

31 Why would God intervene through prayer if he's given us free will?

Why would God intervene through prayer if he's given us free will? It's a big question that touches on how God relates to us and to the world. Christians are the first to affirm that every human being has free will for without it we can't choose to love - and life is for loving. If we've got free will, the argument goes, why do we need to pray for divine intervention? It's as if God's set us up to live our lives without his additional involvement.

Imagine meeting a landlord who arranges for you to rent a room in his property. Little is seen of the landlord afterwards but you're happy to pay him rent. Is *God* like that sort of invisible landlord? So long as the fridge, cooker and heating works you don't have recourse to him?

It's clear from the New Testament that the God and Father of Jesus *isn't* like that. He's not just our creator but the one who seeks interaction with those made in his image. This is why scripture says *pray at all times* (Luke 18:1). Believers are invited to collaborate with God in such a way that their petitions link with their heavenly Father's provision for his world.

As Jesus says in Luke chapter 11: *ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? (vv9-11)*

This invitation to ask for our needs is given in a chapter that begins with the giving of the Lord's Prayer with all *its* petitions.

Why would God intervene through prayer if he's given us free will? The simple answer is he's both given us both freedom to run our lives *and* the command to petition him for our needs. These realities come together in Christian spirituality even if they seem to contradict in logic.

To take an extreme example Abraham petitioned God to spare the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis chapter 18 (v22f) but he didn't get his prayers answered at first sight. Nevertheless we know Abraham continued to trust God. Though he'd asked God's help here he must have come to see that God had other deeper plans.

At the other extreme God can provide supernatural assistance the moment a prayer is uttered. I remember being stuck in the outback of Guyana with my jeep in a muddy hole and one passenger and praying that as my passenger pushed the jeep God would send angels to heave us out of that hole – and we got out safely! There have been many other occasions though when my petitions seemed to go the way of Abraham's for Sodom and Gomorrah!

When Jesus says *pray always* it's really like saying *love always*. It's a matter above all for the heart. God's purpose is to open human hearts to his

compassion so that we can be his instruments and developing our prayer of petition is part of this aspiration.

Why would God intervene through prayer if he's given us free will? To enlarge our hearts is another answer. By calling us to petition him for the people and needs we engage with day by day he is calling us to expand our concerns towards *his* concerns so that, in St. Paul's words *whatever we do in word or deed we do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him* (Colossians 3:17).

Objections to the prayer of petition often come from a so-called scientific world view that all events follow pre-determined laws linked to human free will. It's fascinating to see scientists nowadays abandoning this view and working through challenges to the previous assumption of pre-determined laws as for example in the quantum or particle theory of radiation. There's far greater openness in the scientific community nowadays to exceptions to what one might expect to be determined.

For Christians the experience of God's intervention in answer to prayer seems to grow as one's concerns mature and become less selfish. Like Abraham we grow to accept times when prayer isn't answered as we'd like.

The more we see ourselves as living and moving in God the more effective our aspirations and prayers become.

Prayer like love goes beyond reason because it pierces the mystery of God.