

PRAYER THAT CHANGES THINGS

James McAlister

Despite my best intentions, I've often been disappointed in the lack of results from my praying. Since the death of my wife, however, I can honestly report more effectiveness than in any previous recollection.



But why? Perhaps because the trauma of death forced a shift in focus. Presenting God with only a list of needs no longer satisfied because I usually didn't even know what to ask for in my extremity. Prayer has now become a closer relationship with the One who has invited me to come boldly before His throne and find mercy and grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16).

What I describe here won't necessarily be a pattern for others to follow exactly, but simply an observation about how God seems to be working in this season of my life through three intertwining processes:

COMMUNICATING WITH GOD

When my son was small, he'd often ask me for things. And while I'd certainly grant some of his requests outright, what I really wanted to do was communicate with him so that we could understand each other and mutually arrive at the best decision. So we'd talk about the request and all its ramifications.

Thus my approach to God—my communication with Him—has largely taken the form of ongoing verbal conversations throughout the day. I literally speak aloud to God and explain puzzlements, issues, needs, anxieties, disappointments, sorrows, frustrations, and loneliness, as if confiding in a close personal friend from whom I withhold no secrets. I also ask questions and make requests. He understands, and verbalization (coupled with my Bible reading, of course) helps me gain clarification and insight.

This is reminiscent of conversations I used to have with my wife. We often rambled far afield from the original issue until we came to a resolution. There was seldom any quick fix.

CRYING OUT TO GOD

More so than ever before, I find my prayers punctuated by tears—real, hot and salty. They come without being beckoned and add urgency to my supplications. Does this make any difference? Perhaps. What parent won't immediately attend to the needs and hurts of a weeping child? When Hezekiah

cried out to God in deep distress of soul, God replied, "I have heard your prayers; I have seen your tears" (Isa. 38:5). The combination found favor in heaven. And though He was sinless and perfect, even Jesus Himself offered up prayers and supplications with loud cryings and tears—and was heard (Heb. 5:7).

Tears often spring from a broken heart, and it's comforting to know that "the Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." He sees and hears me right where I am (Ps. 34:17-18).

COUNTING ON GOD

Pray without expecting an answer and you won't likely be disappointed. We must actively, expectantly, persistently count on God to do all He has promised: to meet our needs (Phil. 4:19), to give us wisdom (James. 1:5), to never leave us nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5) and so much more. But far too often the seeming impossibility of a situation causes me to doubt. God cannot lie (Titus 1:2), and I must learn to count on Him to be true to His word.

If I pray according to His will, He will both hear and answer (1 John 5:14-15). When I'm unsure of His will, I consider some questions. For example, is my prayer in alignment with the clear principles of Scripture? Is it consistent with how God has acted before? Is it a good thing that would bring glory to Him and advance His kingdom?

While not perfect, such thinking helps persuade me that if I don't know of any reason why He shouldn't answer my request, I pray with confidence that He will. But what if I'm wrong? Then I count on the Holy Spirit to intercede for me according to the will of God (Rom. 8:26). Thus I don't have to pray without expecting results, and I can count on God to do what's best.

You may get the idea that praying this way might be tedious and drawn out. It can be. Or that it might be emotional and intense. Certainly. Or perhaps even bold and aggressive. Yes.

Prayer indeed changes things, and the greatest changes I've seen have been in me. Pray, and you can expect the same.