



Reflections

September 2013 - *Assurance That God Hears and Answers Our Prayers*

Is it through the scientific method of observing cause and effect that we can prove that prayer works? C.S. Lewis argues in his essay, “The Efficacy of Prayer”, that it’s not through scientific experimentation, but rather through knowing God personally, as God reveals Himself to us through prayer that we gain assurance that God hears and responds to us. Lewis writes,

Thus in some measure the same doubt that hangs about the causal efficacy of our prayers to God hangs also about our prayers to man. Whatever we get we might have been going to get anyway. But only, as I say, in some measure. Our friend, boss, and wife may tell us that they acted because we asked; and we may know them so well as to feel sure, first that they are saying what they believe to be true, and secondly that they understand their own motives well enough to be right. But notice that when this happens our assurance has not been gained by the methods of science. We do not try the control experiment of refusing the raise or breaking off the engagement and then making our request again under fresh conditions. Our assurance is quite different in kind from scientific knowledge. It is born out of our personal relation to the other parties; not from knowing things about them but from knowing *them*.

Our assurance—if we reach an assurance—that God always hears and sometimes grants our prayers, and that apparent grantings are not merely fortuitous, can only come in the same sort of way. There can be no question of tabulating successes and failures and trying to decide whether the successes are too numerous to be accounted for by chance. Those who best know a man best know whether, when he did what they asked, he did it because they asked. I think those who best know God will best know whether He sent me to the barber’s shop because the barber prayed.

For up till now we have been tackling the whole question in the wrong way and on the wrong level. The very question “Does prayer work?” puts us in the wrong frame of mind from the outset. “Work”: as if it were magic, or a machine—something that functions automatically. Prayer is either a sheer illusion or a personal contact between embryonic, incomplete persons (ourselves) and the utterly concrete Person. Prayer in the sense of petition, asking for things, is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine. In it God shows Himself to us. That He answers prayers is a corollary— not necessarily the most important one—from that revelation. What He does is learned from what He is.

“Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!”

Matthew 7:9-11 (NIV)



¹ C. S. Lewis. *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays*. “The Efficacy of Prayer.” New York: Harcourt, 1987, pp. 7-8.