

Does prayer really do anything?

"Prayer changes things!" – so the saying goes. Does it change God? Twist his arm? Are we, like the persistent widow, to try to change God's mind (Luke 18:1-8)? Sway him to our side by asking nicely for a favor? Is God so busy that he has to be reminded?

Is it merely psychological?

Does the slogan "Prayer changes things" really mean prayer changes you? Is it just a psychological thing? It makes you more attentive to the needs of others? And gives you a sense of peace and comfort? Is that all? Does prayer make no difference to God?

Does how we pray matter?

When more people pray. What about prayer chains and stadium pray-in's? If more people join in a prayer, is it more effective?

Time spent in prayer. Are prayers more effective if they are long? Or if one goes on a retreat? Do we get more credit if we pray more? Is praying like putting money in a bank: The more you deposit, the more you have in your account for a time of need?

Posture and gesture. Does it matter whether you sit, stand, or kneel? Does it matter if you fold your hands or lift them over your head? Or use beads?

From the heart. Are formal prayers vain repetition? Are free prayers or "popcorn prayers" more genuine? Are prayers more effective if a "spiritual" person, such as a pastor, prays? Is praying rightly a matter of being earnest, praying from the heart? Is the goal to be spontaneous, simple, and "spiritual"? Or to listen and just "rest" in the Lord? To "be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10)?

Questions! Questions! How about some answers?

The Promises

"Call upon me in the day of trouble and I will deliver you" (Psalm 50:15); "Ask and it shall be given you. Seek and you will find If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matt 7:7, 11).

No limits? Like the genie in a bottle, just rub and get whatever you want?

But what about the bad? What about those who pray to be delivered from cancer but die anyway? What about those who pray for help that never comes? Where is the Lord then? If the Lord can say "No," what do these promises mean?

"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you" (John 15:7).

But this promise is conditional. "If" you abide, "then" God will bless you. We don't manage this. We just can't "abide," and we never do. Does the branch "decide" to abide in the vine? "... Without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The branch can't choose to be in the vine. "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). He is doing it.

"If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you" (Matt 17:20).

Move mountains! But this has never happened. What then do we say? Are such promises just holy hyperbole?

Hey, we're still asking questions! Where are the answers?

The Key: The Holy Spirit Translates

"The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words ... the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom 8:26-27).

We always pray incorrectly and falsely. Even when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we can't do it right, totally and fully, from the heart. But the Holy Spirit translates for us. He takes our baby talk, broken talk, back talk – and translates "according to the will of God."