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Is God More Likely to Answer Prayer if More People Pray?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether God is more likely to answer prayer if more people pray, whether it's biblical for a Christian to say he can "feel" someone's prayers for him, and whether prayer is more effective if one prays at the particular time the event being prayed about is occurring.

- * Is God more likely to answer prayer if more people pray?
- * Is it biblical for a Christian to say he can "feel" someone's prayers for him?
- * Is prayer more effective if you pray at the particular time the event you're praying about is occurring?

Transcript

♪♪♪ [bell dings] This is "Stand To Reasons." #Stairscpodcast with Amy Hall and Greg Coquel. Welcome listeners and welcome, Greg. - Thank you, Amy.

- All right, Greg. I've got your favorite topic. [laughs] - Oh, you got it.

[laughs] Sorry, I have to laugh because I-- - I'm not fast fishing in the spring. [laughs] - We got a couple of questions that actually have a few different questions in them, and they're all about prayer, which I know-- - Oh, I see, yeah. - I know you always hesitate because you say-- - My expensive expertise in the topic.

[laughs] - But let's hear what you have to say to Josh. Here's his question. Is God more likely to answer prayer if more people pray? If so, how is this theologically sound? If not, why ask people to pray? - I don't know.

[laughs] Next. [laughs] So this goes to the calculus of prayer, okay? And that is, how does all the details of intensity and frequency and numbers of people all led up to answered prayer? I have no idea. When you think about, I think it was Dale Yancy, or not Dale, if Phillip Yancy, Dale Yancy's the guy from my past, maybe he's listening right now

as a pastor, was a pastor in Vermont.

But if you've Phillip Yancy, we talk about, look at all these thousands and thousands and millions of people who are God saved the queen, you know, or whatever, and they say these kinds of, what may be, perfunctory prayers, I don't know, but what does that add up to what? Does that make any difference? Or then you have Elijah going up in the mountain after the prophets of Baal are slain in 1 Kings 18 and he prays seven times. And then finally the storm comes, you know, and then he hikes up his robe and he outruns a chariot, you know? So, 'cause the rain is storming. So, I think sometimes there is an individual prayer that is prayed with intensity and God responds.

I think that there are dozens and dozens of prayers that can be prayed with intensity and God doesn't respond. I think there can be lots and lots of people praying and it makes a difference and lots of people praying and it doesn't. I just don't know.

We are told to pray and we are told to pray with intense, with alertly, keeping alert to it with an attitude of thanksgiving. It's in 1 Timothy, I think. And the idea is that we are to pay attention to the things we're praying.

And maybe what it means is so that when they get answered, we can say thanks 'cause a lot of times that just goes right by us. Definitely, we have examples of people praying in groups and that's effective in the book of Acts. You have Peter in prison and everybody is devoting themselves to prayer.

Now, when I think about everybody in the upper room praying, praying, praying, I'm wondering, what are they saying? Is everybody praying at once or is one person praying for everybody and they're given the amen, which is an agreement? Well, you can't agree if you're not paying attention and I find out when other people are praying, it's very easy for my mind to wander. So it isn't like I'm like locked into that prayer as much. But as it turned out, the corporate prayer, even when, as John MacArthur once noted, it wasn't attended with much faith.

It still got Peter removed, released supernaturally from prison. Now, why would I say there wasn't that much faith? Because when Peter came to the door and knocked and the servant girl answered and she said, it's Peter. They said, no, it isn't.

It's his ghost. So they had no confidence that the prayer was being, gonna be answered, but they were praying intensely. So I guess the way I resolve all of this is I try to obey the commands and I try to do the things regarding prayer that are said we ought to do and then let God sort it out.

So I wanna pray on a regular basis. I pray almost every day and a little in the evening. As I getting into bed, I always pray.

Now, if I'm working out of town, I got an early call at 7.30 or eight o'clock in the morning

and I'm off, I'm not praying in the morning. I'm not getting up at five and praying 'cause I might have gotten to bed at 11 last, last, that night, 90 of my sleep. And so my evening prayer before I go to bed, on my knees, right by, by bed, that's what I'm kind of offering my prayer for the day but it's not a very long prayer 'cause I'm tired.

But I am trying to thank God for the day that He gave me and I review the things that happened and pray regarding those things or just thank God for the satisfaction or the difficulties or the challenges that I face that He got me through. And there are opportunities we have to pray together as a team, so as staff, we pray together and that is salutary in some measure. And so we do that and I pray things that are told to pray and like in the Lord's prayer, deliver us, lead us not to temptation, deliver us from the evil, provide for our daily needs.

