

MAGAZINE

Focus



Busy people need

Prayer

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It's good to talk

If there's one activity I enjoy in life, it's having a chat with a friend (or friends) over a cuppa. For me it is a very safe activity. Together we talk and share about what's on our mind – work, family, hobbies, politics, faith – and I must confess that we sometimes even share a 'Did you hear . . . !'

While preparing this edition of *Focus*, I've reflected on what it is I enjoy so much about having a really good natter. More than anything, I think it's about the ability to 'open up' to a friend and share what's on my mind without any threat of censure, rebuke or ridicule – and be accepted for who I am. The nineteenth-century English poet George Eliot describes it well:

*'A friend is one to whom one may pour out the contents of one's heart, chaff and grain together, knowing that gentle hands will take and sift it, keep what is worth keeping, and, with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away.'*¹

The reality is that, in today's world, finding that safe place – finding such a friend as Eliot describes – is not always a given. Even my new best friend, 'Alexa', has a dark side.² Not only does she respond to my every command, but it turns out that she can also 'listen in' on my conversations without me being aware. While mildly amusing, at the deeper level, could it be potentially Orwellian, with 'Big Sister' instead of 'Big Brother'?³

Whatever you might wonder about prayer, a dark side to it there is not! As each contributor explains their own perspective, all agree that the very opposite is true. But what also shine through are people who experience prayer as a means of connecting with their most trusted friend – God. Could it be that talking with God is like talking with our very best friend?

In these times, we're getting pretty close to artificial intelligence (AI) becoming commonplace in our lives. We hope it will help support our daily lives, changing them for the better. And, sure enough, AI can help us drive the car, switch lights on and off remotely, and even do extensive life-saving surgery, which is truly amazing: but where AI really is 'artificial' is when it comes to matters of the heart and mind – emotional intelligence.

I think this is where God comes in. Imagine, even if it's just for a moment, that God exists and that His number-one concern is to connect with us for the better – to be a friend . . . life here and now could be very different, couldn't it?

Keep reading, because, at the heart of this edition of *Focus*, prayer is key to experiencing that difference.

¹<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/127-a-friend-is-one-to-whom-one-may-pour-out> ²'Alexa' is a new and popular form of artificial intelligence with which we are increasingly choosing to populate our homes. ³theconversation.com/the-dark-side-of-alexa-siri-and-other-personal-digital-assistants-12627



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Stuff about praying

by Mike Pearson

I am not sure that reading or writing something about praying is such a good idea. You could easily come to think that there is a right way of doing it. Believe me, there isn't. Praying comes from deep inside. It has to – otherwise we're faking it.

Actually, our real prayers probably don't come with that exact label attached. Our prayers are our deepest longings; things we don't often talk about – perhaps even with our nearest and dearest. These prayers do not need to come in thoughtful sentences with a beginning and an end. They do not come as a careful script. No; they're raw. They are fragments; part of our urgent inner life. They may be nothing more than a sort of groaning. They may be cries in the dark. They may well not be addressed to anybody. But they are truly 'us'.

Sometimes all we can do is put a few dots on the blank canvas of our mind. Then we allow God to join them up and maybe, in time, colour them in. Maybe we come to God with strong suggestions. God does not really need our suggestions. With hindsight I am very glad God did not take up some of my suggested ways of answering my own prayers. Otherwise life would have been very different.

So, if you feel angry, say it. If you feel jealous, say it. If you feel sad, say it. If you feel frightened, say it. If you feel grateful, say it. That's when praying starts. You may say it out loud; silently, in your head; while you're walking; while you're waiting . . . while you're awake in the dark of the night. 'God, I am frightened' – that's a very real prayer.

Sometimes no words will come. Sometimes my mind is too jumbled for words. Sometimes I borrow a very short piece of the Bible. 'Even so, come, Lord Jesus' . . . as and when. 'I am with you always' . . . as near as your own breath, in tight corners. I simply repeat it. Sometimes it's just 'with you always'.

But now I am in danger of making the very mistake I mentioned at the beginning – suggesting a method – so I'll stop. Our prayers are as individual as our faces. We just have to take off our everyday mask. Stop hiding. Turn up – even if for just a brief moment. God knows there's a flame flickering somewhere inside us.

Have I got time for **you?**

I recently attended a meeting where the presenter informed us that pastors pray an average of 7 to 10 minutes daily. Instantly I thought, *Who's counting? And how did they arrive at this figure?* I guess we read texts that inform us that Jesus spent whole nights in prayer, talking with His Father. We read of the day of Pentecost, with its emphasis on prayer. Acts 1:14 (NIV) states: *'They all joined together constantly in prayer,'* leading to a direct and clear result: the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples, giving them the ability to speak in different languages, and breaking down barriers so that the Good News could be shared effectively with those around them.

We read texts like these, and we'd also like a direct response. We immediately begin to try and devise ways of increasing our prayer time, devising complex systems that seek to ensure that we don't run out of things to say. If you are trying to bolster your prayer life past the 10-minute marker, my advice is that you throw

by Patricia Douglas

away the timepiece, resist the temptation to focus on your watch, and rather focus on God, our Heavenly Father, spending time to get to know Him and permit the conversation to naturally flow.

I have a cousin named Sharon – to be honest, we're more like sisters – and we have fond memories as girls of taking a slow walk through West Park (Manchester). We fondly looked forward to this time every week, as there was so much to say, so much to see, with lots of laughter, joy and peace. We discussed all that was happening, the inconsequential together with the profound, and everything in between. We loved looking at the flowers and the people, and at times we were lost in a world of our own. We cherish these

special memories. The years have passed in quick succession, and we now live in different parts of the world: nevertheless, our husbands know that when we contact each other, they are not to expect us to emerge for a few hours; the time just seems to fly. When it comes to prayer, I wonder if we sadly confine it to the realm of church services. Such prayers are good – even wonderful at times – but there's more to prayer than this. We possess the habit of compartmentalising things, and this has been the experience of prayer. We are encouraged to *'pray without ceasing'* (1 Thessalonians 5:17, NKJV), but how is this possible?

God gives us an invitation, as Isaiah says: *'Come, let's talk this over, says the Lord; no matter how deep the stain of your sins, I can take it out and make you as clean as freshly fallen snow. Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you white as wool!'* (Isaiah 1:18, The Living Bible.)

God disarms us; we don't need to be afraid, because He's on our side. He invites us to have a chat and enjoy living in His presence. In this way we learn to recognise His voice speaking to us, and we spontaneously respond to Him and share with Him. And guess what! Time is no longer an issue, and prayer takes on a new meaning.



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A gem of a prayer?

by John C. Walton

Essentially, the same Lord's Prayer that Jesus taught His followers is found in Matthew (6:9-13) and Luke (11:2-4).

Why did Jesus choose that particular collection of words as His model prayer? The words form a short, pleasing address that's easy to remember, speaking to the fundamental hopes and desires of our hearts.

The prayer is in two sections

The first focuses on our need to fill the God-shaped space in our heads. It relates us to God as the glorious Father. With these words we claim our place in the family He is the head of. *This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven: May your holy name be honoured; may your Kingdom come; may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'* (Matthew 6:9, 10, GNB.)

The second section expresses our need for physical well-being and for mental peace. *'Give us today the food we need. Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us. Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One.'* (Matthew 6:11-13, GNB.)

That all sounds very well, but, if we dig a little deeper, is there something more to it? When God made the world, two characteristics

of His plan stood out. First, in creating this material kingdom, God was revealing His power and glory. Second, God created an Eden-like environment to provide health, well-being and peace for human inhabitants. Though His leadership was rejected, God has ever been seeking to restore these two features to His creation. At Mount Sinai He offered a remedy in the Ten Commandments. They cluster into two segments; the first relates to God, with four commandments that are concisely expressed as: 'Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' These four rouse in us the respect and glory due to the One who created us. The second section relates to man, and has six commandments that are concisely expressed as: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' These are guidelines designed to promote our well-being, peace and security.

God's nature is consistent and unchanging. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. He had the same plan in mind when, many years later, He sent Jesus into our world. The angel choir, His messengers, sang to the shepherds the same twofold plan: 'Glory to God in the highest,' plus: '... and on earth, peace, goodwill to men.' The first musical bar relates to God and proclaims His praise and glory, while the second promises peace and well-being for the human race. Jesus entered the world to carry forward the same, unchanging twofold plan!

Later in His life, Jesus' model prayer for His followers again mirrors the same twofold

Love the Lord your God
With all your heart and
With all your soul and
With all your mind.

Love your neighbour
as yourself.

Glory to God in
the highest ...

And on earth peace,
goodwill to men.

Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come:
Your will be done,
On earth as it is in
heaven.

