

Prayer: Why Does Speaking Words Change Reality?

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Introduction: My Children Play at Royalty

One of my favorite things about my daughter Zoe is that from a young age, she planned her own birthday parties. She had some fun ideas. And she would start planning themes and games for her and her friends *months* in advance. Of course there was a princess themed party. That was when she turned 4. She loved making it happen: telling us what kind of cake she wanted, telling us what kind of dresses she and her friends would wear, saying she wanted to play princess games like ‘pin the hat on the princess’ and a homemade game that I don’t remember what it was about. I think this is get the princess to the castle, or something like that. Then, this is Zoe’s birthday party when she turned 7. And once again, there was a theme of royalty. She wanted to make crowns, and go bowling. So here they are at Boston Bowl. When she turned 11, it wasn’t about royalty. It was about Harry Potter. And this time I set a lot of it up. So we had a horcrux scavenger hunt all around our house. But the fun of it was telling me beforehand what she wanted, and planning the party together.

Words. Why is it that speaking words can change reality? Because words are how we make our wishes known. Including to God. And as we ask the question about prayer, why does speaking words in prayer change reality, that’s the beginning of a full-bodied answer. Words are how we make our wishes known. But there is more than that with God, as we’ll see.

Relevance

We’re in a series on Prayer. Dishon started us off last week by asking, What is Prayer? And we saw that prayer is when we join a conversation in progress between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Because the Son and the Spirit are already praying for us. We join in on that conversation. Now we’re going to ask the question of prayer’s effectiveness. Why does speaking words change reality?

Framework: God Speaks

Now I know from both life experience and Scripture that God doesn’t always answer prayers in the way we want. So let me share with you a basic framework that I have. It summarizes a lot of Scripture. I think God answers our prayers in one of four basic categories: (1) YES, (2) NOT YET, (3) I HAVE SOMETHING BETTER IN MIND, and (4) I’M ALREADY DOING THAT BUT IT ALSO DEPENDS ON OTHER PEOPLE PARTICIPATING.

The First Possibility: “Yes”

The first of the four possibilities of how God responds is ‘YES!!!’ The easiest example of this type of prayer is found in John’s Gospel: ‘If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it’ (John 14:14). ‘Whatever you ask of the Father in my name He may give to you’ (15:16). ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in my name, he will give it to you’ (16:23).

Now we have to be careful to acknowledge the phrase ‘in my name.’ When Jesus says that you can pray ‘in [his] name,’ he doesn’t mean just adding, ‘in Jesus’ name, AMEN’ to the end of whatever prayer you want to throw up. It means prayers that are consistent with who he is, and what he wants to accomplish. In the context of John 14 – 17, it’s fairly clear that Jesus is referring to being empowered by his Spirit to be like him. Jesus sends us into the world like the Father sent him (Jn.20:22). I don’t want to belabor the context but go back and read it because it’s clear that you can’t just rip these verses out of their context.

There’s some important background here. We serve a God who speaks life into being, who sometimes uses our words to bring things into being. So in Genesis 1, God said, ‘Let there be light.’ And there was. He said, ‘Abraham and Sarah, you will have a son, supernaturally.’ And they did. That started an unbroken pattern in the Old Testament. So much so that Amos 3:7 says, ‘Surely the LORD God will do nothing except that which He says to His servants the prophets.’ In other words, God speaks to some people beforehand. Those people are called prophets because it looks like they are telling the future. But really, they are God’s partners in this dynamic of speaking and then acting, promising and then fulfilling. The Jewish people could say that there is God, and there is God’s Word, and God is in His Word. That’s just how He makes things happen. He speaks first. Then He does it. So in John 1, John says, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ The Jewish people would have said, ‘Okay sure.’ But then John says, ‘And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among

us.’ That’s the revolutionary thing. God’s Word showed who God really is, by becoming Jesus of Nazareth. So everything ‘in the name of Jesus’ is stamped with the character of Jesus. So when we pray in such a way that is about the mission of Jesus, or the character of Jesus, or ourselves becoming more like Jesus, God answers that prayer.

