



April 2011 - *Getting a Bigger View of Prayer*

It is easy to drift into thinking that because God is all-wise and all-powerful he will do what he knows is best and that our petitionary prayers to him really don't make much difference. But is this line of thinking correct? C.S. Lewis did not think so and offers us a radically different way of understanding prayer and its place in our lives:

Petitionary prayer is, nonetheless, both allowed and commanded to us: "Give us our daily bread." And no doubt it raises a theoretical problem. Can we believe that God ever really modifies His action in response to the suggestions of men? For infinite wisdom does not need telling what is best, and infinite goodness needs no urging to do it. But neither does God need any of those things that are done by finite agents, whether living or inanimate. He could, if He chose, repair our bodies miraculously without food; or give us food without the aid of farmers, bakers, and butchers; or convert the heathen without missionaries. Instead, He allows soils and weather and animals and the muscles, minds, and wills of men to co-operate in the execution of His will. "God," said Pascal, "instituted prayer in order to lend His creatures the dignity of causality." But not only prayer; whenever we act at all He lends us that dignity. It is not really stranger, nor less strange, that my prayers should affect the course of events than that my other actions should do so. They have not advised or changed God's mind—that is, His over-all purpose. But that purpose will be realized in different ways according to the actions, including the prayers, of His creatures.

For He seems to do nothing of Himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures. He commands us to do slowly and blunderingly what He could do perfectly and in the twinkling of an eye. He allows us to neglect what He would have us do, or to fail. Perhaps we do not fully realize the problem, so to call it, of enabling finite free wills to co-exist with Omnipotence. It seems to involve at every moment almost a sort of divine abdication. We are not mere recipients or spectators. We are either privileged to share in the game or compelled to collaborate in the work, "to wield our little tridents." Is this amazing process simply Creation going on before our eyes? This is how (no light matter) God makes something—indeed, makes gods—out of nothing.¹

Lewis reminds us of what the Bible shows us from beginning to end: Our God is not the distant, detached god of the Deist, but rather a Father who is actively involved with his children and his creation. In his all-encompassing knowledge, wisdom and power, he gives us "the dignity of causality," through which our actions and our prayers really do "affect the course of events" and serve his ultimate purposes. Yes, God takes our freedom and our prayers seriously. What we do really does matter. And our prayers, offered in agreement with his Word and Spirit, and in faith, really do make a difference.

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Matthew 7:7-11 ESV

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Harvest Books), pp 8-9.