Give us today our daily
bread
And forgive us our debts,
As we also forgive our
debtors.
And lead us not into
temptation,
But deliver us from evil.

A gem of
a prayer

Feedback loop

It's a gem of a prayer, with multiple layers of meaning . . . designed to bring us abundant life, happiness and peace when we pray it with understanding and sincerity.

design. The first focuses on God and encourages true believers to honour and respect Him as our Father and to seek His kingdom. The second centres on man and seeks forgiveness, a spirit of generosity and escape from evil. That's a true recipe for the well-being and peace of us and of our society. Whoever prays this prayer is assenting to God's plan, identifying with it and asking to become part of it. It's a request for help to live up to its ideals and to be included in God's coming kingdom of glory. Notice the parallel with the twofold structures of the Ten Commandments and the angel choir's message! This reveals Jesus' oneness with the Father and their consistency and reliability.

That sounds very well too, but is there something more to it?

Notice how the second part of the prayer feeds back into the first. The one who forgives thereby becomes more able to honour God's name, to do His will and to welcome His

kingdom. The one who steers clear of evil not only promotes harmony and peace, but is also more fit to respect God, affirm His plan and enter His kingdom. This feedback loop is a pleasing element of the prayer. Observance of the second part feeds back into and amplifies the first part – which in turn augments the second part, and so on. Don't imagine that this implies that the prayer is an 'engine for holiness', whereby just mechanical repetition of the words brings about godliness. Forgiveness is the real and personal action of letting go of resentment and any desire for vengeance. Deliverance from evil is a personal renewal experience of body, mind and spirit. True use of the prayer involves, at the very least, acceptance of these experiences in real life. It's a gem of a prayer, with multiple layers of meaning. It's beautifully composed to develop harmony between heaven and earth. It's exquisitely designed to bring us abundant life, happiness and peace when we pray it with understanding and sincerity.

Awesome God! Reflections on a meaningful prayer life

by Catherine Boldeau

I was born and raised in a Christian home. Prayer was an integral part of our family life. We prayed in the morning; we prayed over every meal; we prayed when we left the house and when we returned in the evening. We had evening prayers and prayed before we went to bed.

Our weekend visits to church were liberally sprinkled with prayer segments at scheduled times. My mind would often wander during the long prayers that were offered for and on behalf of the congregation of people who attended the services. And, of course, there were the meetings devoted just to prayer, and in many of these I would fall asleep. My imagination became a safe haven to protect me from the words that I couldn't understand and the sentiments from well-meaning individuals that scared me.

I think that by the time I hit my late teens and early twenties, I was 'all prayed out'.

I often wondered if I was boring God, because I was praying the same prayers over and over and over again; and I didn't quite

understand the concept of 'talking to God'.

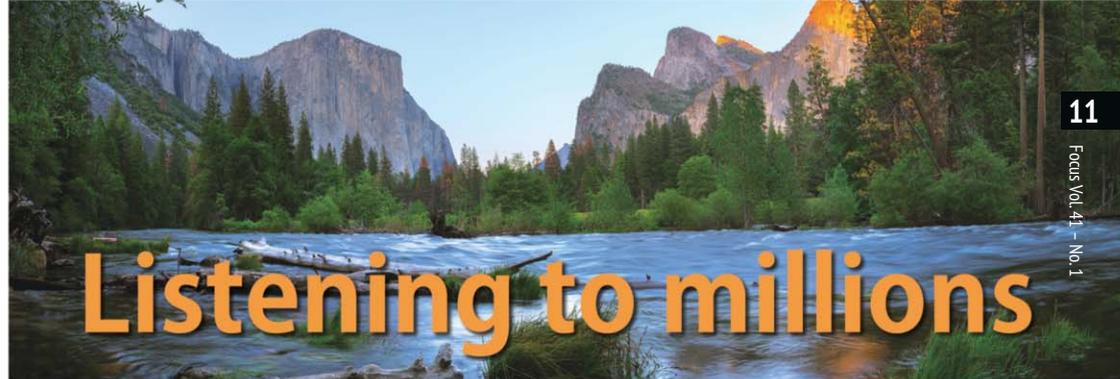
The first time that I can remember having a 'real' conversation with God was when I was 25. I was surrounded by three men while I was walking home in Glasgow and they were shouting racist abuse at me. I felt vulnerable and alone. No one else in the street looked like me. No one wanted to get involved. My prayer at that time was raw and desperate. 'You NEED to get me out of here. NOW!'

He answered my prayer, and from that moment onwards my prayer life changed. I stopped uttering meaningless drivel to the Father and started to have conversations with Him. Sometimes we laugh together, and I've found God to have an amazing sense of humour. At other times, we cry together as we share our common pain.

Sometimes I get angry with Him because I can't make sense of a situation, and He lets me rant and rage; sometimes He reprimands me for my attitude or poor choices: but most of the time we just talk. Our relationship is such now that I talk to God about almost everything. His opinion matters to me. I love talking to Him, but part of our conversation involves me listening to what He has to say. And the more our relationship develops, the more I listen.

And, of course, there are daily moments of gratitude, when I tell Him that I love Him and name the things for which I am grateful.

My life is very different now that I'm talking to my God on a daily basis. No, not everything is rosy in the garden all the time; far from it! But I feel His presence with me, and I know that He is interested in everything about me. It's an awesome feeling to be loved that much!



by Lungani Sibanda

There is a popular children's song that goes:
*'My God is so great, so strong and so mighty,
There's nothing my God cannot do.
The mountains are His, the rivers are His,
The stars are His handiwork too (woohoo!);
My God is so big, so strong and so mighty,
There's nothing my God cannot do, for you!'*

God is God, and that is the whole premise of those who profess to follow Him. As a follower and lover of Jesus, it is easy for me to believe in His abilities. When the question is posed of 'how God listens to millions of people simultaneously', to me it is not really important. He already occupies the highest pedestal in my life, and that determines what His capabilities are in my worldview. If I deem Him small, then the chances are that I will always doubt what He can do in my life. An elderly lady recently said to me that the fact that there are some who believe in the flat earth theory is of no consequence to her, because she has better things to occupy her time with. In essence, what she was saying was that there are more important matters that engage her life, so she is not willing to engage in the trivial.

While preparing this article I spoke to a friend of mine, Ezra, a voracious consumer of knowledge and a beautiful human. To put things in context, Ezra was brought up as a Christian, then became a Rastafarian, and now just believes, untethered to any ascribed religion, that there is a God who controls everything. In our 'sauna sessions' I posed the question of how God can listen to millions of

people simultaneously. He simply said, 'It is about belief.' In Hebrews 11:1 (NKJV) the Bible says, '*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*' Without faith the Christian experience loses its focus. Belief is a very profound aspect of the Christian experience. Without belief we might as well pack up shop. It is simply believing in His Word (the Bible) as truth and using it as a blueprint.

Belief is a byproduct of faith. Faith compels one to look past what may currently be seen of the situation in the belief that He (God) will prevail, regardless of what the evidence shows. Christians believe in God's goodness, and that He rewards the people who seek after Him. When I wake up in the morning I talk to God through prayer, and I am specific in my requests for the day. I thank Him for where I am and ask Him to be with me where I am going, and *voila* – my day is palatable. Please don't get me wrong: prayer is not a magic incantation for a utopian day. For me, it is an anchor from which the day gets started. It is a guardrail to control my behaviour, and acceptance that, while things may not be ideal, whatever happens that day, I trust God to get me through.

Is it worth praying for the world?

Suppose, when we ask such a question as: 'Is it worth praying for something?' we are really saying, 'If I pray for a particular thing, will my prayer make a difference?' That's the real crux of the matter, right?

Will the fact that I pray for the world, the environment, those involved in politics, and social issues really make a difference? Will God listen to my prayer, hear my prayer, and act in some way because of my prayer?

Well, to be honest, I don't understand 'how' prayer 'works'! I think that if we focus on the logic of prayer and try to figure out how to pray what we might consider more 'successfully', I'm not sure we will ever reach a satisfactory conclusion – or even have the kind of prayer life that God designed us to have. It doesn't seem to me that the Bible has much to say about the mechanics of prayer.

What I do find, though, is that prayer is very much commended by God: and prayer for people and the issues facing society is

commended by God as well. Let's look at an example.