Illus: When I was starting my junior year in college, my girlfriend and I broke up. It was really tough that we were part of a relatively small Christian fellowship. It wasn’t a bitter breakup. But I still felt like running far, far away every single day for a while. I think when I was younger, my natural tendency was to try to avoid pain *at all costs*. But I was the worship leader and a student small group leader in this fellowship! I couldn’t run away! For a while, even being in the same room with her was like daggers in my gut. I knew that Jesus’ will for me was to be present with people, to love them, and to not put myself first. Plus, she and I were still friends, but in some ways that made it harder for me because we both cared about each other. So every day, I asked Jesus to strengthen me and give me his love to make me a more stable person. And he did. Yes, there were ways I took care of myself, by praying and journaling and talking with my mentors. But I was able to get up there every week and lead worship, and reach out to people who were going through similar things. The best part of it was that I realized something about Jesus feeling rejected by people, and yet still loving them.

That’s why I think as we mature, more and more of our prayers will be in this category. You can certainly pray for God to work in other people. Like you pray that God would heal your mom. Or that Betsy DeVos would not be confirmed as Secretary of Education. But it’s much more reliable to pray for God to help you have strength and compassion to endure it. And just as honoring of God, too. You can pray that God would help you get into grad school or get that job. But it’s better to pray for integrity, competence, and learning. You can pray that God will help that cute guy or girl would notice you. But it’s better to pray for God to give you contentment and wisdom. That is what it means to pray in Jesus’ name. It’s with his purposes in mind. In Ephesians, Paul prayed that we would experience the resurrection power of Jesus lifting us out of our sinfulness and deadness. And then he prays again that we would be filled to the fullness of God. Now those prayers mean a lot of things, but at the foundation, they are for Jesus to live his life out through us.

So that is the most straightforward way our words shape reality. We serve a God who speaks life and newness into being. We bear the image of a God who speaks. We are children of a God who speaks. And He delights in growing us and developing us into His royal family. He does that through His royal son, Jesus.

The Second Possibility: “Not Yet”

The second possibility is when God says, ‘Not yet.’ When my daughter wanted to celebrate her birthday on a weekday, we had to say, ‘Not yet.’ Sleepovers are for the weekends. In the same sense, Jesus might say, ‘Not yet.’

Here’s an example of a not yet: ⁷ Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me--to keep me from exalting myself! ⁸ Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. ⁹ And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.’ (2 Cor.12:7 – 10)

Paul does not say what this thorn in the flesh was. Was it migraines and bad eyesight, because he alludes to his eyes in Galatians? That probably came from being stoned in Lystra and Iconium in Acts 13. He might have had severe headaches and blurry vision from that. Or, was it a temptation? Like pride? Or a same sex attraction? Very possible. Was it a speech impediment? That’s less likely in my opinion, but I suppose it’s possible. Regardless of what it was, this is God saying, ‘Not yet.’

All of us who have ever prayed probably experience this the most. I think it’s important to think of ‘not yet’ as different from ‘no.’ Take prayer for healing. I prayed many times for the spiritual gift of healing. When my wife and I were first married, and if she got sick, I’d pray for her. And I’d get sick! I’d catch her cold! But more seriously, I’ve prayed many times for God to physically heal people. Now I have seen people miraculously get healed. But when it seems like God doesn’t do it right away, I’ve struggled to interpret it. Why doesn’t he answer every prayer for healing?

We may never know the reasons, exactly. But I think what God is saying when that happens, is basically, ‘Not yet.’ He is committed to healing every person when he raises them into new resurrection bodies like the body of Jesus. I don’t think we’ll have a weakness to disease. In that sense, God will answer every prayer for healing. It’s just that in some cases, His answer for now is, ‘Not yet.’ But even if He does that, your words and your prayers participate in God’s making the world right again.

The Third Possibility: “I Have Something Better in Mind”

The third possibility is when God says, ‘I have something better in mind.’ When Zoe started having birthday parties with friends over, she wondered if it could be a traditional birthday party where each friend brought her a gift. But we said we had something better in mind. We would do a gift exchange. Each person brought a gift. Each person left with a gift. We wanted to model something for Zoe’s friends that was greater than what Zoe wanted at first.