These are all prayers that I toss out and pray there. And so I try to pray largely the kinds of things that I am told to pray for and try to devote myself to it in some significant measure and then pray with others when there is opportunity. And when things come up and I get an email and I get bad news about somebody, whatever, we just got some bad news just 10 minutes ago and I tossed this quick prayer up in my mind in the light of this.

But then it's up to God to sort it out and I don't know how that all works. - I think the first thing we have to think about is why would God work through prayers at all? Because He obviously doesn't need us to pray in order to act, but He does work through prayers. Is it James that says you do not have because you do not ask, right? - And then you don't have, you ask but don't have because you ask a throng motives, right? - So God is-- - By the way, that's a verse that I go the first part all the time.

You have not because you asked not to say God, that will never be said of me regarding these things that are important in my life, even though I've been praying for certain things for years and years and years. I just can't stop because I don't want that to be accused of that, you never know when God's gonna break through. - So I can think of three different reasons why God is working through prayers.

Number one, it creates intimacy with God because we are pouring out our heart to Him, we're experiencing that closeness, we're expressing our trust in Him, we're expressing our submission to Him because we're also saying, "You will be done, "that this is what I want, but I'm submitting to you." There are all sorts of ways that it affects our relationship with Him. And again, He does work through prayers, that's the means that He uses. So it creates intimacy with Him with God and it also creates fellowship with other people.

So when we're praying with other people, we are experiencing that fellowship and God wants to make us into a body. He wants us to be close to each other, He wants us to be intimate with each other in our prayers and our lives and all these things. So if, oh, I

almost forgot the third thing.

So the third thing that praying does is it brings God glory because when we receive the thing we asked for, we know it came from God. So as we're praying and we see God working, we not only increase our intimacy, but we also increase our thankfulness, we glorify God for it. So if that's true in, for one person, imagine like the more people you have doing that, the greater the fellowship with God, the greater the fellowship with each other, the greater the glory that we give to God, the more people participate in seeing God work, all of those things are beautiful things.

So I think those are all good reasons to ask people to pray with you and to pray with more people. I don't know if that translates into God more likely to answer prayers if more people are praying, but if more people are participating in these things, maybe it does, I don't know. - Well, that's the calculus I was talking about.

And that is the thing I think the concerns most people who are praying, they're praying to get an answer, to move God's hand, to change his circumstance, to get help or something that's vexing them. And these other things go along with it. Some people have characterized prayer as prayer isn't for God, it's for us.

You know, and gave, it doesn't change God, it changes us. Well, that's part of what you were saying and I think that is true, but we are enjoined to pray in order to get answers. Scripturally, we're not enjoined to pray to get changed.

And so we are told to engage in prayer, to accomplish a particular end. And be anxious for nothing, but in everything through prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. That is, as the peace of God will guard your hearts in minds in Christ Jesus.

But so it says there's a consequence there, but I think the reason that we're not to be anxious is because we're entrusting them to God with the expectation that God is going to do something in light of our prayer. So that is an important part of it as well. And that's the harder thing for me to figure out.

Yeah, so that's why I get speech to us when these questions are offered. Because, and to me, I just try to do what I'm told to do and let God figure the balance out and do make his decisions. Lewis said he wrote a piece just before he died called Letters to Malcolm, Chief Liam Prayer.

And I'm not sure in this book, I've read this book, but in this book, he makes this particular point. When you're asking God for something, you are making a request of a person. It's not mechanical.

It isn't like you're putting coins into a machine to get a product. If you put enough coins in, once you hit the right number, then the product comes out. You are making an appeal

to an individual who can say no, or yes, or maybe and wait.

And that individual can be influenced by a greater number of people. So prayers, prayed in groups, seemed to make a difference as well. So these are some of the pieces that I have, but it's hard to fit them together in a really tight coherent program.

And I think Philip Yancey's book on prayer is one of the most honest I've ever read, because he identifies all of these difficulties and all of these problems with unanswered prayer is very, very candid about the struggle that he has and other people have with prayer. I've read a lot of books on prayer, you know. And, but his is the one that's not so much necessarily encouraging, but at least it seems to really capture the frustration that we have with trying to make sense of how prayer works.

- I was trying to think if there was an example in the Bible of calling people to pray. And I can't think of examples in the Old Testament where the king would call the whole country. - Very fascinating.

