

How Does Prayer Really Work?
II Samuel 12:15b-23
Luke 11:5-13

“He said, ‘While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, ‘Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me, and the child may live.’”

How does prayer really work? The same question occurred to anthropologist and admitted atheist Tanya Luhrman when an evangelical woman told her to try having coffee with God. Luhrman, a professor at the University of Chicago and later at Stanford, began to wonder how God becomes real to people. After ten years spent studying the members of two Vineyard Christian fellowship congregations, she came to believe that audible and even tactile experiences of God in prayer were the result of a learning process that changed the way people experienced God—a process that literally changed their minds.

Luhrman reports that the Vineyard “invites congregants to ‘pretend’ God is present and make believe he is talking back like the very best of buddies....They go on walks with God, cuddle with God and go on dates with God,” she reports. “They don’t think God is imaginary but they do believe when [they] use their imagination in prayer, they can experience God more intimately.” Being an anthropologist, Luhrman created an experiment to test this. Half of the participants were placed in a prayer group and half in a Bible study group. The prayer group listened to Scripture readings followed by questions that led them into an imaginative engagement with the text. The study group listened to lectures about Scripture. A bit of a set up, if you ask me! Nevertheless, after thirty days, the prayer group reported actual experiences of God. “Some reported feeling God touch their shoulder or speak with them or interact with them in a way they actually experienced with their senses.” Not so the study group. How does prayer really work?

How could prayer possibly work for those of us whose minds are not so easily changed

and whose minister is more likely to lead a Bible study than invite you to cuddle with God? First we need to ask ourselves how we think *the world* really works in relation to God. Ever since the Enlightenment, the “default setting” in our minds makes us think that things down here on earth are pretty much determined by actions and reactions, Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle notwithstanding. God may have created the cosmos, but day to day, God does not normally have much to do with the running of things. Therefore anything that seems to happen outside of the mechanistic lockstep of cause and effect (a cancer in remission that is always fatal, a survivor found after days under a collapsed building, a child conceived in old age) either is put aside as something we eventually will be able to explain scientifically or is considered, by religious sorts who still hold to a mechanistic view of how the world works, to be an intrusion into the created order by another order. In other words, Robert Jenson says, “God, as outside artisan of the cosmos, would have to intervene to respond to prayer; either he would thereby mess up its perfect clock-work, or the intervention would mean that the cosmic mechanism had been imperfectly made in the beginning and needed adjustment.” How does prayer really work? If it works at all in a mechanistic world, prayer asks God to intervene.

“But,” Jens goes on confess in light of Quantum Physics, “the world is not such a mechanism: it occurs rather in the freedom of history, and of a history in which we are participants.” How does the world really work in relation to God? Faith would have it that there is a spontaneity within creation such that things happen voluntarily and with the aid of God’s Spirit, a way that coincides with Quantum Physics rather than Newton’s Mechanics. Prayer is thus another of those fantastic ventures faith takes” with the God whose *freedom* determines the way the world works. “When we pray we ask God to listen to our advice about how the world should go,” says Jens because “[w]hat is around us is not iron impersonal fate, but an omnipotent

conversation that is open to us. We can meaningfully and sensibly say, ‘Please let it rain,’ because rain will or will not happen in a spontaneity with whom we can and may discuss or even argue the matter. And we can make such addresses in hope and trust, for it is the [the God we know in Jesus Christ] whose Spirit is this freedom of all events.”

Consider, then, the prayer that is the 51st psalm: “*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.*” The prayer is David’s “when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” The prayer presumes God to be a God of steadfast love and abundant mercy who may choose to be merciful toward the one praying--or not. Act according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy, David pleads, believing in the same breath that God is sovereign and so free with regard to his human expectations. If God should choose not to be merciful toward him now, David will confess, nevertheless, that God is a God of steadfast love and mercy. I find this humbling, having watched helplessly for decades as people quit God because bad things happen to good people in spite of their prayers.