In Jeremiah chapter 29, the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, sends a personal letter to the people of Jerusalem who have been carried into exile in Babylon. Jeremiah 29:4-7 (NIV):

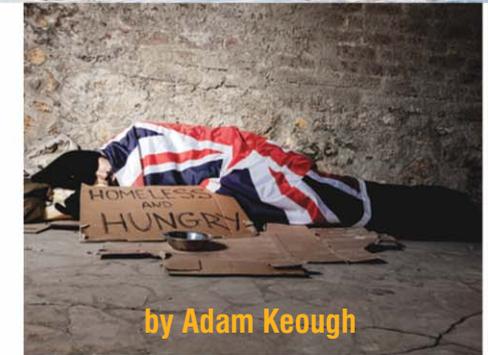
"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." "

Here, God doesn't tell the people how their prayers will work; nor does God tell them the mechanics of prayer. What He does say to them, though, is to pray. And surely, if God

encourages the people to pray, He is only going to do so if their prayers will make a difference.

So, what does He encourage them to pray for? Firstly, for their own lives and the lives of their families. The people have been forcefully brought to a strange city where life is different from what they are used to; but they are to pray in that strange city that they may be able to settle down, look after themselves, and become fully functioning and contributing members of that society.

Secondly, God encourages them to pray for the peace and prosperity of the city to which they have been brought. And how can you really pray for the peace and prosperity of a town, a city, a country, or even the world, without praying for society's leaders and the social issues which those leaders face? Because this isn't just about praying for the peace and prosperity of the people who have been brought as exiles to Babylon; it's about praying for peace and prosperity for the whole



by Adam Keough

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of the society in which they now find themselves living.

I find it interesting that God asks His people to pray in this way for the people of a city who do not know Him. It's as if, by praying for these people and issues, somehow God's missionary purposes in Babylon might be fulfilled: that, through prayer, glory will be brought to God, and somehow prosperity and peace will lead to a greater knowledge of the One True God.

And this isn't the only example in the Bible where Christians are encouraged to pray like this. The New Testament book of 1 Timothy is written by the apostle Paul to a young pastor, Timothy. In chapter 1, verses 18-19, Paul encourages Timothy to *'fight the battle well'* and to hold *'on to faith and a good conscience'* (NIV). In chapter 2, verses 1-4 (NIV), Paul goes on to say to Timothy how he can do this: *'I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.'*

To me, these two passages are extremely similar. The circumstances in which the people found themselves may have been different, but the principles of prayer remain the same. Pray for yourself and for your family, yes: but also pray for the world around you, the political, social, economic and cultural circumstances in which you find yourself; and therefore, by

default, for the leaders who have substantial influence over many of these issues.

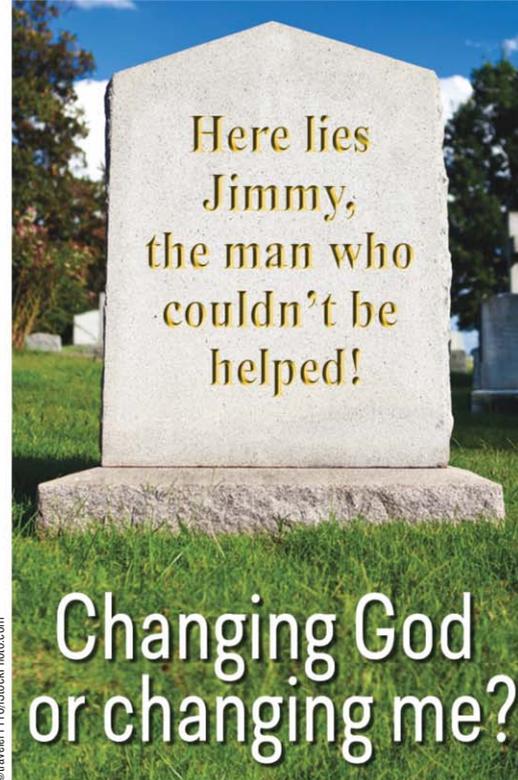
If I think, once again, back to the Old Testament and to the famous biblical character of Daniel, who himself served in a position of influence to the King of Babylon – he prayed three times daily. Although the Bible doesn't tell us specifically what most of his prayers were about, when we understand the person of Daniel – who he was, and the impact he had on those around him – I consider it highly likely that he spent time praying specifically for the leaders and the major issues facing society.

I believe that the principles exposed in the Holy Scriptures call Christians to pray for all those in leadership in our society, whether we agree with their policies and practices or not. So, what exactly might we pray for?

Well, I would suggest that we pray that our leaders have the wisdom and ability to discern right from wrong; also that they would have hearts of compassion, justice and mercy (which throughout the Bible are issues of great concern to God), especially towards those in society who are more vulnerable.

I believe that Christians are also called to pray that our leaders' policies and practices would not be about the hoarding of money for the rich, or the exploitation of the world's resources for personal gain, but about creating prosperity in society which benefits all, where everyone is considered equally valued, and where economic growth and prosperity take into account the stewardship of resources so that our planet is protected for future generations.

The good news is that God cares about people, including those in leadership; about the world; about the environment in which we live; and about all matters of social justice: and He cares enough to ask Christians to pray about them. Your prayers will make a difference!



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Changing God or changing me?

by Adrian Peck

Jimmy was an independent type. No matter what was going on in his life, he was determined to sort it out himself. 'Do you want a lift to the station, Jim?' his friends would ask. 'No, that's fine; I'll walk.' 'You seem to be struggling with all those heavy bags . . . let us take one,' concerned companions would say. Muscles straining, face grimacing, Jimmy always insisted, 'No, I can manage.' One day Jimmy fell ill, and his condition seemed to get worse every time his friends saw him. They asked if he had been to the doctors and he said, 'No, a couple of paracetamols and a good night's kip are all I need.' Things got so bad that he started to look like death warmed up. Alarmed, his friends said, 'Jimmy, we are going to take you to A&E . . . you're in a terrible state.' Jimmy used the last of his strength to shake his head in defiance. 'No, no; I'll be fine.' When Jimmy passed away, his gravestone was inscribed, *'Here lies Jimmy, the man who couldn't be helped.'*

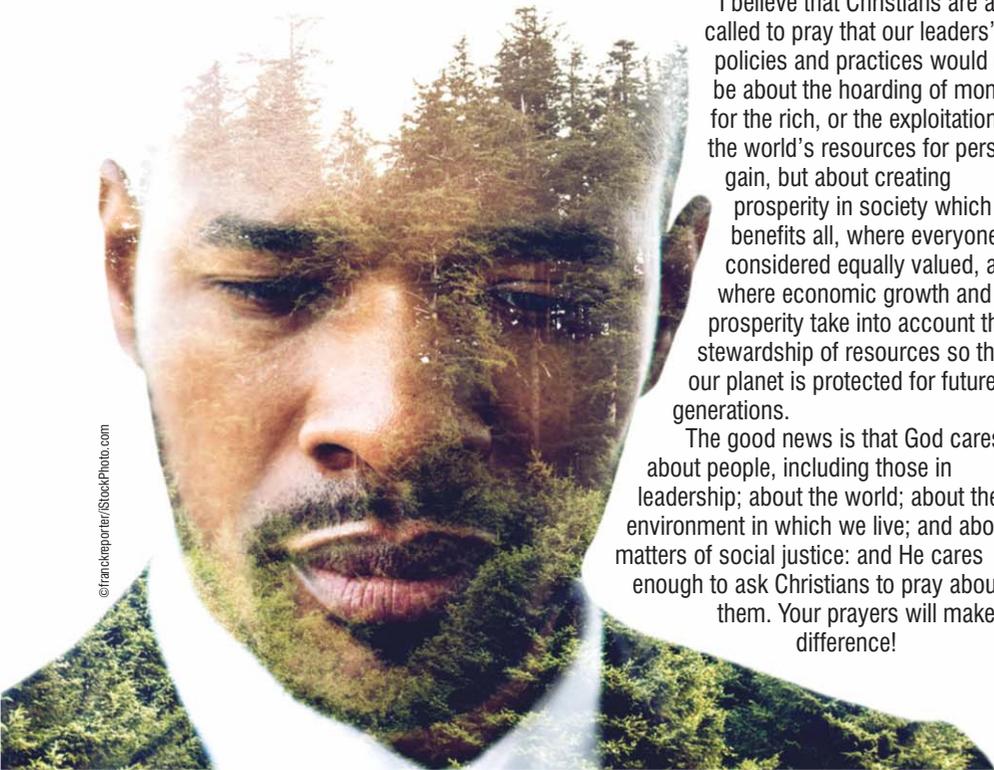
When thinking about whether prayer changes God, it is easy to focus, well . . . on God. If prayer does lead to God adjusting His course of action, it suggests that sometimes He needs to be convinced to help us. The Bible, however, says, 'God is love.'¹ Does He really need to be *persuaded* to change His mind and do good that He otherwise might not do? This can lead on to the idea that more people praying more often and more earnestly make a positive response more likely. It brings to mind stories of people sacrificing anything from animals to humans so their god might stave off famine or bring about a good harvest. You do right by such a god and she/he will do right by you. This fickle, even petty, god is more likely to be feared than worshipped.

