

## **“Why do we pray, and can it really change things?”**

Sunday AM, February 8, 2026  
Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket ON

### I. Introduction

- A. Good morning everyone. It’s great to be here with you this morning. Thank you Jan for the update on the search committee. Every so often when one of us from the committee comes to give the congregation an update, we nearly always ask specifically for your prayers.
- B. We also, nearly every week, invite people to come to the front with their needs and ask God for healing, provision, reconciliation, among other kinds of needs. And we even invite people to come and join with you in those prayers.
- C. These are things that are good for a church to do, and as we’ll see, things we see modeled for us in Scripture and are things Scripture tells us to do ourselves.
- D. Have you ever paused to ask yourself, “Why?” Why would God ask, even command, us to pray to him for our needs? If what we’re asking for wouldn’t be good for us, then it’s pretty clear God wouldn’t answer *that* prayer. But, if what we’re asking for would be good for us, why wouldn’t he just give it to us straight away without making us ask?
- E. This morning we’re going to attempt to answer two questions:
  - 1. Why do we pray? and
  - 2. What happens when we pray?

### **SLIDE HEADING: “Why do we pray, and can it really change things”**

#### I. POINT ONE: **The Bible clearly commands us to pray.**

- A. It is obvious that the Bible commands us to pray. Here are just a few quick examples of how natural it is for Scripture to call us to prayer.

**Colossians 4:2–3** Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. **3** At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ.

**1 Thessalonians 5:14–18** And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. **15** See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. **16** Rejoice always, **17** pray without ceasing, **18** give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

**Romans 12:9–13** Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. **10** Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. **11** Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. **12** Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. **13** Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

- B. There are countless others that could be cited along these lines. The question, then, is do these biblical commands alone provide us with sufficient reasons to pray?
1. Yes, of course! Anytime Scripture provides a clear command to do something, you should do it. However, we should also understand that God provides the commands that he does because he has reasons for doing so.
  2. He's not like the parent who says to do something, because I said so.
  3. To be clear, God *could* do that and we'd be obligated to follow such a command. But knowing *why* God commanded something can actually help motivate us to actually follow that command.
    - a) Part of learning why God would command us to pray involves a recognition that there are different kinds of prayers.
    - b) The reason for prayer might vary depending on the kind of prayer being offered.

## II. POINT TWO: **What our prayers change depends on the kind of prayer we're praying.**

- A. I'm not going to provide a definitive list of the kinds of prayer since they can be grouped in many different ways, but I think this is a general enough list to help with our task this morning. I'll say a little about the first two, but our focus for most of the morning will be on the last two.

**B. SUB-POINT 1: Prayers can focus on God and what he's done.**

1. In practice, things can get somewhat conflated, but in general this involves prayers of thanksgiving for what God has done. Thanking God for his provision of a specific need or for sending of his son to the cross would be examples. These prayers of adoration tend to stem from a recognition of God's holiness and the magnitude of who he is.
  - a) God is perfect in love, knowledge, wisdom, power, truth, justice and righteousness.
  - b) Yet, in all of that, he is a God who cares about his creation and desires to be in relationship with his people and created a way for us to be reconciled to him.
2. Prayers of adoration and thanksgiving will tend to focus on these aspects of both who God is and what he has done.

**C. SUB-POINT 2: Prayers can focus on our need for grace.**

1. When we sin, we disrupt the relationship that God desires to have with us. Prayers of confession start the restoration process and draw us closer to God.
2. God knows that we sin, yet we can be confident that our prayers of confession are heard by God and that he is eager to respond with grace.

**D. Both of the prayers discussed so far do bring about change. In most cases, it brings about a change in the person praying.**

1. As we focus on who God is, for example his holiness, we're likely to seriously reflect on whether our lives are proper reflections of that holiness. We're created in his image, but do our actions and choices reflect that?
2. As we focus on what God has done, sending his Son to die for our sins, we are likely to be more motivated to honor him with our entire lives.
3. As we confess our sin, we are reconciled to God and are in a position to hear his voice.
4. As we pray these kinds of prayers it's also likely that our own motivations and desires will begin to shift as we recognize that perhaps we've been

too focused on our selves, too wrapped up in who's wronged us, or to concerned about how others are acting. Focusing on God's holiness, how he's chosen to act on our behalf, and confessing our sins, we're putting ourselves in a position to grow closer to God himself.

5. However, not all prayers have this as the primary aim. Some prayers seek God's intervention in the goings-on of our human lives.

E. SUB-POINT 3: **Prayers can focus on the needs of others.**

1. Many times when we pray, we do so on the behalf of others. You might know of a friend or family member who is sick and pray for God's healing.
2. We might pray that others come to know Jesus as their personal savior.
3. These prayers of intercession might involve people we know or even those we don't know personally. For example, a few weeks ago we took time to pray for those suffering in Iraq. In doing so, we're asking God to intervene on their behalf, regardless of whether or not it effects us.

F. SUB-POINT 4: **Prayers can focus on our own needs.**

1. A final kind of prayer involves asking God to intercede our own behalf.
2. This could take the form of being overly self-interested, but it need not.

