Word & World
Volume 35, Number 1
Winter 2015

To What Kind of God Do You Pray?[1]

TERENCE E. FRETHEIM

> See, the LORD's hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God…so that he does not hear. (Isa 59:1–2)
>
> I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people. (Isa 65:2a)

God's responses to prayers are shaped by more than the divine will. Indeed, God's responses are affected by what we (and the communities to which we belong) say and do. A key question becomes: To what kind of God do you pray? The response to such a question will have considerable impact on our understanding and practice of prayer, directly or indirectly.

"God and prayer" has become an issue for increasing numbers of people. Indeed, it has become an issue for the mission of the church. In my experience, 9/11 changed the landscape of our reflections about God and prayer. All those people praying! And, to quote a friend: "What good did it do!? If God could have stopped them, then cannot one claim that what happened was the will of God?"

[1]This essay is a development of an earlier article of mine, "Prayer in the Old Testament: Creating Space in the World for God," in *A Primer on Prayer*, ed. Paul R. Sponheim (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 51–62. Petitionary prayer is the focus for reflection.

Prayer is a God-given way for God's people to make a situation more open for God, a God who desires to be as close to people as possible and who always has their best interests at heart. God is open to taking new directions and changing course in view of the prayerful interaction between God and people. Yet, always in view will be God's unchangeable loving will for all.

Copyright © 2015 by Word & World, Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota. All rights reserved.

More recent tragic events, both human-generated (for example, Newtown and Aurora) and nature-generated (for example, Katrina, Sandy, Haiti), have raised even more questions: "Come on, God, can't you at least steer your tornadoes away from schools? God, can't you snap the divine fingers and keep the crazy nuts with guns from mowing down the children in elementary schools? God, why don't you answer our prayers and keep such heartbreaking evils from happening?"

To what kind of God do you pray? The word "God" is often used in conversations with the assumption that everyone knows who God is. We often simply use the word "God" in one context or another and move on, leaving people with the sense that however they might be thinking about "who God is" is okay. And leaders often decide not to address difficult questions that have been raised about God, so people are simply left to continue with whatever understandings of God they now have. I claim that the way in which you speak of God will have powerful effects on your thinking about God and prayer.

In our thinking about prayer, we often think that God need only snap the divine fingers to respond to prayers. God can make things happen or stop things from happening in a moment's notice. God is in control! In the wake of a personal tragedy or a familial heartbreak or community disaster, this image of God sets many a Christian into a theological tailspin. At times, it gets personal. Why didn't God snap the divine fingers for me? What good are prayers when, so often, nothing good seems to happen?

Too often we resort to the language of "mystery," thinking that such language will help people through such moments in their personal or collective lives. One problem is that such tragic events are becoming less and less mysterious, from our expanded knowledge of the way in which the world works, to the reasons for the onset of a disease or human behaviors. And people are getting increasingly suspicious of those who put the "why?" questions on the back shelf; all too often they suspect that such questions are dismissed because they may reveal our complicity in what has happened.

All too often this kind of experience with (seemingly) ineffective prayers and this understanding of God results in Christians moving to the edges of the life of a congregation, perhaps even to the edges of the life of faith. Out and about, there is much more "church-caused scar tissue" or "theology-caused scar tissue" than we realize. I think that such experiences of evil and suffering, and the often problematic images of "God and prayer" associated with such experiences, are a great barrier to the mission of the church.

Thus, I suggest that thinking together about the kind of God to whom we pray may be of help. My concern is how we think about the biblical God's *relationship* with the world. What happens to our understanding of God if we take the word "relationship" seriously? Think of relationships you have, the best relationships. Picture one person to whom you are close, say, a spouse, a child, a friend. What makes that relationship good? Would that relationship be genuine, if only

one of you had something important to say? Or, if only one of you had power in the relationship?

Closeness and Distance in Relationships

Closeness and distance. That is the way it is with relationships. They are not static, always and everywhere the same. How those in relationship interact with each other inevitably has an effect upon the nature of the relationship. What happens is commonly expressed in the language of closeness and distance. We have all said of persons in relationship: "They are not close anymore." Or, "She seems so distant whenever she's with him." Such relational distance has the capacity of reducing the possibilities of fullness in the relationship. For example, if one person in a relationship gives the other the "silent treatment," the other cannot be a spouse or a parent or a friend in the way she or he wants to be. The silence is revealing of a distance between them and reduces the possibilities (for growth, communication, healing) within the relationship.

