PRAYER: A SYSTEMATIC UNDERSTANDING AND APPLICATION
THEREOF IN THE LIFE OF THE BELIEVER

RELT 326 Systematic Theology II
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Background

One of the questions inevitably destined to cross one’s mind is the question concerning God’s presence – whether or not he is present in the world, present in one’s own life or others, etc. The essence of this question seeks to understand God’s activity, specifically God’s actions in today’s world, as well as seeking to know what God has done and will do. In other words – it is a question of whether god is active or not. Naturally, prayer is connected to this question, and it is often through questioning prayer that people come to questions such as these.

Such questions naturally give rise to other questions like: “Where is God”? “Why does God ___”? “Why does God not ___”? Those of the theistic worldview, particularly Christianity, must understand the ultimate key issue of these questions – God’s silence. No theologian nor apologist for the Christian faith has ever given a sufficient, reasonable answer for why God, as sovereign as He is, is silent in the midst of the world’s suffering, especially in people’s pleas – or prayers – for help. The most popular response is that God’s answer could either be yes, no, or not yet 1 but this answers what God may answer – not the question of why he doesn’t answer.

Are we not to judge someone for what they do and say, as well as what they do not do nor say? These questions, then, are not mere struggles people have, but is intimately connected with the Great Controversy. It is for this reason that I have decided to investigate these questions and formulate a biblical response to God’s silence in our prayers. In other words, how we are able to recognize God’s answers, thus fixing the underlying issue of God’s silence.
**Problem:** There is a common difficulty to point out God’s involvement in the answering of one’s prayer. There is a two-part question in this difficulty that have yet to be answered: 1) Does God answer prayer? 2) If he does, how are we to recognize his answers?

**Thesis:** God has already answered people’s prayers by way of what has already been revealed in the Scriptures, signs being an illegitimate expectation on the part of those who pray, implying that God is not always active in answering one’s prayers.

**Methodology:** We will analyze certain texts concerning prayer in order to define the mechanics of prayer as well as categorize a host of other verses on prayer, using the definition of prayer from the Seventh-day Adventist 28 Fundamental beliefs. Then we will look at recent trends of prayers and apply the biblical understanding to those trends to predict how God may answer such prayers. Finally, we will finish off with some pointers on how one may apply prayer to their personal life.
Prayer is a fundamental aspect of the Christian faith. According to the 11th fundamental belief of the Seventh-day Adventist Church we are to be “communing with Him [God] daily in Prayer”. In other words, prayer is essential in keeping a connection with God as a form of communication. This is true for practically most protestant churches. For others, such as Pentecostals, prayer is how God and man commune via an ecstatic experience while Christian science believes prayer is a method of healing for a plethora of issues, medical or otherwise. The Roman Catholic Church believes prayer is a response of faith “turned to heaven” and is by nature a “covenant relationship between God and man.” With that said, there is a universal dilemma for Christians concerning prayer, namely in the communication itself, specifically in receiving, and recognizing God’s answers, to their requests whether the answer be a yes or no. Oftentimes people will attribute many events as being from God, which is also an issue. In order to solve this dilemma we now turn to Scripture on prayer, and differing views on prayer.

**Perspective: Putting the Dilemma in Context**

“The idea of a God who takes direct action in all that happens, who intervenes on our behalf, who heals diseases and transforms evil persons and feeds the hungry is hard to maintain. We modern people look for explanations that we can see and document and test. And so there is little room for the supernatural.”

Perhaps the reason the above notion is “hard to maintain” is because this does not happen. Things such as manna falling from heaven only occurred on the Exodus, Jesus only
healed miraculously during his three year ministry, etc. In other words, God has acted in such ways during certain times – not all the time, and it is time for Christians to acknowledge this valid objection from non-Christians. “We ought not to confuse the open invitation to ask for whatever we want from the Lord with a false assurance that every petition we bring will be granted.” God does grant an answer to every prayer request however (Matt 7:7) it should be noted that God’s answer is not always a yes (see Appendix). We may summarize the issue this way: Our expectation of what, and more importantly how God will respond has not been met, making a seemingly different reality between the world of the Bible and the world of today. We now turn to prayer in Scripture in order to solve this dilemma.

