

that God agreed to soften human hearts by making them
capable of receiving the blessing of reconciliation?,
or was that reconciliation God's plan and intention all along,
and that the prayer was mostly about
getting us on track with God's intention and purpose?

**Is prayer primarily about God changing the situation,
or is it about God changing the heart of those who pray?**

How do we understand the process of prayer?

Is it about change, as in getting God to do something we desire,
or is it about change, as in
getting us on track with something that God desires?

With its a very pragmatic guide to living out the Christian life,
the book of James is mostly focused on what
the behavior of a life as defined by grace looks like,
and doesn't deal so much with receiving that grace or on
the fact that God never gives up on any of us or ever lets go.

So after several chapters of instructions about doing good works,
the author of James concludes with
a fervent call for Christians to be faithful in prayer.

vs. 13-16

Are any among you suffering? They should pray.

Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.

Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have
them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has
committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one
another, so that you may be healed.

The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

If you are struggling or dealing with troubles or difficulties,

bring it to the Lord in prayer, put on the armor of grace,

and let the Spirit's embrace guide and comfort you.

If things are going incredibly well and wonderful,

bring it to the Lord in prayer, put on the armor of grace,

and thank your God with praise and gratitude.

Whatever is going on in life, through prayer we commune with God,
which helps us interpret life in terms of God's presence,
and in prayer we ask, what is God showing us, teaching us
so that our faith can develop, mature and grow deeper.

**The Lord is always up to something, pouring grace into our lives
and in prayer God guides us to see it and recognize it.**

In prayer we focus, speak with and listen for the Spirit to reveal,
placing our emotions, desires, needs and burdens before God,
expecting that the Lord will do something about it,
and help us live more fully & faithfully as God intends.

Prayer is traveling along a path where we can be transformed by God,

and if there is a change in circumstances or situation,
it is only by the sovereign grace and kindness of God,
and not that our prayer has coerced or forced God's hand.

But prayer is about far more than just our individual spirituality.
It is also the
critical work and mission of the whole community of faith.

**Prayer is an integral part of the life we share as a faith community
as we are involved and supporting one another in prayer.
Praying for others, we recognize that all are important & connected
as we become conduits of God's gracious love, mercy and healing.**

For example, a friend told me this story
about a man crushed with grief when his beloved wife died.

He said to his friends that he couldn't pray like he used to
because he was too angry, upset and disappointed with God,
and in fact wasn't sure he even believed in God anymore.
His friends were quiet for a moment, then one of them said,
"then we will believe for you and we will pray for you."

And over the next weeks these friends continued to visit him,
and they would gather for prayer, and each time
they asked God to restore the faith of their dear friend.

After several months, these friends were with him in his home,
and he said with a smile,
"It is no longer necessary for you to pray for me.
Today I would like you to pray with me."

James concludes his letter, vs. 19-20

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

This passage isn't about God taking back the gift of our salvation,
but recognizes that a believer's faith can fade and stumble
into a dark and sinful place that feels like death,
and that we can be paralyzed by obstacles and burdens
that block us from allowing God's love to enter.

As a community of believers connected by the faith we share,
if someone wanders or stays from their faith,
we pray and support them amid their wondering & struggling
so that their faith may be strengthened and restored.

The Mark passage that we read earlier is about
how someone can be paralyzed and blocked from access to Christ.
We see how the support of friends can help overcome the obstacles
that were keeping him from the healing and mercy of Jesus.

In the story itself, Jesus was teaching in the house,

perhaps with someone near the open doorway
repeating what was said
to the crowd gathered outside, listening in the street.

Suddenly inside, there was some thumping, and a scratching noise
as dust and bits of straw came tumbling down from the ceiling.
Then hands appeared, tearing open a large hole in the roof
and Jesus stops speaking, and looks up, interrupted ...
... as a mat was slowly lowered passing down through the opening.

The mat was lowered by ropes attached to each of the four corners,
until it came to rest in front of where Jesus was sitting...

... and then looking down at the man on the mat, Jesus spoke:
"My son. Your sins are forgiven."

When these men brought their friend before Jesus to be healed,
I doubt that forgiving his sin was anywhere on their agenda.

But when Jesus said that, the scribes huddled over in the corner,
began to grimace, and their faces hardened with disapproval.
And then looking right at them, Jesus challenged them:

Mark 2:7-12

At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among
themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier,
to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'?"

But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"--he said
to the paralytic-- "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home."

And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they
were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

At this point, early in the gospel of Mark,
the author is telling this story to illustrate who Jesus is,
that he is the Son of God and has authority to forgive sin –
and he proves that power,
by demonstrating his authority to heal the paralyzed man.

Reading this story, a bit deeper as a metaphor that applies to me,
it challenges me to ask, what in my life paralyzes me,
and what holds me back from the healing Christ intends?
Where am I stuck from fully accepting God's forgiveness & healing?
What am I allowing to frighten me, to stymie my joy & living fully?

When fear or regret, failure, guilt or loss paralyzes our spirits
only God's grace, love and healing available through prayer
can bring give us courage and strength to take up our mats,
and to live in hope sustained by God's truth & promises.

Prayer helps open us to change and grow as we connect with God,
as we can see this world and our circumstances in a new way,
finding peace and hope as God realigns our understanding
with a renewed Christian perspective and perception.

*** Prayer moves us toward healing, even if our situation doesn't change.**

There is another lesson this story can teach us about prayer.
These four friends of the paralytic at the four corners of the mat
exemplify what it means & looks like for us to pray for one another.

They had compassion enough to put themselves out on his behalf,
creatively overcoming the obstacle of the pressing crowd—
-- by making a hole in the roof to place their friend before Jesus...

**... and isn't that a picture prayer being enacted
as they cared for their friend, bringing him to Jesus?...**

**... and as the Church, are we not to be to each other,
like those four friends at the corners of the mat,
bringing those in need before Jesus,
to be healed, blessed and made whole...
... humbly before Almighty God, who hears and answers our prayers?**

Christian prayer is coming before our Heavenly Father in humility,
so that by sharing our concerns, petitions and requests,
our relationship with God grows deeper as we draw nearer,
so that our lives and our thinking
are brought more and more into line with our loving God.

Does God want us to pray when we want something?
Yes, absolutely, the command to pray is throughout Scripture.

Does God do miracles, impossible and totally unexpected things?
Certainly that's true, and there's no doubt in my mind.

**Does prayer cause or make God do something
that He otherwise would not have done had we not prayed?**

I don't know, how could anyone other than God possibly know,
for prayer and the decisions of God are definitely not
something to be tested by experiment in a laboratory.

**But through our faithful deepening and our consistent prayer life
we put on the gift and blessing of the armor of God
which strengthens and enables us to stand and to serve;
for prayer is what keeps us connected and listening to God,
for prayer helps us remove the obstacles between us and God.**

Our struggles and problems, our trials and burdens,
are not about flesh and blood, not in defeating other people,
but always it's to stand with the Lord in faithfulness,
standing strong in the armor of God's righteousness.

As we read in Ephesians 5, vs. 10-11, 18

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God,
so that you may be able to stand ... pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.