David will not quit. “*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.*” I imagine him praying these words over and over again after the prophet Nathan had taken his leave. Sent with word of God’s judgment to the king’s chambers, Nathan first confirms David’s trust in God’s abundant mercy, assuring David that “God will put away your sin; you shall not die.” But Nathan says more, says that because David has utterly scorned the Lord by lying with Bathsheba and arranging for the murder of her husband, “the child that is born to you shall die.” The news could not have been worse. Still, this does not shake David’s trust in God’s steadfast love and mercy.

But there is another theology at work in these words that is not unlike Newton’s

Mechanics. The story is told to us by the Deuteronomist, a writer who believes in a tit-for-tat sort of God: believes that if a person is faithful to God, then blessings will abound, and if a person is sinful, then punishment will follow. We pray to the God of the Deuteronomist when things go well with us, because the rules are clear and we are in control. Here the Deuteronomist reports that because David sinned, “The Lord struck the child that Uriah’s wife bore to David, and it became very ill.” Truth be told, we are even Deuteronomists when we are down on our luck, asking God the question you asked this fall, “What did I do to deserve this?” This prayerful question’s operative and often unexamined theology presumes we are talking to a God who is a judge bound to the rules determined apart from any particular situation. Who can stand? So while God may, now and again, act mercifully, the Deuteronomist’s prayers assume God’s actions are not free: they are in lockstep response to a reliable quid pro quo, to a principle of humanly conceived fairness we believe in more than we believe in God.

David prays in defiance of the Deuteronomist, I think. Painfully aware of Nathan’s prophetic word—“the child...shall die,” David nevertheless pleads with God for the child. Day and night he prays and fasts and prostrates himself on the ground. No other story in all of Scripture, save for Abraham bargaining with God to save Sodom and Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, holds in solution the paradox of our praying to the God whose judgment we know and whose freedom makes us, nevertheless, pray for a merciful change of heart.

On the seventh day, the child dies. Again, the expected human reaction to such senseless tragedy is the sort of chest-heaving grief that has led many to quit God in a rage or to live out the rest of their days in silence, sulking. David does neither. He rises from the ground, anoints himself with oil, changes his clothes, goes to the house of the Lord to worship, returns home and breaks his fast. His servants are dumbfounded. ““What is this thing you have done?” they ask.

“You fasted and wept for the child while it was alive; but when the child died, you rose and ate food?”

David responds theologically: “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, ‘Who knows?’ The Lord may be gracious to me, and the child may live.” David’s unshakable belief about who God was toward him, wrought in the marrow of his bones since he was a little shepherd boy roaming the Judean hills, has become a complete trust in the freedom of the God with whom he has to do. That is why, on the darkest day of his life thus far, David does not beseech God as an outside artisan of the cosmos to intervene. Rather David begs the God he has been talking to ever since he was a little boy to be merciful to him, a sinful man.

“Ask, and it will be given you,” says Jesus. “Search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” How does prayer really work? Prayer really works when, even in the face of sadness and disappointment and grief, the conversation continues. Prayer really works when the conversation makes us, our minds and our bodies, vulnerable and available to the freedom of the God for whom we were made. God’s word to David through Nathan only days after he had become king of Israel, a word contrary to the Deuteronomists’ understanding of God, was this: *“I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him....But I will not take my steadfast love from him....* In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.”

The context of the conversation that invites your beseeching and mine is also the context of God’s word to us, God’s promise to be with us, come hell or high water, in Jesus Christ. He is the answer to our asking, our seeking, our knocking, for in him we behold God’s steadfast love and abundant mercy toward us. Ask and he will be given to us; seek and we will be found by him; knock and he will open the door to the place in God he has prepared for us.

How does prayer really work? As one who quit the Deuteronomist's Mechanistic God of tit-for-tat long ago and who also has no interest in conversing with the God I can cuddle, I dare to speak in these latter days with the God of David and David's greater Son, prevailing upon God's steadfast love and mercy that I learned about in Bible study as I read of David beseeching God for his child and of Abraham bargaining with God for Sodom and of Jesus in the garden asking if the cup might be removed from him. Though I may never hear God's audible voice or feel God's hand upon my shoulder, nevertheless, on the darkest of days, I rise, wash, change my clothes and enter the Lord's house to continue the conversation. Does it really work? Who knows? Perhaps today the Lord may be gracious even to me!