- Yeah, to pray for things. And it's, in those instances, those were corporate type prayers. So it could be that he is more likely to answer a corporate type prayer when you're praying corporately.

I don't know, but that is an example. We do see people praying together and calling other people to pray. And so we should do it and then leave it up to God.

What happens? - Well, you also have this other spiritual dimension. You don't have a lot of hints of this in scripture, but in Daniel, he is praying for something. And the answer to his prayer is delayed because the angel bringing the message encounters another demon that he fights with for three weeks or something.

He's opposed. And you get the sense that it is Daniel's continuous, pardon me, Daniel's continuous prayer, persevering prayer that enables the angel to get freed up to come and finish the mission. That he's been sent on as a messenger.

And now, so that's just one little glimpse in the unseen world about how prayer is working. Who knows? I wish we had more insight into that kind of thing, but that suggests there are all kinds of things going on in the unseen world that our prayers are influencing, but there you need to have a certain amount of prayer to accomplish the task. That's what it seemed to be in that case.

And then the other occasion where the disciples, this is in Mark, are trying to cast out a demon. Jesus has the transfiguration, he comes down and there's this man's son whose demon possesses and the disciples have not been able to cast it out. And he said, this can only be cast out with prayer and fasting.

So there is something about the duration and intensity and focus of prayer that ends up

having an impact on this spiritual entity. It is amazing that God has us participate in this way because he didn't have to do it this way. And so I think we need to trust that there's a reason for that even if we can't work out all of the details.

So I have a few more questions on prayer for you. Oh, okay. (laughs) So I'm exhausted.

Stephen Bennett sent in a tweet that has three questions. The third one was the same one we just had. It's having many people pray more effective than just one person pray.

And the answer, quick answer, I suspect so. But I don't know how and why. Okay.

So the first two questions, okay. Number one, I have heard Christians say that they can feel someone's prayers for them. Is that biblical? And two, is praying at the particular time something is occurring more effective than otherwise? Well, the feel, the prayer part is, there's a difference between being unbiblical and non-biblical.

Non-biblical, the way I'm using the word means the Bible doesn't address it one way or another. Unbiblical means the thing is being done contrary to scripture, okay? And so this, you know, praying I felt it, I mean, I don't recall any passage of scripture or knowledge as that. And of course, the purpose of the prayer isn't for people to generally or frequently isn't to feel something, is to have something done.

Now, if a person is grieving and you're praying for mercy for that person from God, and that's probably the thing I pray for more than anything else regarding other people is God to be merciful to that person because I don't know exactly what mercy looks like in that circumstance to pray more specifically oftentimes but I pray for mercy for them. And this could have a subjective impact on a person. If a person, if you're praying that a person's spirit be lifted and they have a sense that they are being buoyed up in a special way, well, that would make sense.

And I don't have any problem with that. So because it's not unbiblical contrary to scripture but it may be unbiblical that is, scripture doesn't address it. - And people have told me many times that if they're going into a situation and they don't know how they're gonna face it and they're asking for prayers and then they have a sense of peace and calm as they're going into it, they do have a sense that the prayers have made a difference.

And so I think that's what people mean when they say they're feeling it. - What was the other? - So the second question is, is praying at the particular time something is occurring more effective than otherwise? - Well, I don't know what otherwise would be because if you had a time, I guess. - Well, okay.

I don't know. If you wait until afterwards, it's hard, you know, reverse causation or something like that. You know, although-- - There's an interesting detail.

There's an interesting detail because if you're praying, and there are examples of this, historically, people are praying at the table because they don't have food, it's an orphanage. They're praying and then they finish their prayer and then someone knocks in the door and leaves the food there for them. Now, of course, the answer to the prayer had to be initiated before the prayer was prayed.

But God knew the prayer was being prayed and that's why He initiated the action so that when the prayer was said, it was immediately answered with a knock on the door, kind of thing. So that's different, okay? But I don't know that there's any value in delaying praying. And if you are forced to delay, you find out something way after the fact.

There's the person that you would pray for is still in maybe their circumstance and so you can still pray in a certain sense, contemporaneously with the need. So I don't know what to make of that. I mean, it just pray.

This is, I've written about this, but the first rule of prayer is to pray. It doesn't have to, you can have all kinds of patterns and things in the Lord's Prayer and this, that and the other thing, acts, adoration, commission, thanksgiving and supplication. You could do all kinds of things to help organize it.

I've written things on it in our mentoring letters and stuff. But the fact is, the most important thing is to just pray. And so if I'm like, like yesterday, you know, I sit down and I'm distracted by a bunch of stuff, I just gotta start praying.

