

## Prayer

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Exod 32:14

(BHS)

וַיִּנָּחֵם יְהוָה  
עַל־הַרְעָה  
אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת  
לְעַמּוֹ: פ

(NASB)

So the LORD **relented**  
of the **harm**  
which He **said** He would do  
unto his people.

The verb *nacham* means, “to repent, to change one’s mind.” It is quite the anthropopathic image for the infinite God. “Evil” is the basic meaning of *ra’*, sometimes glossed with the more specific “disaster” or “harm” or “calamity.” Pretty simple, right?

You know the story. Israel had apostatized with the golden calf. Then God said to Moses, “So now leave Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation” (Exod 32:10). It is important not to miss his stated intention. God intended to destroy Israel and make a new nation from Moses.

Then Moses interceded. The way the story plays out, Moses’ plea moved God to change his mind about it. His stated purpose was taken off the table.

Now, you may struggle with this theologically. You may say that God knew all along what he would do. You may say that this was all staged for Moses’ benefit, or something like that. But the story is very simple and clear. Believe it or not, the text as written portrays God as changing his mind.

I take this as a picture of prayer. Since God allowed Moses to participate in His intended purpose, then perhaps we can also go before the throne boldly with our petitions, with every expectation that we are making a difference. Perhaps our prayers are part of God's plan—and if we don't pray, perhaps on Judgment Day we will be confronted with the bad consequences of our prayerlessness.

Another picture of prayer that I like is in Genesis 18. There, God in the company of angels reveals what was about to happen to Sodom. Abraham “prays” about this—and seemingly changes the particulars of God's stated purpose to include a close inspection of the notorious city—with the possibility of *not* destroying it. Again, you can argue that nothing changed—but to do so more or less renders the chapter meaningless. It is written to indicate that Abraham's intercessions made a difference. At least, he saved three people.

In the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 3, God's Eternal Decrees, it is stated in the first paragraph that the God who ordains everything that happens also establishes the secondary means whereby those things happen, “the will of created beings and the freedom and contingency of secondary causes are established by him.” I put prayer in that category. God *establishes* prayer as a means by which his purposes are fulfilled.

Sometimes I think of prayer in terms of Micaiah's vision of 1 Kings 22. Various spirits suggested various strategies to accomplish God's purposes, and the Lord picked one that he knew would succeed. I think of my prayers as going before the Heavenly Court, where they get serious consideration.

We pray *as if* we can change God's mind or influence him, because that is the image we are given in these sorts of texts. Obviously, the Lord's Prayer is asking for something real from the Father, and is not just designed for our psychological benefit. When Jesus prayed, it wasn't just to get his head right.

Anyway, we as Christians are invited to pray. We have that glorious privilege of access to the throne of God. So don't be shy! Speak your mind! Don't take no for an answer! Be persistent!

And he told them a parable **to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart**. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'"

And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?" (Luke 18:1 – 8)

When you pray, remember Moses in the wilderness participating in deciding the fate of Israel. Remember Abraham participating in the fate of Sodom. Remember the widow influencing the judge.

Something to think about.