Martha asking Jesus to tell Mary what to do: ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to him and said, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me.’ ⁴¹ But the Lord answered and said to her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; ⁴² but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.’ (Luke 10:40 – 42)

This is how Jesus stops us from being a control freak in prayer. On the one hand, he hears us. And he ministers to how we feel. But on the other hand, when we pray something that is too narrow, or is outside of God’s character as revealed in Christ, God says, ‘I have something better in mind.’ So Martha asked Jesus to tell Mary to do what Martha wanted. ‘Lord, make her do this!’ But Jesus broke her big sisterly authority. He broke the social convention of women not sitting at the feet of a rabbi because that was thought to be a man’s place. He broke those things because he had something better in mind for Mary. Mary wanted to listen to him and know him better. Martha just wanted the meal to go more quickly. So today it might be: ‘Lord, change my roommate!’ Or, ‘Change my professor!’

Illus: This is where Christian parents always have to be careful when we pray for our kids. And we always have to be careful to pray about other people. Here’s an example. All of us are familiar with ISIS, the Islamic State. And I’m sure that many have prayed not just for them to stop but for them to suffer a fate worse than death. But what if Jesus has something better in mind? One former ISIS militant reported that he enjoyed killing Christians. Just before he killed one Christian man in particular, the man said, ‘I know you will kill me, but I give to you my Bible.’ The Christian was killed and this ISIS fighter took the Bible. He began to read it. And perhaps that made him more open, as he had a dream. A ‘man in white’ appeared to him and said, ‘You are killing my people.’ Then he started to feel sick and uneasy about what he was doing. In another dream, this ‘man in white,’ who he understood to be Jesus, called him to stop what he was doing, follow him, and be mentored. So he went and told his story to a Christian ministry called YWAM. It was reported by The Voice of the Martyrs Radio Network, which is fairly respectable.¹

This is probably why, at the end of the day, Jesus taught us to pray, ‘Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’ And God’s kingdom is not something external to us. It is internal to us. Internal to each person starting from God reigning in the humanity of Jesus, and sharing the new life of Jesus into each one of us by the Spirit. We don’t always know what to pray for, as Paul says in Romans 8. Thank God that His goodness and good intentions are always greater than ours. He can gather up our prayers, limited as they are, and still work with what He can work with. And over time, we’ll understand His heart more and more.

The Fourth Possibility: “I’m Already Doing That, but It Also Depends on Someone Else”

- Paul says, ‘*The Spirit* sends me, and tells me I will suffer.’
 - ²² And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. ²⁴ But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself,

¹ See more at: <http://www.gospelherald.com/articles/55860/20150603/violent-isis-fighter-converts-to-christianity-after-encountering-jesus-christ-in-powerful-dream.htm#sthash.Rwo7MhGG.dpuf>

so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God...' (Acts 20:22 – 24)

- Other Christians tell Paul *through the Spirit*, 'Don't go!'
 - ^{21:4} After looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem...' (Acts 21:4)
- Paul says, 'I will go!'
 - ^{21:13} Then Paul answered, 'What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.' ¹⁴ And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, 'The will of the Lord be done!'" (Acts 21:13 – 14)

A few things are remarkable about this story. Yes, I believe that when we speak to God, God might speak back. Yes, I think that we can hear from God. But it's important to notice that the Spirit of God can speak in ways that reflect God's emotions. And God's emotions are not the same as God's will. So that still leaves you to do the hard work of discernment. And sometimes, what God is saying is, 'I'm already doing that, but it also depends on someone else.' If you were one of the disciples here, and you loved Paul, and didn't want to see him get hurt, you might be upset. 'God, why don't you tell him to do something else?!?' But God ultimately seems to leave room for Paul's choice. In God's mind, sometimes there is more than one possible action to take. Not always, and not over moral issues that He's already spoken about. But there is always a place for genuine human choice in God's dynamic relationship with us.

Illus: That's been important to me because I've prayed for my parents to come to Jesus for over 20 years now. But they have still not come to Jesus. I think in a case like this, God's response to me has been, 'I'm doing that, but it does depend on someone else.' I see that Jesus is their salvation. Jesus is everything God could do for their salvation. And I have seen God at work in them and around them, but I have also seen their resistance.

Application: Pray!