

The power of prayer

“There is nothing more powerful than prayer; nothing can be compared to it.” With this quote from John Chrysostom, Olive Wyon begins his book *Prayer*. And there is no doubt that every Christian recognizes the truth expressed by the distinguished bishop of Constantinople.

However, there is no unanimity as to how to interpret the nature and extent of the power of prayer. Is it simply an exercise of self-suggestion or does it have external effectiveness? Does it act only subjectively on the person who prays, as a healthy spiritual gymnastics, or does it influence God and His actions in some way? Does it only change our interior or -using a well-known phrase- does it also “change things”?

It is obvious that prayer exerts a powerful action in the spirit of those who practice it. Releasing our sorrows, fears, and anxieties before the throne of God brings us «the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding» (Phil. 4:6-7 ESV). The confession of our sins frees our conscience from the feeling of guilt and, on the basis of God's promises, instills in us the joy of forgiveness (Ps. 32:5; 1 John 1:9). Thanksgiving makes us more aware of God's goodness manifested in the experiences of our lives (Ps. 103). Worship sharpens our spiritual vision of God's glory, His attributes, and His works (Ps. 95-100). Intercession broadens the horizons of our interests and makes us more supportive in relation to the people for whom we pray; it makes us more “human”. All this amounts to a very precious spiritual enrichment. But is that all we can expect from prayer? According to some liberal theologians, yes. But both Scripture and experience show us that the believer's expectation can include objective results, in addition to merely subjective ones, since “in response to prayer, events take place in the external world that would not occur if they had not been preceded by prayer”.¹ Abundant biblical examples corroborate the preceding assertion. Through Abraham's intercessory prayer, Abimelech and his family were healed (Gen. 20:17). Hannah's fervent supplications were answered by the birth of her insistently requested son (1 Sam. 1:10-18). In response to Elijah's cry, God granted him a resounding victory over Baalism (1 Kgs. 18:36-40), and it was the prayers of the same prophet that decisively influenced the drought and the rain (Jas. 5:17-18). By the prayer of Elisha the son of the Shunammite woman was resurrected (2 Kgs. 4:33). King Hezekiah's pleas saved him from the invasion of Sennacherib (2 Kgs. 19:15-37) and from illness (2 Kgs. 20:2-11). The repentant Manasseh, exiled and captive in Babylon, prayed to God, and «he prayed to Him, and God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom» (2 Chr. 33:12-13 ESV). Daniel prayed and God revealed Nebuchadnezzar's dream to him (Dan. 2:17-19). Heeding the prayers of Nehemiah, God inclined the heart of the Persian king Artaxerxes to authorize and

¹ A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, The Judson Press, 1949, 433.

favour the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Neh. 1:4-11; Neh. 2:4), and not less impressive are some of the responses to prayer mentioned in the New Testament. Remember the miraculous release of Peter, imprisoned and condemned to death (Acts 12), or what happened in the prison in Philippi while Paul and Silas «were praying and singing hymns to God» (Acts 16:25-40 ESV).

The history of the Church also abounds in facts that confirm the objective effectiveness of prayer, both in the physical and in the spiritual realm and even in the political order. Countless are the cases of healing from serious illnesses or astonishing deliverance from other no less serious dangers, events that had been the subject of previous prayer.

Luther, a man of prayer and of great faith, visited Melanchthon on one occasion when he was in a dying state. His death seemed so close that it looked inevitable. Between sobs, Luther prayed, asking God for the physical recovery of his most intimate collaborator. A vehement exclamation at the end of the sentence brought Melanchthon out of his stupor. He only spoke a few words: “Martin, why don't you let me leave in peace?” “We can't do without you, Philip” was the response. Luther, kneeling next to the dying man's bed, continued praying for an hour. Then he persuaded his friend to eat soup. Melanchthon began to improve and soon fully recovered. The explanation was given by Luther in these words: “God has given me back my brother Melanchthon in direct response to my prayers.”²

Of course, not all requests on behalf of the sick have been answered in the same way. In many cases healing has not occurred. As we saw when considering the requirements of prayer, we must submit to the sovereignty of our Father, who is as wise as merciful. The diversity of responses, positive or negative (in our opinion), does not invalidate the power of prayer. The faith that moves us to it has a double aspect in its results: that of prodigies, sometimes miraculous, and that of the spiritual power to resist the greatest adversities. This is the great message of Hebrews 11:32-40.

Admirable philanthropic works, such as that of George Müller in Bristol, in the 19th century, have highlighted the effectiveness of petitions made to God for the necessary help. Müller's experience is especially significant. When undertaking his work, that man of great faith firmly resolved not to ask anything from anyone but only from God. Despite the many moments of extreme trial that he had to endure, he remained true to his purpose and always at the right time the provision requested from the Lord providentially arrived.

Missionary expansion and great revivals have also always been closely related to prayer. Many battles against adverse political forces have been won by praying. This was evident in the days of the Reformation. Well known is the fact that Mary Queen of Scots feared the prayers of John Knox more than armies of thousands

² *Dictionary of illustrations for pulpit and platform*, Moody Press, 1949, p. 442 (4253).

of soldiers. History also shows the effectiveness of prayer in favour of temporal authorities (1 Tim. 2:1-3) with a view to peaceful civil coexistence and the triumph of justice. Only God knows to what extent the prayers of His children have influenced the course of important historical events. Chapters 9 and 10 of the book of Daniel deserve deep reflection. The author was deeply impressed at the Assembly of the World Evangelical Alliance, held in Singapore in June 1986, upon hearing the testimony of the Filipino delegate. His report on the experience of his country at the beginning of the same year, when everything gave rise to fears of a bloody revolution, highlighted the fact that thousands of believers were praying in churches begging the Almighty for a peaceful solution while others demonstrated in the streets with the same end. He and many others attributed to this Fernando Marcos' decision to leave the country, thus avoiding the feared bloodbath.

To these examples we could add many more, all demonstrating that prayer is not a simple exercise in spiritual gymnastics, but a cause of effects within and outside of ourselves. This was the conviction of C.S. Lewis when in one of his famous *Letters to Malcolm* he wrote: "If what you meant in your last letter is that we should discard the petitionary prayer which, as you point out, asks God to act as an 'engineer' arranging particular events in the objective world and limit ourselves to acts of penitence and worship, I disagree with you. It may be true that Christianity would be, intellectually, a much easier religion if it told us that this is what we should do. And I can understand those who think that that religion would be more noble. But remember the psalm: 'Lord, I am not a person of noble thoughts'. Or, better yet, remember the New Testament. In it the most daring petitionary prayers are recommended to us both by way of precept and by example."³

No wonder James wrote: «The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective» (Jas. 5:16 NIV).

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3 C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcom, chiefly on Prayer*, Fontana, 1966, p. 38