Let's go back to the ideas hinted at in the parable with which we started. By refusing help, Jimmy was never going to be helped, even if such refusal was to his own detriment. Now, it would have been something for him to have accepted help when it was offered; but if he'd have

asked for help, that would have been a game changer. By asking for help we acknowledge our need, show vulnerability and recognise that going it alone is not an option. When we pray, it can be the same. Prayer makes us available to be helped and influenced by God. More than that, it opens us up to having a relationship with Him.

'Relationship' is the key word. To use prayer as a negotiating tool is to move prayer towards being a cold, transactional activity. However, instead of focusing on God and how He might change, prayer is the means by which we open ourselves up to partaking in a transformational partnership with the Creator of the universe. By praying, we give God permission to act not just for our own benefit, but so that we in turn can act on His behalf. As Mother Teresa found, 'I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us, and we change things.'

¹ John 4:8



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'Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger people.'
John F. Kennedy

Prayer quotations

The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.'
Søren Kierkegaard

'God always answers prayers. Sometimes it's "yes." Sometimes the answer is "no." Sometimes it's "you gotta be kidding."'
Jimmy Carter

'We should not pray for God to be on our side, but pray that we may be on God's side. Prayer is simply a two-way conversation between you and God. My prayer today is that we will feel the loving arms of God wrapped around us, and will know in our hearts that He will never forsake us as we trust in Him.'
Billy Graham

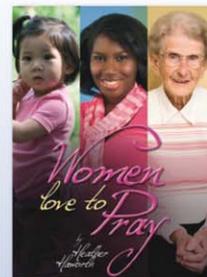
'To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.'
Martin Luther

'I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me.'
C. S. Lewis

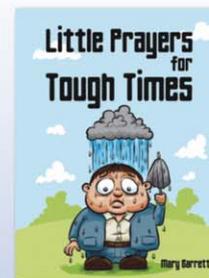


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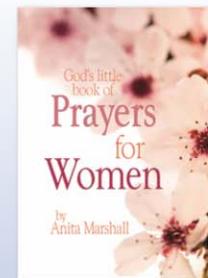
Books to help you pray!



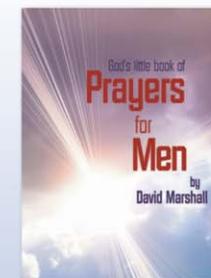
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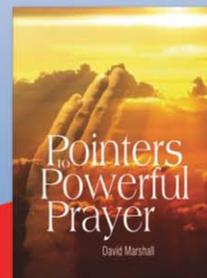
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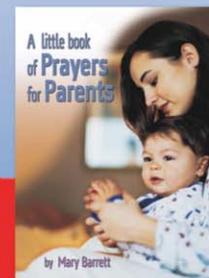
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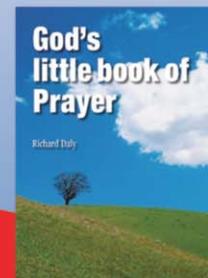
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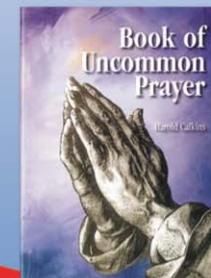
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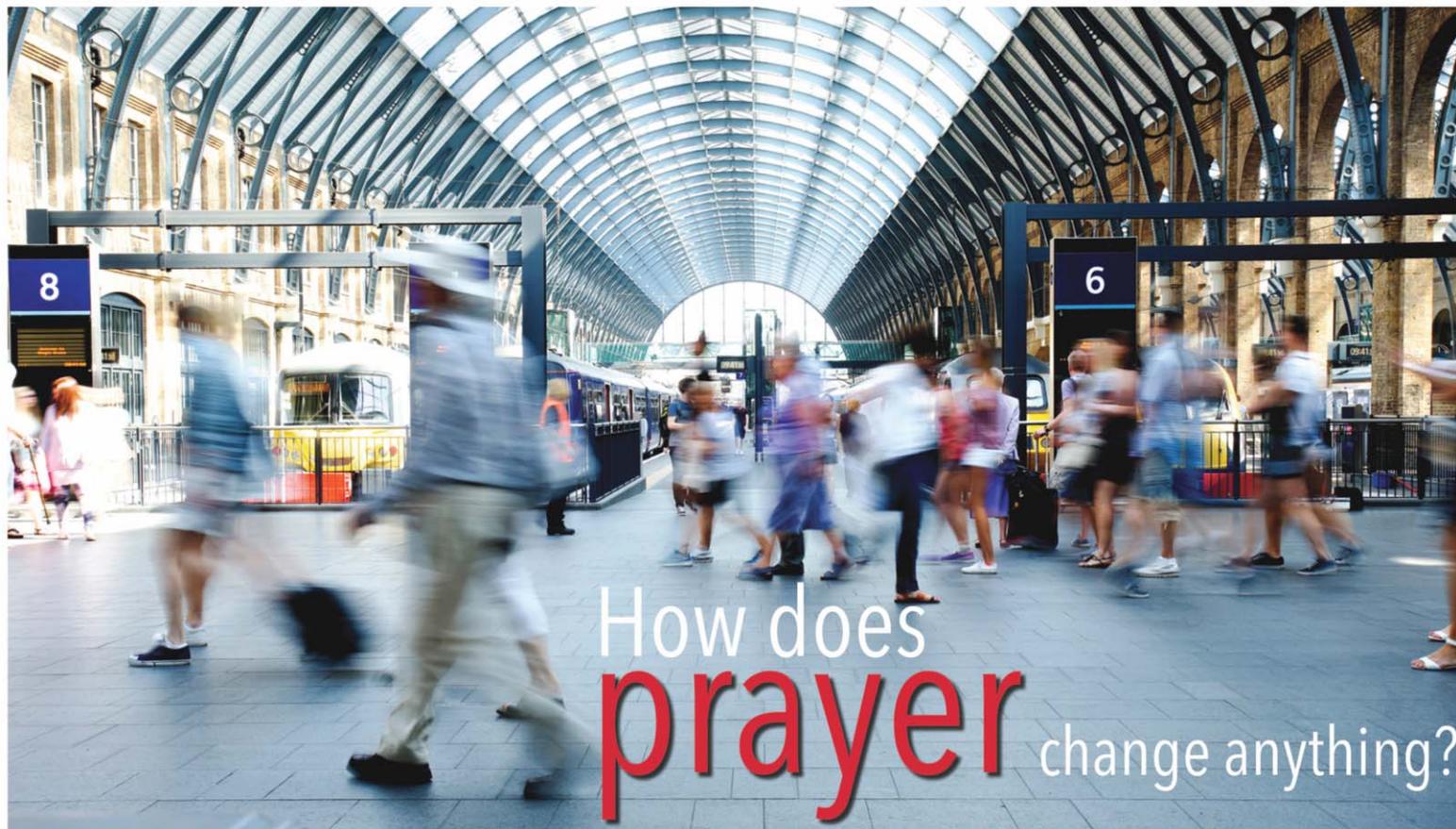
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How does prayer change anything?

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by Richard Daly

I can only go by my personal experience. And for me I really believe that prayer is not just talking to God and asking Him for things, or for help when you're in trouble. . . . For me, prayer takes on a different level of meaning.

The whole experience really started when I was given a plaque with just three words: 'Prayer changes things.' I must have been around 12 or 13 at the time, and the plaque seemed quite cool so I placed it on a hook on my bedroom wall, overlooking my door; to be honest, after a while the plaque with those words just became merged with the whole décor of my room. I never really thought deeply about it; I just assumed that whenever I got in trouble or things got a bit tough, those three

words would be a reminder to pray: that was all.

It wasn't until I was about 15 that little things happened that got me thinking about the effects of prayer. One day I was travelling with my mum and her friend to an event in London. We were at the train station, and, while waiting for the train, I noticed that my mum's friend was beginning to panic a little, and then there was a frantic exchange between her and my mum. I discovered that an envelope she had in her handbag with a large amount of money had gone missing. I could see that she was in a lot of distress, frantically searching her bag and looking around on the floor to see if anything had fallen. It was then that I felt impressed to

pray. I went aside to a corner and prayed a simple prayer that God would help her find the envelope with the money inside.

As I finished praying and opened my eyes, I looked over – and there she was with a broad smile on her face, tinged with great relief, holding a white envelope in her hand. Now, for me at that time it was amazing to realise that my prayer was answered before my very eyes in that very instant! Now, I know, you might think, 'Yeah, but that could have been just coincidental' – and yes, it could very well have been – but the point is, that experience made an indelible impression on me that prayer really can change things.