**Selected Passages on Prayer: A Brief Analysis**

We will now turn to some important passages on prayer. One of the most widely recognized passages is the Lord’s Prayer, which is considered by most denominations to be the model prayer – spoken by God Himself. This prayer must be the first text we analyze as it sets the stage for properly understanding all other texts on prayer within the biblical text.
The Lord’s Prayer

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<td>² He said to them, “When you pray, say:</td>
<td>⁹ “Pray then in this way:</td>
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<td>Father, hallowed be your name.</td>
<td>Our Father in heaven,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Your kingdom come.</td>
<td>hallowed be your name.</td>
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<td>Give us each day our daily bread.</td>
<td>Your kingdom come.</td>
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<td>And forgive us our sins,</td>
<td>Your will be done,</td>
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<td>for we ourselves forgive everyone</td>
<td>on earth as it is in heaven.</td>
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<td>indebted to us.</td>
<td>Give us this day our daily bread.</td>
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<tr>
<td>And do not bring us to the time of</td>
<td>And forgive us our debts,</td>
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<td>trial.”</td>
<td>as we also have forgiven our debtors.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>And do not bring us to the time of trial,</td>
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<td>but rescue us from the evil one.</td>
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<td>¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.</td>
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This prayer is intended to be an example, or model, prayer; ⁹ a guide if you will. ¹⁰ In the gospels, there is some variation between the two forms, coming later in Luke’s gospel and early in Matthew’s. “Variation would be natural if Jesus was interested in a pattern rather than a rigid insistence on one form of words.” ¹¹ With this in mind we can use this prayer to analyze other texts on prayer as well as analyze prayers of people today. Taking a look at the Lord’s Prayer itself, here is what we find:
1) Prayer can include the past, present, and future, hence the future coming of the kingdom, providing us with our daily bread, as well as forgiving others – which implies that such actions were done in the past.  

2) God is the focus of the prayer; however, man is also the subject of a prayer. This is why we have God’s kingdom being the primary focus, yet man’s needs are also addressed (such as our daily bread).  

3) Prayer is intimate, personal, (see verse 14 in Matthew’s Gospel above) and recognizes both God’s power & love as we hallow his name, yet refer to Him as Father – a family title.  

4) God’s will is acknowledged, having an eschatological focus and on the spread of God’s character (see verse 10 in Matthew’s Gospel.)  

5) Man’s needs are also acknowledged, namely in sustenance (bread), forgiveness (see verse 12), and security from sin (see verse 13.)  

6) Prayer can be both corporate and private (the ‘us’ language incorporating both aspects), as well as involve praises/thanks as seen in asking for one’s needs and rejoicing and hallowing (or uplifting) God’s name  

Since this is a model prayer, we can only can include that prayer may include these and things related to them, such as justice (being consistent with God’s will) and, whatever one prays for is to be prayed with these goals in mind i.e. to be in line with the example God gave in regards to prayer.
The Sword of the Spirit

The next passage we will look at is Paul’s words on “the Sword of the Spirit”. This verse, often ignored, is essential in aiding us on our quest to answer the question of God’s apparent silence in answering one’s prayer.

“Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.” Ephesians 6:17, 18

Just as the Lord’s Prayer is an example of how to pray, so Jesus’ actions are an example themselves. For example, in the above verse Scripture’s role in prayer is outlined, and its effectiveness is demonstrated by Satan’s failure in his effort to attempt to get Jesus to sin, such as the temptation in the wilderness (Cf. Matt 4). We are also to “persevere” in prayer this way, in every part of our lives “at all times.” It is necessary to note that being alert should cause us to turn our “prayers into action”. We are not certain as to how prayer in-and-of itself is an aid, other than Paul referring to prayer as a sort of intercession. Perhaps since prayer calls Christians to action (being alert) and since God’s will is knowable, hence why he gives us Scripture anyway, and given that Christians are to pray in light of the Scriptures, we could say that prayer is an aid because prayer is focused on God’s will and man’s needs. In other words, through prayer people strive towards and aid in achieving God’s will, being alert (and thus ready to act) by applying the Scriptures (which contain God’s will) to every situation. Man being involved in helping to achieve God’s will is part of the Christian duty in the great commission, and is implicit in the Lord’s Prayer (God’s will being done on earth as well as his kingdom being established). Applying this to other situations in Scripture we can see how this occurred, such as in Col 1:9 when Paul prays that the Colossians know the will of god – in the letter, Paul uses the
Scriptures in order to do this (his prayers causing him to be ‘roused to action’). God is involved in some processes such as the changing of the heart (Jer. 31:31-34) however, in most matters, man has a role in prayer as well, especially since there are instances where God sends others.

