

Why do we pray? \* Q's from the pews  
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We have a really interesting question to look at this morning –

If God is all-knowing (knows what will happen before it happens), why do we bother to pray? Does he sometimes change his mind?

That's a great question and certainly one that I've thought about in the past.

If God is all-knowing and all-powerful and controls world events with perfect wisdom, then why do we bother to pray? He already knows what He's going to do. What difference does it make if I pray?

Now that's one question that we have to deal with (why do we pray?) but this question introduces another one. Whoever asked this question has built a possible answer right into it.

God is all-knowing and all-powerful but maybe He changes His mind? Maybe His mind is set in one direction but then our prayers move Him in such a way that He changes His mind and decides to do something different? What about that? Could that be a reason to pray?

Great questions and we're going to have some fun here this morning trying to unravel them all. Put your thinking caps on because this will be one to chew on for a while. We're going to answer two questions here this morning: Why should we pray? And does God ever change His mind?

Let's start with the second one first because I think it helps us to answer the first one. Does God ever change His mind? That will have some impact on how and why we pray, so let's start with that. Does God ever change His mind?

Well, let's look at some Scripture – Jonah 3:10. You'll remember that Jonah went to Nineveh to warn the Ninevites about God's coming judgment – they heard his message and turned and repented – and in response, Jonah 3:10 says 'that God had compassion on them and did not bring upon them the destruction He had threatened.' Literally, that 'had compassion' is the verb that everywhere else is translated 'repented' or 'relented' and NLT actually says 'He changed His mind and did not destroy them as threatened.'

*Jonah 3:10 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. (Jon 3:10 NIV).*

So there's your answer I guess – the LORD changes His mind.

But wait, what about Numbers 23:19?

19 God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill? (Num 23:19 NIV).

1 Samuel 15:29 says the very same thing - 1Sa 15:29 "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind."

So now we've got two different passages saying two different things. God DOES change His mind; God DOES NOT change His mind. What do we do with that?

Well, to be honest, I think that we need to think a little more about Jonah because there's more going on there than we just said. The *narrator* says that God changed His mind, but did He, really?

What was God's plan? Send Jonah to warn Nineveh. If they kept on with their sinnin', God would bring judgment on them; but if they turned from it, He would relent. That was the plan. And Nineveh repented. And that meant that God relented. God was willing to show them mercy, if they would listen to Him. Jonah even said so – chapter 4 he says 'I knew it, God! I knew that if they turned from sin, you'd show them mercy, even before I left home!'

*2 He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."*

Now look, did God change His mind? I don't think so. I think that He did exactly what He intended to do in light of Nineveh's response to His warning. He turned away His wrath in light of their response. From the narrator's 'on the ground' point of view, it may have looked like He was changing His mind, but in reality, He was doing exactly what He intended to do – extend mercy if they repented, exact justice if they didn't.

He did exactly what He had set out to do, in response to human action.

That happens here, that happens when Moses intercedes for the Israelites at the Golden Calf; that happens with Abraham pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah. God threatens disaster, but leaves the door open for mercy and when people respond, God responds accordingly. I think that there is a conditionality, an 'if/then' built into many of God's plans; God's mind is big enough to go either way, depending on human response.

So I don't think that we can say that God ever changes His mind – His mind is forever fixed on mercy and justice – but there is a degree of 'if/then' built into His plans. God has His plan but God responds to our actions, affirming or redirecting them to accomplish the good ends of His plans.

And I think that that has huge implications for our prayer life. Sure, God doesn't change His mind, but that's ok, because His mind is always set on good! Just look at Jonah 4:2 – Jonah says to God "I knew that this is what you were going to do – because you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. (Jon 4:2 NIV). The implication here is that God's mind was to show mercy, if they would ask for it. Ligon Duncan puts it like this: "[God is a] God who is looking for an excuse to have compassion on you." (<https://rts.edu/resources/does-god-change-his-mind/>).

