

Dear Friends,

If we study our Bibles, the title of this week's Gleanings, "Does Prayer Change Anything?" seems almost foolish. In most lessons on prayer, Scripture affirms that a right-hearted prayer of faith indeed does change things. The Lord has promised in His Word--Scripture--that He shall so hear and respond to His people.

In Luke 11, Jesus taught one of the most comprehensive lessons in the Bible on prayer. He built His conclusion on the details of a caring, devoted father responding to the need and request of his own child. When the child approaches the father and states his request, his need, the father neither ignores the request nor answers with something that ignores the request and, in fact, mocks it. If the child requests a loaf of bread, will the father give his child a rock in the shape of bread. If the child requests a fish, will the father give the child a venomous snake? And Jesus' repeated answer is no.

If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him? (Luke 11:13 KJV)

"...**how much more**," Jesus reminds us, shall our Father give the Holy Spirit, and through Him, our requests, but in far richer and better supply than any human parent can give to his child.

During the last eight months, what have we taken to the Lord in our prayers? "Stuff" that would help us; make our life easier? Or things that would relieve the children of God at large? And where have we looked for relief during this season? To the political powers of the country? Red or blue, neither party is God, despite campaign promises beyond our imagination. We need to shift our focus, folks. We need to take our burdens, our problems, and, yes, our needs to the Lord and ask Him--and keep on asking Him--to send us relief and help. Our study text promises His relief when we change our lives and turn to Him.

Perhaps it is time to swallow pride, turn from our personal idols (Oh yes, we still worship idols in our day), and change our lives, in the end, pleading for His love and forgiving mercy to heal us. He promised to respond.

Lord bless and help us,
Joe Holder

Does Prayer Change Anything?

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14 KJV 1900)

In streamed sermons and various writings, I suspect that I've seen or heard this verse mentioned more in the last eight months than in any five-year period of my life before this season. I struggle with passages that become too familiar to our minds, fearful that we take them for granted and do not give serious reflection to their meaning.

This verse is part of the Lord's word to Solomon upon his completion of the temple. Solomon spared nothing to make the temple as the Lord would have it. After its completion, the Lord appeared to Solomon "*by night*" and gave him an assuring message of His pleasure at the completed work, including this verse.

The Lord began this verse/sentence with "**If**." "**If**" introduces a specific condition which is essential to the outcome described following its appearance. It qualifies the outcome, based on whether or not that stated condition is fulfilled. Think of it in this logical manner. "If, then" links what follows "then" to what is stated in the "If" clause. It also implies the opposite, "If not, then not." If the conditions

following the “If” clause are not fulfilled, then the outcome following the “then” clause also shall not occur. “If” appears over 1400 times in the King James Bible, and most of those appearances logically and grammatically follow this “If, then” pattern of conditionality.

Partly, related to my effort to nudge all of us not to take this verse for granted, and partly because we have seldom lived in an era that more cries out for God’s people to pray than our current situation, I introduce this passage with the title, “Does Prayer Change Anything?” Likely, most of us have either heard or participated in the hair-splitting discussions that address this question. One party thinks that God has ordained and irresistibly fixed every event that occurs, so that nothing can change from what He has so ordained. When I hear this idea, I want to ask the person who believes it, “Why do you ever pray at all then?” When we examine the Bible passages related to prayer, a significant portion of them specifically state changed outcomes that result—or may result—from our prayers. Another party believes that the conditionality affirmed in Scripture is accurate and valid, so that prayer does address the Lord in a manner that prompts Him to hear and to respond with changes that answer the petitions offered to Him.

Occasionally the fixed or fatalistic leaning advocates will protest, “What about God’s sovereignty? If prayer changes what God does, He really isn’t sovereign.” This idea builds on an errant understanding of the word “Sovereign” and its meaning. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines the word as follows:

“A person who has supremacy or authority over another or others.”

The correct meaning of the word deals with authority, not with absolute control and manipulation of others and their actions. We see this meaning clearly in legal documents from various governmental entities, “The sovereign state of California,” or Country A violated the “Sovereignty” of Country B by some action it took.

Applied to God, this word identifies a distinct attribute of God that Scripture affirms. ***There is no authority higher than God.*** When God speaks His will or His law, there is no higher authority to which we may appeal.

The question of how the Lord governs His universe and especially His people is not answered by this word, but by the teachings and examples of Scripture that reveal those dealings. Clearly our study passage, and most of those 1400 appearances of “If” in the Bible emphatically affirm that God does not govern His universe as a cosmic puppeteer. He governs it with designated authority in His natural laws (Always subject to His providential intervention), and by His assigning responsibility and accountability to people, as affirmed by these “If” passages, and a multitude of additional passages that fill the Bible with charges to us to live our lives according to His never-grievous-commandments, and by the faith-walk He sets forth in Scripture and teaches to us.