**Matthew 7:7–11** Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. **8** For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. **9** Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? **10** Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? **11** 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!

3. It seems rather clear that God does not mind our asking for what we need and is pleased to give us good things when we do ask.
4. Some philosophers and theologians will separate call this third type of prayer 'intercessory prayer' and the fourth they'll often call 'supplication'.

- a) For today, we're going to conserve both of these kinds of prayers in a similar way and treat them both as 'petitionary prayer.'
- b) When we're asking God to do something as a result of our prayer, we're petitioning him to perhaps heal a friend or to heal us. What both have in common is that we're not simply seeking a change in our understanding or desires, we're asking God to change something about the world we live in as a result of our prayer.
  - (1) It might turn out that what we are petitioning God for wouldn't actually be good for us, and so he doesn't answer that prayer. Over time we might come to see why and our faith in him can grow as a result of the knowledge that his love for us is why he didn't answer that prayer.
  - (2) Or it might turn out that in the process of petitioning God we come to realize that our desire for that prayer to come about is actually a desire that is not in line with God's plan.
  - (3) In both cases, there is a change that occurs in us, but the initial intent of our prayer is to see God to move in some way to make something happen. We want to see a son or daughter return to Jesus, to see the sick family member healed, to finally find a job after months of searching. These kinds of prayers are what we'll refer to as petitionary prayers.

### III. Puzzles about Petitionary Prayer

- A. Now, if you're anything like me, you're likely to sometimes have some questions about the nature of petitionary prayer. And, also if you're anything like me, it can be tempting to wonder if we should even bother with petitionary prayer at all.
- B. I suspect in a church of this size that I'm not the only one who's had questions about this kind of prayer. There are some who have argued that it's not even possible for God to answer prayers because it would either conflict with his moral goodness or require a rejection of his omniscience.
  - 1. In what follows we'll consider both of these concerns and I think that in doing so we'll come to a better understanding of how our prayers do really change things.

2. Now, before we move any further, I'd like to just mention that these are really tough questions and it's unlikely I'd be able to say enough about each of them to satisfy the depths of everyone's questions. I think we can be humble enough to note that we might be reaching the outer limits of understanding when it comes to looking for answers to these kinds of questions. But, it's also worth noting two things:
  - a) First, just because may not be able to fully understand how all of this works with exact precision, that doesn't mean we can't know *anything* about how this works.
  - b) Second, just because some questions might be difficult to answer, it doesn't mean we shouldn't ask them. For those of you who have children or grandchildren, I can't emphasize enough how important it is that you create room in your lives for these kinds of questions.
    - (1) There are scores of people who now consider themselves to be atheists who de-converted from Christianity because they had questions like what we're going to examine, but were told that they shouldn't ask these kinds of things or that they should just go pray some more and let God remove their desire for answers.
    - (2) Shutting down a young person's attempt to more fully understand their faith is the quickest way to see that person start to wonder if the reason people don't want them asking these questions is because there aren't any answers to them.
  - c) Keep in mind that God is big enough to handle our attempt to understand more fully who he is and how he has ordered this world.

#### IV. POINT THREE: **A perfectly good God could be justified in withholding good things from his people.**

- A. Let's consider the first concern I raised above that petitionary prayer is impossible because it's incompatible with a perfectly good God. Why would someone think that?
- B. Here's a basic argument we could use to illustrate this line of thinking:

#### **Is petitionary prayer compatible with the goodness of God?**

**1. A perfectly good God would want to maximize the goods of each created individual (provided that it doesn't prevent some other even greater good).**

- a) For example, he would prevent sickness or just provide healing. He would provide for a job, etc. The idea is that there is no reason God would withhold these things from you, if it were in his power to provide them.
- b) But, God may also know that it might be better for you in the long run if he withholds some good because it being withheld is required for you to experience some other greater good later.

Perhaps the reason Paul's thorn in the flesh wasn't removed is because if it were removed, then Paul would not be as reliant on God.

**2. If God responds positively to petitionary prayer, then there are some goods that would not have been had if there was no petitionary prayer.**

- a) The idea here is that if we assume petitionary prayer works, then we're saying God brought about some good only because we prayed.
- b) If we didn't pray, then that healing or provision, etc. wouldn't have come to that individual. If it would have come anyways, then we're not really saying it was because of our petitionary prayer. It was because of something else.
- c) But this conflicts with the first claim.

**3. Therefore, God must not respond positively to petitionary prayer.**

C. What do we make of this?

- 1. First, we should consider that Scripture seems to provide a lot of examples of petitionary prayer working, so we should at least be suspicious of an argument along these lines. For example,

**2 Kings 19:15, 17–20, 35** And Hezekiah prayed before the Lord and said: "O Lord, the God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made

the heavens and the earth... **19** So now, O Lord our God, save us, please, from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone... **35** And that night the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. **36** Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went home and lived at Nineveh.

Seems pretty clear that God heard Hezekiah's prayer and it suggests that he destroyed the Assyrians in response to it.