> ***The distance or separation between God and people because of sin does not mean that God has moved to another part of the globe; this is a distance <u>within</u> relationship. God is not able to be the kind of God that God wants to be.***

So it is with divine-human relationships in many ways, as the texts cited above and below make clear. The distance or separation between God and people because of sin does not mean that God has moved to another part of the globe; this is a distance *within* relationship. God is not able to be the kind of God that God wants to be. God's possibilities within the relationship are more limited because of what people say and do. More specifically, lack of communication makes a difference in what is possible for God within the relationship. "I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask. . . . I held out my hands [a prayer gesture] all day long to a rebellious people" (Isa 65:1–2a). In other words, prayer creates more relational space for God, gives God more room in which to work, makes God more welcome. Human beings have the capacity to affect God's exercise of the divine will in a positive or negative way.

I have put the issue in these terms: "God may well be deeply involved in a suffering situation, and God's will for a positive resolution may be reasonably clear. Yet the accumulated effects of sinfulness and other factors at work in a given situation may be such that even God's options are limited in view of divine commitments made in the God-human relationship."[2]

I state the point from a different angle. When asked about God's response to

[2]Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010)146.

prayers, people commonly say (or imply) that God has three answers available: Yes, no, and wait (or similar). It is less common to speak about another kind of response from God: God has determined to answer a prayer in a positive way, but God's will to do so is being successfully resisted by human words and deeds. This resistance may come from within ourselves or from powerful factors at work in the communities within which we are praying.

I believe that the use of this image of closeness and distance can be of much help in our efforts to draw out the Old Testament understanding of God and prayer.

Prayer and Relational Space for God

Fundamental to any talk about prayer is an understanding of the nature of the relationship between God and human. Generally speaking, prayer is one aspect of the gift of relationship that God has established with us.

1. At the heart of the matter, the relationship between God and human is of such a nature that both parties can meaningfully interact with one another in word and deed. The Old Testament understands this possibility as given with creation, not something peculiar to the chosen people. The language of prayer is used to describe the worship activity of non-Israelites (see Isa 44:17; Jon 1:5), and *Israel's* God may answer the prayers of such people (see Jon 1:14; 3:8–10).

2. Speech is an integral aspect of the divine-human relationship. Other ways of interacting might be cited, but speaking and hearing, listening and responding, are central to what it means to be in relationship (Isa 29:13). From the creation stories on, conversation is perhaps the most common way in which God and humankind relate to each other. The absence of such communication is a sign that the relationship is not healthy, and is an occasion for divine wonderment ("Why did no one answer when I called?" Isa 50:2b) and a prelude to judgment (see Jer 35:17; Isa 65:12).

3. The Old Testament does not speculate on how such God-human conversations take place; it only testifies to their reality. Individuals do hear God speak through such "vehicles" as dreams, visions, "personal" appearances, and encounters with certain people. Divine speech is not unambiguously divine (see 1 Sam 3:4–8), but it is commonly believed to be sufficiently clear and effective to shape faith and life.

4. The divine-human conversation is genuine communication. The relationship thus has a fundamental integrity, wherein both parties to the relationship can be affected by the other. For the sake of a genuine relationship, God so enters into relationships that God is not the only one who has something important to say.[3] Human beings have the God-given capacity to affect the nature of the relationship in both positive and negative ways. God is thus pictured in the Old Testament as

[3]For further consideration of such relational issues, see Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005) 13–22.

both delighting or rejoicing in response to the human conversation and being provoked to anger in its absence.

5. By giving human beings the capacity to function as a true party in that relationship, God makes the divine self vulnerable. People can now speak words to God that hurt—words that reject the divine word, words that presume upon the relationship, words inimical to a harmonious relationship. Those in relationship become more vulnerable the more they collapse the distance between them, the more they share of themselves. God's "homing" in Israel means for God a greater vulnerability. Yet, that is a risk that God is willing to take for closeness.

God so enters into relationships that God is not the only one who has something important to say. Human beings have the God-given capacity to affect the nature of the relationship in both positive and negative ways.

6. Because God is in genuine relationship with the world, God is desirous of close communication with us. In the language of Prov 15:8, "The prayer of the upright is God's delight." God is delighted when people pray. It is a sign of health in the relationship when such communication lines between God and humankind are open and active. Prayer is one of the ways in which the relationship can be kept close. On the other hand, when people do not pray, that is a sign that something is not right in the relationship.