Another objection raised by fatalistic leaning folks; “But, if prayer changes what God does, that belief contradicts God’s immutability.” And the answer is no, not at all. God never acts contrary to His revealed and moral character. In fact, throughout Scripture, He affirms that He always follows that character. Whatever He does in keeping with that moral character in no way alters His nature. If He responded to something in a way that contradicted His moral character, yes, He would compromise His immutability, but Scripture affirms that He never—ever—acts contrary or contradictory to His moral character.

Does our study passage, and the broader context of God’s response to Solomon indicate at all that God might graciously respond to the prayers and repentance of His people so as to alter past judgments for their sins? Indeed it does.

This verse includes four conditions, stated by the Lord and required by Him before the blessings He

states are providentially given.

1. ...**humble themselves**. Whenever the Lord's people ignore the Lord and His revealed teachings in Scripture, the very act manifests an arrogance of pride that is inexplicable and inexcusable. "God didn't tell me that. He said it to someone centuries ago. God wants me to be...." And the believer who follows this attitude shall never experience the blessings promised by the Lord in this verse and its context.

2. ...**and pray**. Prayer addresses the Lord with our "requests," whatever we ask of Him. A "request begins with us. (*Philippians 4:6*) Jesus devoted most of Luke 11 to this question, repeatedly in multiple examples and in His concluding words, teaching the disciples, and us, that he does respond with answers to our prayers that specifically give us what we need and request of Him.

"If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" (Luke 11:13) According to Jesus' words, a caring, responsible father will give his own son 1) bread, 2) fish, 3) or an egg, upon the child's request. Jesus then explains His intended meaning by these examples in His words in Verse 13. "...**how much more** shall your heavenly Father give "...to them that ask him," to His own children. In our study verse, the Lord requires that His people pray, that they look to Him for their help, and not to their own imagination and devices. In our current pandemic, how much are you looking to one or another political leader or interest to develop the vaccine for this virus and deliver us from our isolation? And how much time are you praying for the Lord to intervene, regardless who rules in civil government, and providentially guide those people who are researching and developing the vaccine? The Lord makes His point quite clearly. **He responds to His people when His people pray to Him**, instead of looking for relief and deliverance from any other source.

3. ...**and seek my face**. This phrase identifies where we go to find relief from whatever afflicts and attacks us. Do we pray and seek the Lord's help, or do we shout angry words at each other in our devotion to one or another human? The Lord doesn't respond to angry shouts or harsh bitter words. He responds to His people, praying and seeking **His face** for their deliverance.

4. ...**and turn from their wicked ways**. As a loving Father, our God knows how to grow His children into strong and wise children. He also knows how not to grow us into spoiled brats who stomp our feet and demand anything we want from Him. He quite specifically requires a conscious and deliberate change of behavior from us. Remember the definition for "**Sovereign**." It identifies authority. Does God have a "**Sovereign right**" to command us to look to Him and to follow His commandments? Does He have a "**Sovereign right**" to command us to turn from our own sinful choices and ways? **Indeed he does!**

...*then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land*. In gracious loving care, the Lord promises that He shall respond to our doing what He "Sovereignly" commanded us to do with this forgiving, healing mercy. We can quote this verse daily for a year. Nothing will change. But, when we take its words to heart, and start working on obeying the Lord's commandments and expectations in it, He has promised this gracious healing balm to flow freely.

If we apply this verse to our present dilemma, how might it play out. When will this pandemic end? When the political party we prefer wins the election? No. When medical research discovers an effective vaccine? Perhaps, but how many hurdles remain after a vaccine is developed before you can get it and become immune to the virus? If we apply this verse to our dilemma, the answer might shock some of us. **It will begin to end when** God's people look into their own hearts, 1) humble themselves, 2) pray, 3) seek the Lord's face instead of whatever they are presently seeking, and 4) repent of their own sins (Not point out what we see as all the errors in other people).

Does prayer change anything? Our study verse categorically affirms that it does. Further, in verses 17-

18, the Lord affirms more “*If, then*” blessings. As a righteous warning, the Lord warns Solomon; “*But if, then.*” Should Solomon ignore the Lord’s commandments in this lesson and go his own way instead of the Lord’s, God warns that He shall send His righteous judgment, not His healing blessings. Folks, let’s shut down whatever we’ve been doing, and go to our knees, looking to the Lord for our remedies. While on our knees, let’s also look within. Do we have any habits or attitudes that need to go away? Then repentance is the word of the hour. Lord, convict us and show us Your way!

Elder Joe Holder