And I just pray wherever I can start, which is on my mind, same thing driving in today. I pray with those things that I can pray about. And because if I try to do this artificial thing, I don't get what might be artificial to me in that moment, I might not get going very well.

But if I have something right in my mind and I just jump into it, then I get praying and then I kind of get warmed up to it and it becomes more real to me in the moment. I'm more invested in it personally and emotionally. So that's why to me, the first rule of prayer is to pray.

- And whenever you have an inclination to pray, don't put it off. - Yeah. - Do it when you're thinking of it.

- Can't hurt. - All right, Josh and Steven, I don't know how helpful that was, but maybe it's helpful to know that we all try to kind of figure these things out. - It's a struggle.

Every book that I've read on prayer acknowledges that prayer is a struggle. Whether it's Tim Keller that's writing or whether it's Philip Yancey that's writing or whether it's C.S. Lewis that's writing or whether it's who's the Welsh preacher. It was a great prayer.

- Martin, Martin, Martin, Martin, Martin, Martin, Martin, Martin, Jones, they all

acknowledge prayer is difficult. And one of them said, I can't remember, I am loath, I am loath to go to prayer and when I'm in prayer, I am loath to stay. - So it's hard to get started and easy to stop as his point.

It's always a struggle. Does that sound familiar to you? - Well. - That quote? - I don't, I'm not familiar with that quote.

- It's another one of those greats that you would, maybe it's John Newton, I don't know. - It might have been, I know he had some things to say about it too. I have noticed though that the more I pray, the easier it gets over time.

So it's always harder to start up if you haven't been praying for a while, it's always harder. And when I've been praying more faithfully and more, it gets easier over time. I don't know why that would be, but it's a good reason to create some sort of discipline in your prayer so that you're not only praying when you have the inclination to pray.

And I think it does get better over time when you're being faithful. It's just hard sometimes. There's a sense of like having to overcome something.

And I think this is just part of our fallen nature. It reminds me of like working out, you know, when you start say jogging or whatever, I don't do that anymore 'cause of my back, but it's like, okay, you gotta get out there and just pound pavement for a quarter mile before you start listening up. And then you get the endorphins and whatever.

So there's a, but it's easy to stop, you know? And, but it's easier to get going after you've been going for a while and so in the same sense, prayer like that, you get going and as you get going, it gets easier. But it still is easy to stop. So, you know, fight the temptation.

I find sometimes it's really helpful to get started by praying right away with something I really care about. And if I'm praying right away with something about something I really care about, then I'm more emotionally invested in that prayer and it kind of gets me going a little bit. Another thing I do, if I'm not sure how to start, I will start saying thanks because there are more references to being thankful in prayer in the New Testament than there are anything else or examples of being thankful to God when prayers are prayed in the New Testament.

So I just start thinking, you know, everything, I give thanks for my four and F-150, you know? It's like this is, I love my truck and my girls call it the bubble 'cause it's nice and big and safe feeling. But it seems kind of like, well, that's kind of ordinary. Well, it's a place to start.

I am thankful for that. I wanna be thankful for the ordinary things and I'm thankful for the trials and difficult circumstances in my life and I just try to get thankful. That gets me going a bit.

So if I can't think of any way to start, I start that way and I'll also start with singing. And I have an old song book from Hope Chapel in the 70s. It's all Jesus movement music and it is wonderful.

The songs are wonderful. They have sweet melodies. They are Christocentric, Theocentric, and a lot of them are appealing to God to do something in my life and make me more like the Jesus, make me more likely.

And so there's one. I can pray that from my heart. I can sing that from my heart and I can right away get into a connection with God there.

And one other thing I do to get started if I don't have a good momentum as I get out my valley of vision and I go to my marker there with my next day of valley vision and I start praying that Puritan prayer for myself as much as I can with integrity given the line. Sometimes I skip lines that aren't me or aren't my theology or something or I make a little adjustments with my pencil into it. But it's, these are all ways of kind of getting going and getting into it, getting warmed up so that we can maintain the momentum with other things that we're praying for or about.

- All right, thanks, Greg. If you have a question for us and then on Twitter with the hashtag #STRS or go through our website on our hashtag #STRS podcast page, you'll find a link there and you can send us your question. This is Amy Hall and Greg Kolkle for Stand to Reason.

Thanks for listening. (bell dings)

(upbeat music)

(upbeat music)

(upbeat music)

(upbeat music)