There've been other times when I prayed for

an immediate change to a given situation, but nothing happened. However, as I began to gain a deeper understanding of prayer and of the God who hears our prayers, the phrase, 'Prayer changes things' took on a different meaning.

There's a passage in the Bible that says: '*... if you say to this mountain, "Be removed and be cast into the sea," it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.*' (Matthew 21:21, 22, NKJV.)

What I understood this Bible verse to be saying to me was that in life there will always be mountains or obstacles that we will have to face. Sometimes they come in the form of personal challenges, external forces that cause distress in our personal life or home, health problems or even unpredictable events. If I really believe that what is before me (that is, an obstacle) is preventing me from having a closer relationship with God, then I can confidently ask Him to remove that 'obstacle'.

That's where I believe 'prayer changes things'. Sometimes, I may be experiencing a particular challenge that's causing me nothing but hardship and pain, and I ask God to remove it and change my circumstance, genuinely believing that God will change the situation for me: but the prayer may not be answered in the way I expect it to be. God, in His wisdom, may feel that in order for spiritual growth to take place I will need to endure that situation for a longer period of time. It's in those moments that the words, 'Prayer changes things' take on a different form. Sometimes it's not the situation or the circumstance that may need changing, but me: my attitude, my way of thinking, my realisation that what is needed from me is to trust God more; so it's me that needs to be changed.

But that's not all. It's in those difficult moments that He also provides the mental, emotional and physical strength to endure. There's a lovely scripture in the Bible that says, 'Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you' (Psalm 55:22, ESV).

That word 'sustain' is the operative word in that sentence. God is promising that, when we pray to Him about something that we think needs to be changed, we know that His answer



He led me
to a source of
renewed strength.

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can be ‘Yes, straight away’ or ‘Wait’, but in the waiting time He provides the ability for us to keep going, even though we may feel like giving up. In other words, He sustains us through the situation.

An experience comes to mind that amplifies this point. When I was studying for the ministry in the Caribbean, one of the ways I sought to earn money to pay for my tuition was selling Christian books. We called the role ‘literature evangelist’. I was placed in a rural area of Jamaica where the houses were quite sporadic, so I had to do lots of walking. One day there was a delivery I had to make to a lady in a certain house in a very isolated area. The only way to get there was by a bus that left at 11am and returned at 4pm. The bus was crowded; I could hardly see out of the window: but I knew that the house I was going to had a green roof, so I looked out for that.

Along the winding, dusty road, a route that seemed like being in the middle of nowhere, among the crowds of people on the bus, I saw a green-roofed house. However, when I got off the bus, it turned out that it was the wrong green-roofed house, and the bus had driven off. Upon enquiry I was told that the house I

needed was another six miles down the road. By this time it was getting quite hot, with the midday sun bearing down directly above my head.

After three miles of walking, carrying a case with a load of heavy books, and wearing a jacket and tie in the hot, dry sun, I had reached the point of total frustration. I prayed aloud, asking God to send a car down the road, another bus or even a motorbike. I was actually doing God’s work, so why wouldn’t He want to help me? I wanted God to get me out of this situation. But no vehicle came.

After walking half a mile further, I began to get extremely hot and thirsty, and, as there were no shops nearby, I decided to sit under a tree to rest and shelter from the sun. It was then that I felt the impulse to look up. I was actually sitting right under a mango tree . . . and the tree was full of ripe mangoes. I threw a stick up, and at least half a dozen mangoes came down. They were sweet and juicy and quenched my thirst, cooled me down and satisfied my hunger. They also gave me renewed energy to continue my journey, which I did.

You see, God did not answer my prayer to change my situation in providing a car to make my journey easier. Instead, He led me to a source of renewed strength. It was like He was saying, ‘Richard, sorry, but I’m not going to provide a car for you; I’m afraid you will still have to walk the remaining miles: but what I will do for you is ensure that you are sustained to complete your journey.’ I believe that’s how God indirectly answers our prayers sometimes. He equips us to face our challenges, rather than just removing them, so the phrase, ‘Prayer changes things’ has many facets to it.

What I have learnt most of all is that prayer is more about the need for God to change me rather than any given situation I go through. Prayer is not just about asking God to change the circumstances you face in your life; rather, it’s about asking God to change your life to face the circumstances.

So yes, ‘prayer changes things’ – and usually it results in a change beginning within you.

Why didn’t God heal Grandad?

by Julian Thompson

Through stories such as the healing of Naaman’s terminal illness (2 Kings 5) and Christ’s healing of the blind (John 9:1-12), the Bible testifies to the fact that God can heal. In fact, not only did God heal in ancient times, but, from the many wonderful scriptural promises such as: ‘. . . *the prayer of faith will save the sick*’ (James 5:15, NKJV), and: ‘*For I will restore health to you and heal you of your wounds*’ (Jeremiah 30:17, NKJV), the Bible makes it clear that God can and is still willing to heal today. However, while such promises provide comfort in difficult times, and while as a pastor I have seen God provide kidneys at the last minute, reverse tumours, and cause cancer to go into remission, I have also come to understand that just because God *can* heal doesn’t mean He *will*.

In spite of my most earnest prayers, close friends have still died too young, family and church members have passed away from post-operative complications, and I have had to watch as people I’ve looked up to my whole life slowly diminish as a result of dementia. The human condition can often be a tragic one, and, as one who has seen God do some truly remarkable things, I have often found myself struggling to reconcile the promises of healing in Scripture with the reality that prayer doesn’t always result in the restoration of health. If the truth be told, I’m not sure that this is a tension that can ever fully be reconciled.

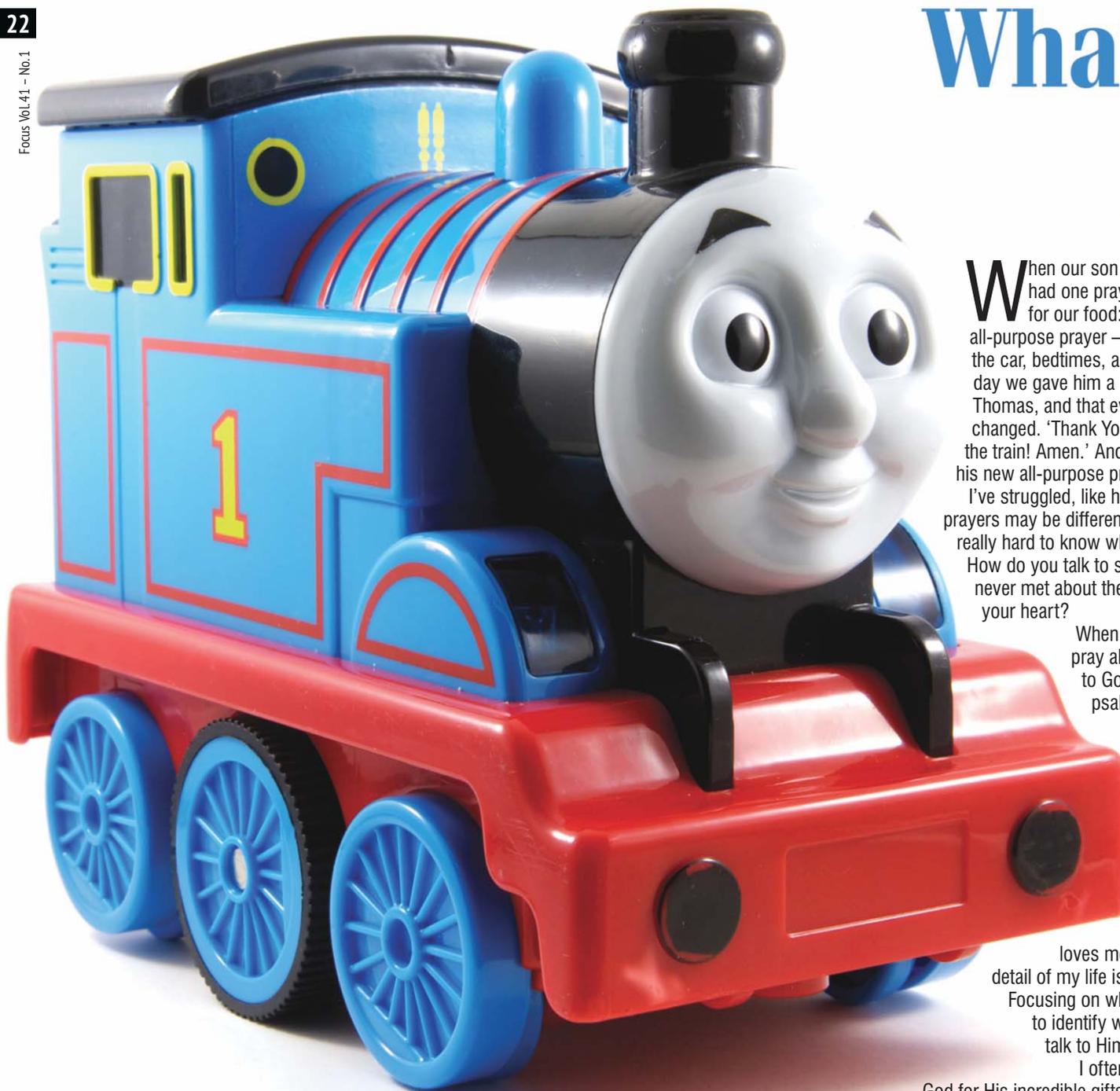
So, why doesn’t God always heal when we ask Him to? A typical answer to this question might speak to the ‘sovereignty of God’. ‘God knows best’ and ‘everything happens for a reason’ are but a few of the platitudes that I have often heard spoken in moments of tragedy. While I’m sure these words are well-intentioned, for those grieving or suffering,