We *want* to see God's plans fulfilled because He knows better than we do what is actually good and helpful from an eternal point of view.

But He also invites us to participate in His plan, to let Him know about our experience of the plan and what we need – materially, emotionally, spiritually - so that He can respond accordingly. Otherwise, all of those passages that I gave you – 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (pray continually), Luke 18 (pray and never give

up), Matthew 7:11 (if we give good gifts to our children, how much more will GOD give good gifts when we ask!), Romans 12:12, Colossians 4:2, Philippians 4:6 – wouldn't make any sense.

We pray because God responds to our prayers. He doesn't change His mind, but He always responds to our prayers, in His time, in light of the good purposes that His mind is set on.

Ultimately, we get a sense of what 'God's mind' is when we look at Jeremiah 29:11 - God's plans are to prosper us and not to harm us. That's God's basic posture towards His people. I think that we get further a sense of God's mind when we look at 1 Timothy 2:3: God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

God's mind is always set on those things – but He listens to our prayers and responds to them in harmony with the good plans that He is always pursuing.

God doesn't change His mind on the big picture, but He does respond to prayer in the details of life. We pray because He responds to prayer for good.

So let's take a minute and run a case study through this.

Let's say that you or one of your kids is hoping to get a new job at a specific place. As far as you can tell, this place seems like it will be a really great place to work, a really great opportunity, and so you want to get this job. And so you go to God in prayer.

Now, the way that our question is framed – does God change His mind? – implies that God has a plan regarding this job. You're going to get it or you're not going to get it – but here's the thing – do you know His mind on that? No. So who's to say if God changed His mind? Unless He announces it first, we really have no idea.

And so of course we pray, knowing that our Father is even more willing to give good gifts to His children than we are. And if this job aligns with God's good plans, then you'll get it. If it aligns with God's good plans but not yet, then you'll get it, eventually. Maybe you need to learn something about patience and perseverance and waiting on the LORD before you get it, in order to really thrive in that position. If it doesn't line up with God's purposes, that means that God is planning for something even more important for your eternal well-being.

And in the meantime, He'll be providing strength and support and encouragement; everything you need to get through. We pray because God responds to prayer, in His wisdom, in His time, for good.

Let's do another one – kids are going back to school. We know that God's mind here is not to harm them – He's not capriciously going to make an outbreak happen at a school. So we don't need to pray and change God's mind from some kind of sadistic mean streak. His mind would never be in that direction anyways. His mind is eternally fixed on what is eternally good. And so we pray with confidence, asking God to give us confidence, to keep our kids safe, to keep teachers and staff and everyone involved safe, to build up these kids to be highly functioning, cooperative and compassionate members of society. God's going to answer those prayers. Would God do those things if nobody prayed for them? Well, probably, but wouldn't that be awful if nobody did?

God wants to hear from us; God wants us to come to Him for help, because really, prayer, is not just about asking Him for stuff. Prayer is really about building relationship with Him, getting to know His mind better. If your kids only came to you when they wanted into your wallet, that wouldn't be a very good relationship would it? No, you want to grow together by spending time together, talking together, and it's the same with God. We pray to grow in relationship with Him.

Robert Morris, in a book called "Why Keep Praying?", makes a good point on this, which I think I'll close on. He says:

When [Jesus] chose to come to earth, He laid down His divinity and picked up His humanity. As a human being, He needed the power of the Holy Spirit in His life, just as we do. As a human, He needed to hear His Father's voice. He needed to pour out His soul and have fellowship with the Father. He needed strength and guidance and help as He walked on this earth as a human being. Here's a question for all of us. If Jesus Christ, God's Son, needed to pray and make vital, personal contact with God the Father every day, do you think there's a possibility that we need to do that too? Absolutely, we do. We need to pray (Morris, Robert. *Why Keep Praying?* (p. xi). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition).

We pray because God – in His sovereign goodness - responds to our prayers.