

“One Day it will All Be Well”

Deuteronomy 34; Matthew 7:7–11

It is time for some hard truth.

Hard truths. Life is filled with them. We either face them or lie to ourselves. Yes, sometimes we don't get what we want . . . period. Even if it seems like a good want, or a biblical want, or a just want. Life is as hard as often as it is easy; it has always been this way and will be until Jesus returns.

Take Moses for example. Called by God to lead his people from slavery to freedom. The Law-bringer. But even Moses was denied entrance into the Promised Land. He didn't trust God when the Israelites needed water and disobeyed God's direct command; so he would only see the Land from afar. (The story can be found in Numbers 20:1-13). It seems harsh, but Thomas Dozeman notes that none of Moses's actions were made in isolation. The same can be said for us all.



The power of leadership is dangerous. It can breed arrogance, making people intolerant of conflict and blind to due process. The fall of Moses is a paradigm of such abuse. He is impatient. Moses first demonstrated impatience when he killed the Egyptian taskmaster (Exod 2:11–15), forcing him to flee for his life. In Num 20:2–13, Moses' impatience cost him entry into the promised land. Anger forces him to exploit his power by not following the legal channels of accountability between God and Israel. In the process, he places himself above the law and plays God. The tragedy of the story resides in his blindness and confused motivation. He accuses the Israelites of being rebels in their legal complaint against God, when all the time he is the rebel himself. The continuing message of this tragedy is clear: No one is above the law, not even Moses the law-giver.¹

When it comes to my own relationship with God, the wants most often left unsatisfied are my unanswered prayers. Yes, I know that perhaps the silence is God's answer, but honestly, it doesn't always feel like that. Sometimes, it just feels like prayers go unanswered for year after year. And I'm pretty sure I'm not the only Christian who feels that way. What do we do with the times when it seems like God is silent, when it feels like our prayers go unheeded? Since we are focusing on Moses today, let's reflect on prayer in the Old Testament.

Prayer among the Hebrews

Terence Fretheim is an Old Testament scholar. By his count, there are 97 Old Testament prayers outside of the book of Psalms and 38 of them are spoken by lay people, not prophets, priests, or kings. These prayers, often seeming more like conversation, are integral to the story of God and his people; they express the nature of their relationship. And prayer is just that . . . a relationship. Prayer isn't simply language; for Paul writes that the Spirit lifts up to God the prayers that we can't articulate. He urges believers to "pray without ceasing" (1 Th. 5:17). And any sampling of Old Testament prayers helps us to grasp the true depth and wonder of the relationship that God desires to have with us and for which we were made.

In these prayers, we find Moses interceding with God for the rebellious people and changing God's mind. You'll find many who will argue that it can't really be that God changes his mind, at least not in anything like the sense that you and I mean. But is it really so crazy to suggest that God changes his plans and actions in response to those whom God loves? What is love if it isn't a relationship characterized by genuine mutuality?

We find in the prayers a God who is present and close and who is delighted when his people pray. To no surprise, we find that our sins damage our relationship with God. We learn nonetheless that God is always there, ready to listen and to respond. And as you'd expect in a genuine relationship, God is deeply affected when we hurt and is ready to listen, even crying out "Here I am" in the face of our silence.

¹ Thomas B. Dozeman, *New Interpreter's Bible*, 1994–2004, 2, 167.

One of my favorite stories of prayer in the OT is that of King Hezekiah, told in 2 Kings 20:1-11. Hezekiah, king of Judah, was one of the few good kings of either Israel or Judah. Hezekiah fell ill and was near death when Isaiah, God's prophet, told him that the Lord had said Hezekiah would not recover. It was time for the king to get his house in order. In his sorrow, the king wept bitterly and prayed to the Lord, reminding God that he had always been faithful to God and done what is good in God's sight. Before Isaiah had even gotten out of the building, the Lord told him to go back to the king and tell him that he would be healed and would live another fifteen years. . . . This is the God whom we worship and with whom we pray; a far cry from the "divine mind" of Plato and Aristotle.

Can prayer really change what happens?

I considered for a while the title for this section of the study. I wanted something clear and penetrating. Too often when we talk about prayer we limit ourselves to the change prayer makes in ourselves and in our relationship with God. But there is this everpresent question as to whether prayer can actually change the course of events. We pray for a friend's recovery from illness. We pray that we and our home would be spared from a devastating storm. Then, our home is destroyed and a loved one lost. Not surprisingly, we wonder whether our prayers have any real effect at all. Or we begin to think that we prayed poorly, or lacked faith, or, worse, that perhaps there is simply no one on the other end of the line.

In his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard writes:

God's response to our prayers is not a charade. He does not pretend that he is answering our prayer when he is only doing what he was going to do anyway. Our requests really do make a difference in what God does and does not do. The idea that everything would happen exactly as it does regardless of whether we pray or not is a specter that haunts the minds of many who sincerely profess belief in God. It makes prayer psychologically impossible, replacing it with dead ritual at best. And of course God doesn't respond to this. You wouldn't either.

Part of the problem is that we fail to comprehend how God has freely chosen to work in this world. God works through us. Going back to the creation story, we were the ones tasked with filling the world and subduing it. It is a mistake to think that when it comes to life, we do part A and God does part B. Or that we "let go and let God" waiting for God to do it all. Or that we try to do it all. Rather, we do it all *and* God does it all.

If a young woman goes back to school so she can get a better job, it will change the course of her future. Not even the most rigid determinist doubts that. But when it comes to God, all of a sudden, I'm supposed to believe that what I do (as in pray) is pointless and has no effect – on God or on the future. The truth is that our prayers not only do us good, they do God good, and they can affect the course of events. God works with my hands, my intellect, and my prayers. Indeed, the more fully I embrace a genuine trusting and faithful relationship with God the better instrument I become for God's purposes and my own. Yes, the truth is that our friends die prematurely and pandemics strike. Creation remains wild, untamed, and even hostile.

However, Fretheim writes:

We confess that in response to prayer (and in other ways) God is at work in these devastating effects to bring about positive results in and through human (and other) agents. But one must also speak a "Who knows?" (e.g., 2 Sam. 12:22; Joel 2:14) or a "Perhaps" (Jonah 3:9 GNT) with regard to the effect of the divine work upon specific persons and particular generations. It is not a question as to whether God wills good in the situation, but whether, given God's own self-limited ways of responding to evil and its effects in the world, what can actually be done and how and when.²

So, with all this, we pray and we pray some more. In all things, for all things, as we seek an ever-deeper, more honest, and more loving relationship with the One who made us.

And in his time...it will All Be Well.

² from Fretheim's book, *Creation Untamed*.