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platitudes can have the unintended consequence of minimising their experience. Losing those we love and care about hurts – it’s important to be honest about that and not spiritualise away people’s pain. As such, I’d like to attempt to approach this question from a somewhat different perspective.

In the Bible, not all prayers for the sick resulted in healing. In spite of intense prayer and fasting, King David experienced the death of a child (2 Samuel 12:15-25). In spite of prayer, the apostle Paul had to live his life with a debilitating health condition (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). And, while David and Paul responded to God’s ‘no’ with circumspection, others, such as Heman, spoke to God in ways that some of us wouldn’t dare to speak to our own parents (Psalm 88). The characters in the Bible were human – they experienced pain, suffering, and loss. They too knew what it was like to pray for healing and not receive the answer they hoped for. Some, such as Paul, accepted God’s ‘no’; and others, like Heman, questioned it: but what’s consistent in all these stories is that, despite their hurt, pain and grief, they all kept talking to God, and somehow they found the strength to carry on. It’s been five years since my grandfather, Arthur Malcolm, died of cancer. I don’t know why God didn’t heal him, and it’s very likely that in this life I’ll never know: but what I do know is that I keep talking to God about it; and, while He didn’t heal my grandfather, somehow it does seem as though He is healing me.



by Karen Holford

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What is there to pray about?

When our son learned to pray, he had one prayer: 'Thank You, God, for our food: Amen.' It was his all-purpose prayer – good for journeys in the car, bedtimes, and mealtime. One day we gave him a little blue train called Thomas, and that evening his prayer changed. 'Thank You, God, for Thomas the train! Amen.' And then that became his new all-purpose prayer. . . .

I've struggled, like him, even though my prayers may be different. At first it can be really hard to know what to pray about. How do you talk to someone you've never met about the deepest secrets of your heart?

When I'm not sure what to pray about, or how to talk to God, I read one of the psalms that describe

God's loving and forgiving character. I usually choose Psalm 23, 103, or 145. These poems help me to remember who I'm talking to, how much He

loves me, and that every detail of my life is important to Him. Focusing on who God is helps me to identify what I most need to talk to Him about.

I often start by thanking God for His incredible gifts in my life. Focusing on His generosity fills me with joy and peace

and opens my heart to Him. I try to list thirty things I'm thankful for. I don't always get to thirty, even though there are thousands of things I could mention; but thanking Him for some of His gifts is a good place to start.

Then I tell Him about the things I've done wrong, the people I've hurt, the mistakes I've made, and the ways my behaviour has damaged my relationship with Him and the people around me. It's easy to talk to Him about these difficult things when I've already reminded myself how much He loves me and longs to forgive me.

Then I talk to God about the things that are bothering me: my friend who has cancer; a student who is struggling with debt; people affected by the latest tragedy or natural disaster. I pray about my family and my work. I used to tell God what to do: 'Please heal Anna. Please help Joe find the money he needs.' But I'm not God, and He has ways of working things out that are beyond my comprehension. So now I just tell God about all the messy things, and I put the muddle into His hands to unravel in His own loving way.

We all have different ways to pray and different things to pray about. The good news is that we can pray about absolutely anything, anytime, anywhere, and in any way. The Bible tells us that when we don't know what to pray, the Holy Spirit, God working invisibly in our lives, knows exactly what we need to pray for and turns our silent pain, our inexpressible praise, our secret hopes and dreams, our worries and fears, our heartfelt needs, and even our deepest regrets into simple and eloquent prayers. I just need to show up with a heart that is open to God.



Why is prayer important to me?

Prayer gives me a
NEW START
every day!

by Grace Walsh

Nutrition

The human body is a wonderful machine, and to function properly it requires the right fuel: that is, the right food and the right fluids. The same applies to my spiritual life. Jesus says, in John 6:35 (NKJV), *'I am the bread of life.*

He who comes to Me shall never hunger.'

When I pray, He satisfies the deepest hunger of my soul and gives me the best spiritual nutrition. This is why

Jesus said, *'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'* (Matthew 4:4, NKJV.) His Word, the Bible, contains the guidelines for living a happy, healthy life here, and it also contains the guidelines to enable us to live forever. Prayer provides the spiritual diet that points to my eternal destiny – a menu for here and the hereafter.

Exercise

When it comes to exercise, the old adage rings true: 'Use it or lose it.' When I don't use my muscles, they will become weak and atrophy, or shrink. For me, prayer is another form of exercise, one that makes an eternal difference. Prayer builds my spiritual muscle, and, just like exercise, it is my lifestyle. That first great ambassador for Christianity, Paul, says, *'We walk by faith, not by sight.'* (2 Corinthians 5:7, NKJV.) I may not always understand what is happening in my life, and the future may appear uncertain, but when I pray I can trust God and by faith believe that He cares for me. I trust Him when I am healthy as well as when I am sick. Walking by faith is living with assurance, living with security, and living with hope. When I pray, I trust that there is no problem too big for God to solve, no difficulty too great for Him to unravel, and no challenge too large for Him to handle. Praying is resting in His love, rejoicing in His care, and relaxing in His presence.

Water

Water is vital to life. It is the key to the removal of toxins from my body. I need toxins removed from my body in order to feel optimally alive. In Jeremiah 2:13 the prophet is telling the people of his time that it is not wise to abandon God, who is like a fountain of constantly flowing, bubbling, living water, and to choose instead a sinful life that is like polluted water draining away from a broken cistern. When I am thirsty, longing for a satisfying draught of cool water, the world of sin and selfishness has nothing to offer me, but prayer always refreshes my soul. Jesus once said to a distressed and lonely woman, *'Whoever drinks of the water that I*

shall give him will never thirst.' (John 4:14, NKJV.) Every time I pray, it's like drinking from a well that never runs dry. When my soul is barren and scorched like a desert I taste this water that Jesus offers, and I never feel thirsty again.

Sunshine

Sunlight is life-giving. It brings life to the entire planet. My life, health, productivity and general well-being are truly dependent upon the sun. Human beings have an internal biological clock that is synchronised with the light-and-dark cycle of the physical world. In the same way, when I pray, my spiritual life is synchronised. In John 8:12 (NKJV) Jesus said: *'I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness.'* When I pray, the sunlight of God's presence brings healing to my soul. As the light of His love fills my heart, life takes on a totally new meaning. I have a new purpose for living.

Temperance (self-control)

When I pray, God has promised to give me success in all things. *'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,'* says the apostle Paul (Phil. 4:13, NKJV). At first, change is difficult. Years of bad habits can make change a challenge. Fuelled by my willingness and the desire to pray, God performs a spiritual surgery and removes the bad desires. He does in me what I cannot do myself. God is my source of change, and He enables me to see the bad habit, detest the habit, and desire and enable its removal. Only His power can change me. Only through allowing Him to partner with me – even to the point of controlling my life – can I be transformed into the image of Christ. It's about prayer and power: my prayer, and God's power.

Air

I can live 4-6 weeks without food, perhaps 5-7 days without water, but only minutes without air and its life-giving oxygen. My body needs food, clothing, sunshine, and water inside and out, but none of these needs is as urgent as pure air. Other wants may be met by occasional supply, but air must be available



When I pray, the sunlight
of God's presence brings
healing to my soul.

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every moment or I die. Prayer is like the breath of my soul. It symbolises the vital elements that define spiritual life. The Holy Spirit is like the air or wind. What air is to physical life, the Holy Spirit is to my spiritual life. When I pray, I invite the Holy Spirit to fill me, because He alone can sustain my life.

