



Prayer is an adventure into an unknown: we do not know what will happen when we pray. All we know is that we are putting ourselves into the hands of the One Who is Lord, and Who can do far more abundantly than ever we ask or even imagine.

This may sound shocking, but I recoil at the phrase, 'It's because we prayed . . .' Why? Mostly, I think, it's because of a vivid experience when I was in hospital and when every breath was desperately difficult. I was in terrible pain, which was heightened with even the tiniest movement required to draw in a breath. I remember noticing all those around me, breathing with no difficulty, no struggle, no wincing! What an utter MIRACLE I was watching! And then I recall - so vividly - realising that they were not breathing easily because they've prayed for it. Most of them didn't give a toss about prayer.

Thus the lesson was driven home to me. We are experiencing miracles every moment, every second, every breath. Most of the time, we neither pray that it'll happen, and nor do we register that God has given us another miracle - never mind thank Him for it. We take it for granted - as with so much of the work of His Holy Spirit - and it goes on, not 'because we've prayed' but 'because God loves to give'.

In fact, I believe that all the work of God is not 'because we . . .' anything. It's all 'because God . . .' And therefore I find it more potent to hear people tell their testimony, saying that they prayed, yes, but then - instead of describing what their prayers did - tell us what God did. Then their testimony of prayer is not about them, but about God. And that is what prayer is all about: God.

It would be easy to attribute 'answers' to prayer to the verse in Psalm 37: 'Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.' Oh yes . . . BUT what the verse doesn't say is that after I've prayed, the desires of my heart will have been changed - through the prayer! So

whereas I may have begun my prayer asking God for a Rolls Royce (well, even a Skoda would do) I won't have been praying for very long for God to have turned my whole heart around. He'll have met me, or spoken to me, or shown me something of Himself, or invited me simply to come up for a while and sit on His lap. Suddenly the desires of my heart will change – how can it be otherwise? – and all I'll long for is to be allowed to linger a while in that special place, to hug Him once more or to allow myself to feel His breath falling soft upon my cheek.

Prayer is nothing to do with manipulating God into giving us what we want. It's all to do with finding out what He wants. If I contort myself saying that God will give me what I want so long as I spend just a few minutes 'delighting myself' in Him, then I'm in for a new shock ... the best kind of shock; the kind that is all a part of the wonder-filled adventure of prayer. It's about discovering that God to be bigger, greater, higher. When we are very young, we can fall into the trap of thinking that God is there to answer our prayers – a bit like the cash point. Press the buttons and the money comes out – so long as we remember the right PIN number!

Fortunately, God doesn't give us a PIN number. Jesus asked us to memorise one prayer, but He also gave examples of His own praying very differently from that. He prayed privately as well as publicly. He prayed with tears. The Holy Spirit prays with sighs too deep for words. God's prayers over us are sometimes expressed in dancing, or as described by Zephaniah 3:17, 'I will rejoice over her with singing..' When we pray we avail ourselves to the working of the Holy Spirit, and when He is at work, nothing remains static. The wind of the Spirit blows and our previously lifeless souls burst into a dance of life. The picture comes to mind of one blustery day up in Mull when I'd hung out the washing on the line outside. I watched it flapping and began to giggle because it looked as if the wind was truly playing with those clothes. When at first I'd hung them up, they'd drooped lifelessly, heavy with the water. But as the wind whipped up it filled those previously empty clothes until they became like dancing shapes in the air. A nightdress began to do handstands as if on a bar in a gymnasium; a shirt billowed out as if preparing to fit a Michelin man, then just as suddenly it went thin again. It all looked such fun! And I chuckled to consider the parallel with how God's Spirit blows within us when we pray. I can start off feeling quite limp and lifeless until, in prayer, He fills me until I'm dancing and playing with Him. It's impossible to say that 'nothing happens' when the wind of the Spirit blows! Or when His fire ignites dying embers... that's not 'nothing'.

Sadly, I often hear of people whose tentative steps into praying are squashed because, they say, those with 'results' must pray better. I want to ask, Are they really praying 'better'? Look at the man who was healed at the pool of Bethesda. He was wonderfully healed, yes, but there's nothing to suggest that his healing was a result of his prayer(s). We're not told that he was any more keen than any of the others who lay by the pool waiting for healing. Indeed, he was persistently slow, and always had been whenever the angel had come: why did he never make it into the water sooner, I wonder? And when Jesus came along and asked him a straight question, 'Do you want to be healed?' the man didn't even give a straight answer. He didn't say a direct, 'Yessss!' He fumbled around with a great long, wishy-washy story, telling his whole history of how he'd tried over the last years and what had happened every time and how he'd failed and there was no hope. (Oh, how anyone who's offered prayer ministry might sigh with recognition here!). Yet, despite that, Jesus healed him. Why?

We can merely stab at answers. The truth is that there's so much about prayer that we do not know. Some see answers to their prayers, and others do not. My own experience is of being asked to pray

in the darkness without the nice 'result' I'd like. In fact, the more I pray, the more I absorb that God's ways are not our ways. Every one of us is told (not asked) to pray; to be alert; to be vigilant; to pray without ceasing. We've to do battle - prayer is not a cushy little job for women to do while knitting. We need to be warriors, to put on our armour and, having done all, to stand . . . not flag. Jacob's way of praying was to fight with God. Do you dare to hit out at God when you pray? To do so may be very different from the nice-sounding prayers of Christians in your fellowship. But if you venture out from conforming to niceness, if you dare to give Him a punch (fancy hitting God!!) you could just find that you're giving God your real self. That could be the moment when you find Him to be your own God, which was Jacob's discovery.

Elijah and Jonah both moaned to God: that, I read, was their prayer. 'I'd rather die', they each said in their different situations. 'I can't go on like this'. But God didn't criticise them for praying 'badly'. He met them where they were, as they were. He spoke to them. To Elijah He revealed Himself – and not with drama, but with silence.

How often do you and I hear silence in response to prayer, and believe that that is a sign of God's absence? God told Elijah it was a sign of His presence. If we're ever going to measure the 'results' of our praying, we need to learn about the silence of God. We need to hear what it means, and trust that. Let us not waste time comparing how we pray: it is that we pray that God loves. He is the Teacher: He is the Wonderful Counsellor; He is quite able to guide our praying to a different way, so long as we listen and keep listening to His guidance. If prayer is about anything, it is about God. Prayer is an adventure into an unknown: we do not know what will happen when we pray. All we know is that we are putting ourselves into the hands of the One Who is Lord, and Who can do far more abundantly than ever we ask or even imagine.

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