Prayer and God's Possibilities

I take a closer look at some Old Testament texts from within this relational framework. For example, Isa 65:1–2 pictures God in agony over the absence of prayer on the part of those whom God loves:

> I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people.

When people do not pray, it affects God, indeed it hurts God. Even in the absence of prayer, however, we see here a God who remains eager for communication: "I held out my hands all day long." At the same time, God does not force the issue, but honors the silence, even though in doing so there may be negative effects for both God and people.

Such lack of communication makes for relational distance between the parties in the relationship. Even more, such silence on the part of the people means that God is not able to be God for them in a way that God would like to be.[4] This ef-

[4]For a text that explicitly speaks of divine disappointment, see Terence E. Fretheim, "What Kind of God Is Portrayed in Isaiah 5:1–7?" in *New Studies in the Book of Isaiah: Essays in Honor of Hallvard Hagelia*, ed. Markus Zehnder (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2014) 53–68. See Jesus' experience of this reality in Matt 23:37: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

fect would be comparable to ways in which silence on the part of a child or spouse affects the possibilities in relationship for a parent or a partner. So, too, God's possibilities are negatively affected by the lack of responsiveness on the part of the people in the relationship.[5] Isaiah 59:1–2 puts it well:

> See, the Lord's hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

Human sin and the lack of responsiveness within the relationship can adversely affect the way in which God is able to be God to people. Distance affects what is possible for God. This reality does not mean that God cannot work at all, but in the particularities of a given situation God's presence is less effective, and God's will does not get done as God would like. In honoring the integrity of the relationship, God may be less able to bring God's power to bear in a given situation. People do have the power to give God less room in which to work in their lives, to close down a situation for God to a greater or lesser extent. Hence, what is possible for God in responding to prayer varies from one situation to another.[6] How God would like to respond to a person's prayer may not come to fruition.

A variety of other passages could be cited in this connection. For example, in Ezek 8:6, the people's sins drive God away from the temple, from that more intensified form of divine presence in Israel. Or, what God "expected" to happen did not happen because of the sinful actions of the people (Isa 5:2, 4, 7).[7] Or, because the people "have acted wickedly," God "will hide his face from them at that time" (Mic 3:4; cf. Deut 32:19–20; 2 Chron 15:2). God's presence is not a "forced entry"; indeed, human wickedness can push God back along the continuum of presence so that God's presence becomes less intense and less effective.

One result of this distancing is that God will not hear, let alone answer, prayer (see Ps 66:18; Prov 1:28). The absence of justice in interhuman relationships is especially cited in this connection:

> When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. (Isa 1:15)
>
> Just as, when I called, they would not hear, so, when they called, I would not hear, says the Lord of hosts. (Zech 7:13, in context)
>
> Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.… [for you do] not share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house. (Isa 58:4–7)

What human beings do and say with respect to the neighbor may negatively

[5]See my considerations of divine self-limitation in "The Self-Limiting God of the Old Testament and Issues of Violence," in *Raising Up a Faithful Exegete: Essays in Honor of Richard D. Nelson*, ed. K. L. Noll and Brooks Schramm (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010) 179–191.

[6]This is not to deny God's omnipotence, but recognizes limitations in the *exercise* of power in view of God's honoring of the relationship. See footnote 5.

[7]See article noted in footnote 5.

affect the shape of the divine response to prayer. At the same time, in every such situation, while God's presence *to* Israel is diminished in its intensity, God's presence *for* Israel remains alive and well—though that may be hidden from the people's eyes (for example, Ps 44). The God of promise is so desirous of closeness that God is always working toward the fullest possible intensification of presence and all that that means for the salvation of God's people. Prayer is a way of trying to deal with those "spaces," that is, making more room in life (through, for example, repentance) for the more intense forms of the presence of God.

the God of promise is so desirous of closeness that God is always working toward the fullest possible intensification of presence and all that that means for the salvation of God's people

It should be made clear that God is constantly taking the initiative and does "break through" in special intensifications of presence from time to time. For example, 1 Sam 3 witnesses to a highly persevering God, unsurpassed in working for, creating, and finding openings—even when all the doors seem to be closed. But human prayer, even if no more than a "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening," will make a difference in what is possible for God in any given situation. God is now more welcome, given more room to be at work. Such human openness provides another means through which God can be more effectively present and at work. Prayer makes a difference to God and to God's way of being in relationship.