2. The second thing to note is that the first premise is actually false. Although at first glance it seems clear that a good God would provide good things if he were able, there might be circumstances where God chooses to *not* provide some good to a person.
3. If there is some other even greater good that can only be had by God withholding lesser goods from individuals, then a perfectly good God would be justified in withholding those goods. What do I mean by that.
  - a) Well, it may very well be the case that the reason God chooses to answer a petitionary prayer is not just to bring about the request.
  - b) Perhaps the main goal of answers to petitionary prayer is for God himself to be glorified and for this answer to prayer to provide evidence of his existence and his love for his people.

**D. SUB-POINT ONE: Providing some good only after we pray can provide evidence of God's goodness.**

1. If God were to just automatically grant us these various goods, without ever asking for them, then it's unlikely that we'd see God's hand at work in our lives.
2. This seems to be behind John Wesley's famous quote in his *A Plain Account of Perfection*, that "God does nothing but in answer to prayer."
3. It wouldn't be unjust for God to withhold some good from us because we didn't ask for it, if the ultimate reason for providing the good is for us to come to rely on him more fully.

4. This leads to a second reason why God may withhold goods until we pray.

E. **SUB-POINT TWO: Providing some good only after we pray can protect us from self-idolatry.**

1. I've hear many pastors and evangelists say that some of the hardest areas to reach with the gospel are those that are most affluent.
2. This isn't because they're more educated than others, or more modern, or anything like that. It's because they don't see the need for God in their lives. They have their material needs met and it can be easy to think that's all their is.
3. If we never had to ask God for something, and he just provided it ahead of time on his own, then it would be very difficult to not come to think of ourselves in a self-sufficient way. The reality would be that God is providing things for us, but we wouldn't know it and would be tempted to think it's because of what we've done.
4. In that kind of situation, it would be very difficult to show the appropriate gratitude that we should have for God's kindness and generosity to us.
5. Instead of coming to believe that we are the source of all we need, petitionary prayer can make it clear that we truly must rely on God for all things.
6. Similarly, God waiting for us to pray for someone else can cultivate community among the faithful and help promote the kind of unity that God seeks for his church.
  - a) Coming to the front to pray and asking others to come pray with you makes it clear that we are the body of Christ and do not go it alone.
  - b) Your burdens can be shared with one another deepening the bonds of Christ among us.

V. **POINT FOUR: An all knowing God can choose to act ahead of time based on the fact that we prayed.**

- A. Some might wonder why we even bother praying for God to act on our behalf because his omniscience ranges over the future anyways.

1. Why pray for favor when applying for that job if God already knows whether you're going to get it or not?
  2. He already knows our needs, so why do we need to pray about it?
- B. Here it will be helpful to say a little about the magnitude of what it is that God actually knows.
1. To say that God is omniscient is to say that he knows all things. But, I'm not sure we always fully appreciate just what that amounts to.
  2. God knowing all things means that he not only knows every true proposition: Don Horban is on holiday, the Patriots will lose in the 2026 Super Bowl, this sermon is going on too long, etc. Of course God knows all of these kinds of things, and everything else that happened in the history of the world, is happening right now, and will happen tomorrow and the next day.
  3. This, many of us take for granted. However, God actually knows far more than that. He also knows *what would have happened* if any particular event unfolded differently. For example, God knows how each and every event would have unfolded if Kamala Harris had won the US Presidential election and Pierre Poilievre had won in the recent Federal election.
  4. Think about every contingency, every *what if*, there could be for every action and God's being omniscient means he knows how things would've unfolded for each one.
  5. Believe it or not, we actually see evidence of this in Scripture.

**Matthew 11:20–24** Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.

**21** “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. **22** But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

**23** And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. **24** But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.

- a) Not exactly the mild and meek Jesus we sometimes hear people talk about is it?
  - b) But, in the midst of this rebuke we see Jesus claim to know what *would have happened* if these “mighty works” had been done in a different city at a different time. Had things unfolded in a different manner and Jesus’s works had been done in Sodom, then it would not have been destroyed.
  - c) God not only knows what did happen to Tyre and Sodom, he also knows what would have happened.
- C. What’s fascinating is that God not only knows all of these things, he also *has always known* them.
- 1. Before God created anything at all, he knew that he could create a world in which such works being performed in Sodom would lead to repentance. For reasons only he knows, God choose to create a different world. He created this world instead.
  - 2. Having a better understanding of God’s omniscience turns out to be really helpful when thinking about petitionary prayer.
- D. God’s omniscience includes his foreknowledge of what you will do in each and every circumstance you face. And that includes his knowledge of whether you will pray, or not.
- 1. So, God knew that you would pray for your loved one’s healing. And, he could decide to heal that person based on the fact that he knows you will pray for it.
  - 2. So, you’re prayer is directly linked to the healing that comes, even if God foreknew all along. He actually based his decision to provide that healing (or any other kind of provision) on your prayer before he even created the world at all.
  - 3. God surveyed all the ways the world could unfold and chose to create a world in which he provides for someone’s need on the basis of your prayer.

## VI. Closing Remarks

A. I know that this is a meaty topic for a Sunday morning, it can be hard to try to make sense of something like how God can use our prayers, or why he would even want to do so.

B.

VII. Let's Pray