Rest

In contrast to this busy world, when I pray, I quickly find rest, as Jesus promised in Matthew 11:28 when He said, *'Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'* (NKJV). Sin separates me from God, the source of love. It causes emotional fragmentation, disintegration, detachment, meaninglessness and purposelessness; life seems disjointed, spinning into a downward spiral: but, according to the Bible, I can enter God's rest by faith. I very much enjoy keeping special the biblical Sabbath – entering into God's rest. For me, when I pray, it's like taking a mini-Sabbath break.

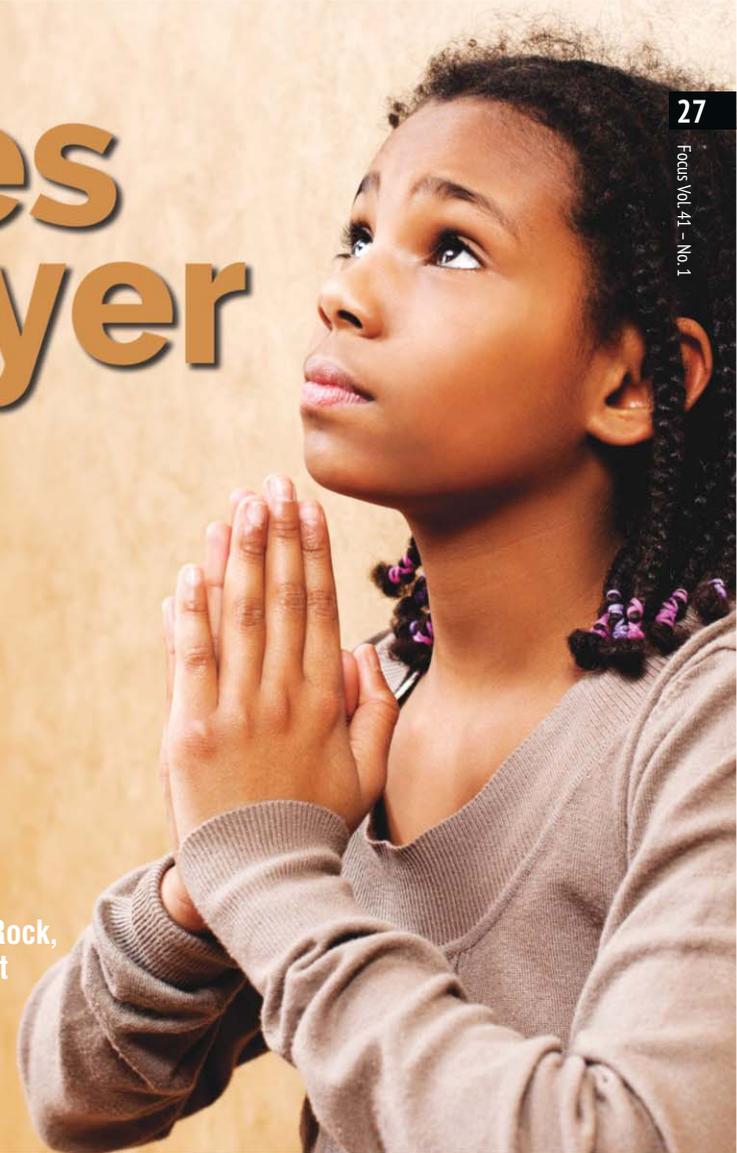
Trust

Erik Erikson, a famous psychologist, originated the concept of the eight important questions to be solved in life. The first and most basic dilemma that humans need to resolve is to decide whether to trust or mistrust. Whom can I trust in life? For some, unfortunately, it comes down to: 'Can I trust anyone?' Trust is a basic human need. Meeting this need will develop what psychologists call 'secure attachments'. The Bible says, *'Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, . . . whose hope is in the LORD. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters.'* (Jeremiah 17:7, 8, NKJV.) Trust is one measure of a relationship! How do we grow in a trusting relationship? The only way trust between two individuals can be maintained is by regular, positive communication with each other. Prayer is the way I communicate with the most trustworthy, reliable Person in the universe. I sense that God has been good to me in my life; therefore, prayer brings emotional and spiritual healing in my life.

Does prayer work?

Submitted by Maureen Rock,
principal of the Adventist
Discovery Centre

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As the crowd screamed violent hatred at a six-year-old girl, Dr Robert Coles watched in shock.

It was 1960, and Ruby Bridges was the first black pupil in a New Orleans school. Every morning and afternoon for months she walked through mobs that shouted the worst abuse and threatened to kill her. White families had removed their children, so she was alone in class and at play. Yet her strength and dignity amazed Coles.

Ruby's teacher said:

'A woman spat at Ruby but missed; Ruby smiled at her. A man shook his fist at her; Ruby smiled at him. Then she walked up the stairs, and she stopped and turned and smiled one more time. You know what she told one of the marshals? She told him she prays for those people, the ones in the mob, every night before she goes to sleep.'

Dr Coles, a Harvard professor and famous

child psychiatrist, decided to study her. In one of their interviews she mentioned that she prayed and hoped God would do something. Coles did not believe in God. He asked her why she prayed, and she just said, 'Because.' When he asked again, she said, 'Because they need praying for.' Coles thought that was cute, but did not take it seriously. Yet here was a disadvantaged child showing strength and courage that baffled an expert. He said, 'I was accumulating all this information, but I was getting rather frustrated.' He had been called 'the greatest living psychiatrist' by *TIME* magazine, and had won a genius award and a Pulitzer prize for his study of children, but now he had to admit that he could not understand this child's superhuman dignity and courage. 'Now how do you explain that?'

Coles interviewed her family. Her parents could barely read or write, and were often taunted by mobs, but they had taught her to pray about problems. Coles even came to her church as an observer. People there said that faith and prayer kept them hopeful despite poverty and racist attack. At first Coles put it down to emotionalism in the uneducated, but it obviously worked: he saw 'the look of pain give way to the look of hope in countless faces'. Coles said, 'How is someone like me supposed to account for that, psychologically or any other way?'

Eventually he concluded that Ruby's prayers did something: something powerful and beyond mere psychological explanations. Coles started praying. Today he is still fascinated by prayer and faith, and tells anyone – children or his Harvard students – that prayer is real. Ruby Bridges Hall, now several decades older, is still praying. She eventually worked at the same school as a liaison officer.

But is prayer just a placebo, like a drugless pill that works because the patient believes it will?

Belief helps, but the Bible says that prayer puts us in contact with God and gives 'the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding' (Philippians 4:7, NKJV). As Coles was obliged to conclude, it's supernatural.

Is it arrogant to expect God to take five minutes off from running the universe to bother with us?

Not when He asks us to, and His time and love and intelligence are infinite. (That's enough data-processing capacity to give all 7.7 billion of us personal attention and still run the universe.)

Is it arrogant for humans to tell God what to do?

Yes, if we try to manipulate Him into running the universe our way: so Jesus told us to pray, 'Your will be done' (Matthew 6:10, NKJV) – the most difficult words for anyone who is a Christian, accepting that God sees the bigger picture.

Why tell an all-knowing God what I want?

Because He wants to protect our free will and won't go against our choice. It gives Him human 'permission' to move.

Does prayer always change the world?

In Rwanda thousands of people were gunned down while praying for peace! The Bible has stories of prayers God answered with a 'No': for example, Jesus asked not to have to die for the sins of the world – but He did (Luke 22:42). Paul asked God to take away a huge problem of his – but he had it for life (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Prayer is not a guarantee that life will be easy. It doesn't always change things, but then, on the other hand, it often does: and it will give you the inner strength and courage to persevere.

How to pray:

- 1. Use your own words.** Talk as if talking with a friend (Exodus 33:11) – in everyday but respectful language. Neither do we need a script to say what we need to say.
- 2. Pray anywhere, any time.** Even when the mobile phone is out of range, God is watching and knows all our thoughts.
- 3. It helps to have a regular time and place to pray.** Jesus went off alone in the early morning to pray (Mark 1:35). Not a morning person? Make another time and

stick to it – best when not too tired. Even Jesus prayed a lot, on His own and with others.

- 4. Pray about anything.** Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God your needs, and don't forget to thank Him for His answers. No problem is too trivial. Jesus said that He even knows how many hairs we have! No problem is too big for the Mind that created the universe.

Jesus taught His followers 'the Lord's Prayer' (Matthew 6:9-13) so that in prayer we can:

- Thank Him, and recognise what a great Friend He is;
- Offer to cooperate with His plans;
- Ask for whatever we need ('daily bread');
- Ask Him to forgive our mistakes;
- Ask for help to forgive people who hurt us;
- Ask for help to do the right thing.