Prayer as God's Power Sharing

This discussion is related to the fact that any relationship of integrity will entail a sharing of power. If one party has all the power, no true relationship exists. This understanding of divine power is something that God has built into the created order from the beginning (see Gen 1:26–28): God's first words to the newly created human beings are power-sharing words. God has chosen not to be the only one in the relationship with power. Given the divine commitment to be faithful in the relationship, what the creature does with the power at its disposal will affect how God is able to use God's power in a given situation. Prayer is a way in which the power at the disposal of the human can be more in tune with the will of God, and they can act together rather than competitively. Prayer is a means that God can use to extend or expand on God's possibilities. This divine move proceeds in a way that honors the power-sharing nature of the relationship that has been established.

Thus, for example, no matter how open to God a given situation of illness may be, physicians will still be needed. The will, insight, and energy of the human creature are resources that join up with the power of God. Let it be noted that an intelligible account of what happens on such occasions can be given apart from faith for a variety of purposes, for example, medical research. But the biblical faith

would claim that no full account of any event can be given without factoring God into the process. And prayer has to do with that which brings the human and the divine factors into a greater power-sharing effectiveness. Prayer makes more room for God to be present and do God's work.

I turn to those texts that speak of God changing direction in view of human intercessory prayer (see Exod 32:12–14; Amos 7:1–6). Note that the intercessors (Moses; Amos) do not suggest that God's announcement of judgment is unjustified. Nor do they make an appeal to Israel's good deeds. But they do give God reasons to act in a way different from what God has announced. What status do such reasons have for God? It seems clear that without the prayers of the intercessor, the results would have been other than what they were. The prayers do make a difference, not simply for the people but for God (many references could be cited with respect to petitions; for example, 2 Kings 20:1–7; Jer 26:19). It also seems clear that God is not now being given information that was previously unavailable. The major difference is that certain matters are now being forcefully articulated by one with whom God has established a special relationship. Because God honors the relationship, the decision-making situation is changed from what it was prior to the prayer.

Through such prayers the human party in the relationship enters into the decision-making sphere set into motion by God's announcement (see Gen 18:17–19; Amos 3:7). The two are now together in a power-sharing situation with respect to the shaping of the future.[8] God now has some new ingredients with which to work. The decision (will), insight (knowledge), and energy of the intercessor are placed in the service of God. God thus has more possibilities within that situation. If those human beings upon whom God has chosen to be dependent in other ways (for example, Moses) think in these ways, then they help shape the future. God honors what the individual brings as an important ingredient for shaping that future. The situations are now more open, for both God and human are working together. It means that God's presence is more intense and hence more effective. The possibilities for the future are more wide-ranging.

A cautionary word needs to be voiced. The God-human relationship could be conceived in mechanical or external or formal terms. One must insist on the living, dynamic character of the relationship and those involved in it. Responses within any relationship, even between those who know each other very well, are not as predictable as one might think. Moreover, the pervasiveness of evil can get in the way of God's response to prayers, given the self-limited way in which God has chosen to work in the world. Just the complexity of the causes that feed into any moment in life prevent one from tracking possible connections between prayers and what happens in the wake of prayers. Factors such as these should stop us from re-

[8]This is not to deny divine omniscience. God knows all there is to know, including what God has decided to do in that future (for example, raise the dead), but there is a future which God knows only in terms of possibilities or probabilities in view of the divine-human relationship (for example, see God's options, "if, if not," in Jer 22:1–5).

ducing these matters to absolute clarity or from thinking that by our prayers the future can be shaped with precision. The question is not whether God wills that which is good in the situation. Rather, the question is what can in fact be done given God's own self-limited ways of responding to developments in the world.

The God-human relationship could be conceived in mechanical or external or formal terms. One must insist on the living, dynamic character of the relationship and those involved in it.

To conclude, prayer is a God-given way for God's people to make a situation more open for God, a God who desires to be as close to people as possible and who always has their best interests at heart. God is open to taking new directions and changing course in view of the prayerful interaction between God and people. Yet, always in view will be God's unchangeable loving will for all. The people of God have been given the power of prayer by their God as a means (not unlike preaching; see Rom 10:14) in and through which God works to accomplish God's purposes in the world. At the same time, given the impact of a possible negative human response, God's will for the best may be successfully resisted and God's way into the future may be more difficult and complex. ⊕

TERENCE E. FRETHEIM is professor emeritus of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.