will. God does not override this will when we pray for someone's conversion – otherwise everyone would be saved. But our prayer increases the work of the Spirit in these people. Divine power does not coerce; it persuades: and his power is love!

The free will of angels: Angels can influence whether prayers are answered. Daniel had to wait until the angel came, who had been held up by another. That was not God's timing, but resistance and spiritual warfare in the invisible world (Dan 10:12-13). Satan prevented Paul from visiting the Thessalonians, although he prayed for it (1 Thess 2:18; 3:10). The powers

have an influence on whether prayer is answered or hindered. They can be the reason a prayer is not answered, and then we should not attribute it to God.

The number and power of spiritual beings: As in the visible world, spiritual warfare also has to do with these features. Angels come to each other's aid, because it makes a difference (Dan 10:13). Elisha's servant saw the multitude of angels who came to help (2 Kgs 6:16-17). One man had not just one demon but many, whom Jesus drove out (Mark 5:1-9). The disciples could not drive out a strong demon (Mark 9:14-29). Seven spirits return (Luke 11:24-26). We need not be afraid, for the one who is in us is greater than the spirit of the world (1 John 4:4).

Sin: Where there is known sin, hostility or unwillingness to forgive, the sin must be dealt with: it must be given up and confessed, so that we can pray effectively again as righteous people.

How can we live as Christians in this war zone, with a thousand questions and unanswered prayers?

Fix our eyes on Jesus – not form our image of God from our experiences!

God is with us and beside us! Always!

God can bring something good for us out of every situation and every suffering (even if he did not cause the evil).

Not ask the WHY question that no one can answer, but stand against suffering and against evil, and not accept it. Just as Jesus did!

How can we live and find the right way and the right decisions? By living and being led by the Spirit who dwells in us!

Living in the hope of the new creation! All suffering will be over! Soon!

Many of the thoughts in this sermon I owe to Gregory A. Boyd.