- 5. Avoid ruts.** Jesus said, 'When you pray, do

not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him' (Matthew 6:7, 8, NKJV).

- 6. Practise.** If your mind wanders, don't give up. Go straight back to praying and you'll learn to focus. Write your prayers in a diary if that helps you concentrate – you can throw away the embarrassing ones!

7. Be honest!

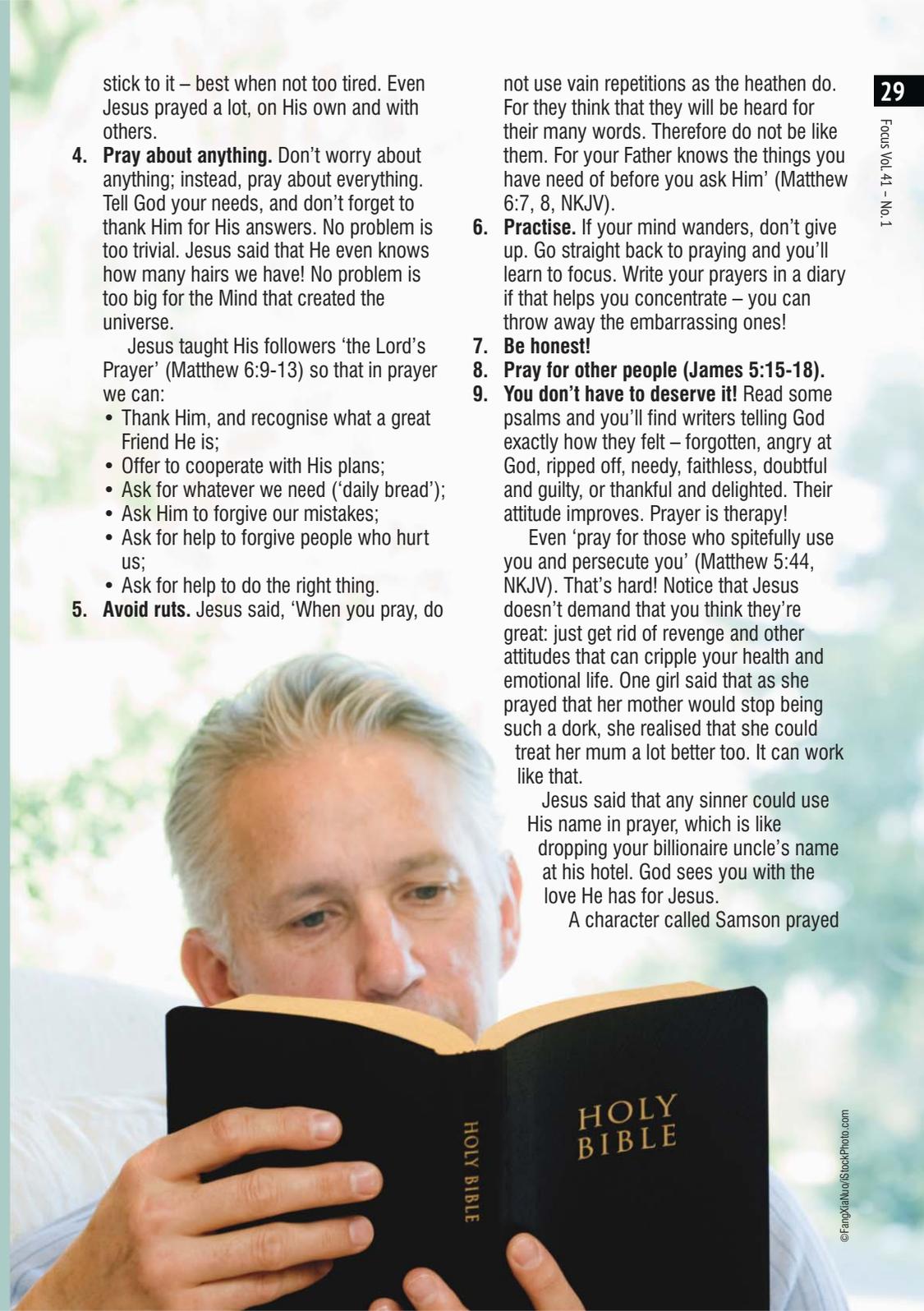
8. Pray for other people (James 5:15-18).

- 9. You don't have to deserve it!** Read some psalms and you'll find writers telling God exactly how they felt – forgotten, angry at God, ripped off, needy, faithless, doubtful and guilty, or thankful and delighted. Their attitude improves. Prayer is therapy!

Even 'pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you' (Matthew 5:44, NKJV). That's hard! Notice that Jesus doesn't demand that you think they're great: just get rid of revenge and other attitudes that can cripple your health and emotional life. One girl said that as she prayed that her mother would stop being such a dork, she realised that she could treat her mum a lot better too. It can work like that.

Jesus said that any sinner could use His name in prayer, which is like dropping your billionaire uncle's name at his hotel. God sees you with the love He has for Jesus.

A character called Samson prayed



after being caught in a prostitute's bed, trapped in an enemy city, after killing 1,000 soldiers, blinded in prison – any-odd-where! He should have prayed before he got himself in these messes – but God still helped as much as possible (Judges 13-16). 'Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need' (Hebrews 4:16, NIV-UK).

- 10. God won't bless prayers to satisfy sinful desires (James 4:3).** If you're planning something you know He won't approve, don't expect His help – except to change your plans! For example, if you pray, 'God, make me a successful shoplifter', you're on your own. If you pray, 'God, I want to shoplift, but I know I shouldn't', He'll help (Psalm 66:18-20).
- 11. Be determined.** Jesus said, 'Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you' (Luke 11:9, NIV-UK), and that we shouldn't give up (Luke 18:1). If you know God would approve but you don't get an answer, hang on. Don't focus on doubts and fears, or they'll get worse. Keep trying until you succeed.
- 12. Listen.** If 'God' tells you to kill or tells you what brand of toothpaste to buy, see a doctor about schizophrenia. But sometimes God 'speaks' by giving you a great idea when you pray. It could just be your subconscious or imagination, so check it out carefully against the Bible and common sense – but don't write it off. God sometimes uses this method (Isaiah 30:21).

'Be careful. . . . Your prayers may not change the world, but they may change you, and this is not really what you intended.'

Rabbi Lionel Blue

This study on prayer and others from the Bible are available from the Adventist Discovery Centre.

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Who are you talking to?

by Lynette Allcock

I sat in the radio studio listening to my guest, a gospel singer, as she shared all about her music and her experiences with God. She had been telling me stories of how prayer was like a conversation between her and God, and I was intrigued. 'It sounds like you have a really intimate experience with God,' I commented. 'What would you say to someone who wants more of that personal relationship with God?' She thought for a moment. 'Talk to God like He's sat in a chair across the room from you,' she said. 'You don't have to be formal and perfect. God wants to befriended us. Don't think of God as someone for a certain class or nationality. See God as your God; talk to Him like a friend.'

That image stuck with me long after the interview. It was helpful in my own prayers; sometimes if I was sitting at home in my bedroom, or I'd arrived at work early, I would pray aloud, imagining God sitting across from me like a friend or a parent. After all, the Bible teaches us to view and talk to God as 'Father', or, even more affectionately, 'Daddy'.¹

Yet even that could feel a little ethereal sometimes. I may have been talking to God like a friend or father, but who was I really talking to? How could I imagine this Being?

I discovered that it helped me to imagine Jesus as the person sitting across from me. I looked at the stories of Jesus, because Jesus shows us what God is really like.²

The Bible is full of tales of how Jesus treated the people who came to Him. He welcomed and listened to the hurting, the questioning, the conceited, and the confused.



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He parted with the rich and the poor alike, counting both society's outcasts and members of the elite as His friends and followers. He responded with love to expressions of faith as well as anguished accusations. He told stories to everyone who would listen, and had intellectual discussions with the theologians of the time, challenging their concepts of God. He welcomed boisterous children and corrected His followers when they thought the children were bothering Him. He was down-to-earth and compassionate.

Looking at Jesus, I can see what God is like when I approach Him.

When I chat with my closest flesh-and-blood friends, I know I can come to them with whatever is on my heart. They will be there in my darkest moments. I can be honest with them about the good and the bad. Looking at Jesus, I know that God is a friend like that too.

So now, when I pray, I remember what Jesus has shown me about God. God is a good listener. He's welcoming, no matter what state I arrive in; He's eager to talk back; and He always has time for me.

Looking at Jesus, I know who I am talking to.

¹Galatians 4:6

²John 1:18 and Colossians 2:9



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