Before moving on to the next important text to analyze, it is important to note that there is an irreverent way to pray as outlined in 1 Cor. 11:4,5 when Paul comments on men and women covering their head when praying, being the way in which they would differentiate themselves from the Temple prostitutes. Using the model prayer, it would make sense that one should address God properly as God is both a God of love and power. Thus, there should be respect and intimacy, not one rather than the other. It is also worthy to mention that one’s piety (and therefore a stronger connection to God) is also a factor involved with prayer.

Healing Through Prayer

It is now that we come to the most controversial verse on prayer. This verse has given rise to different interpretations such as the Christian Science view on prayer. Understanding this text will not only clear up the confusion amidst the various interpretations that have resulted from this verse, but will also be instrumental in helping us understand the mechanics of prayer.

“13 Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 14 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. 15 The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. 16 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.” James 5:13-16

It is easy to interpret this passage as being cured from any sickness via prayer. This is not the case however. James seems to reinforce what we have already seen in Ephesians, namely to
always pray. James is first concerned with suffering (Gr. Κακοπάθεια), which refers to one’s mental state or response to situations, and is generally concerned with suffering in the general sense. Verses 14-16 forces us to recognize the “corporate nature of faith”, complementing Paul’s statement that when “one member suffers, the whole body suffers.” Though certain people in Scripture in times past were able to heal others, probably due to their piety, this certainly does not happen today (common sense is sufficient to demonstrate this statement). In short “It is best to take anointing, then, as a symbol of God’s blessing attendant to the intercessory prayer and possibly as ‘consecrating’ in the sense of reminding the sick that they belong to God. Anointing reminds both them and the community that they are specially ‘set aside’ for prayer….and points to the reality of the future blessing of eschatological life….This would bring comfort and encouragement to the sick, even if the one suffering must await the final resurrection before he or she experiences being ‘raised up.’” The idea of saving also seems to be linked to the future, the overall message being that God will provide some sort of deliverance, hence his use of “resurrection language”. It is also necessary to note that through this use of resurrection language that prayer may also provide comfort.
Summary: The Mechanics of Prayer

- The Lord’s Prayer is a model prayer, including the many aspects that a prayer may focus on.
- Prayer is to be done in light of Scripture, being the source of divine revelation.
- Man’s role in prayer is to be focused upon what the prayer itself is focused upon, doing what they can to turn the prayer into an action.

Trends in Prayer: How God Answers

Considering the mechanics of prayer, we will look at some recent trends in prayer and how God may answer said prayers.

1) Family & Friends

82% of people surveyed prayed for their friends and family. Prayers for this may include many aspects such as health (social health, physical health, etc.) finances, sustenance, etc. Scripture, a record of God’s self-disclosure i.e. divine revelation, has a lot to say about health such as diet: Gen 1:29; Dan 1; physical activity: Gen 3:17; Eccl 2:24, 3:22, 5:18; social/emotional health: Gen 2:18 and health over all (Matt 1:21). As far as finances, the Bible has some verses on being a good steward – which includes good financial skills, the Bible giving some basic, fundamental advice as well as prompting others to look deeper into stewardship. As for sustenance, the Scriptures say that “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat” (2 Thess 3:10),
God may provide food miraculously like in the Exodus (Ex 16:4), however, one eats by working for their food, via farming and such (see Gen 3 again) which has only improved in our time today. Thus, God has given an answer to people’s request.

2) **One’s Own Issues**

74% of people surveyed prayed for this. This is likely the same as the above prayers.

3) **Good Things**

54% of people surveyed prayed for the good things that have happened to them. It should be stated that Prayer can also be a praise or thanks, and is not simply a request.

4) **One’s Own Sin**

42% of people surveyed prayed for this. Scripture has a lot to say about this, see forgiveness in the Lord’s Prayer

5) **People Where Natural Disasters Have Occurred** 38% of people surveyed prayed for this

6) **God’s Greatness**

37% of people surveyed prayed for this. Again, prayer is not simply a request

There were other prayer requests in this trend, such as wanting to win the lottery and a good parking spot,\(^5\) which does not fit into the model prayer as it is not an absolute need of man i.e. is a selfish prayer. Another trend is seeing God as someone who grants wishes, as well as expecting some sort of sign from God. Another trend is that no one has received a dream or vision because of their prayer. Not everyone in Scripture receives a vision or dream in response for their prayers. For example, Daniel received a number of visions, whereas his companions did not, and even Daniel received his answers via Scripture at times (Dan 9:2).\(^6\) People today are in the same situation, namely that they do not receive dreams or visions. This is because God has revealed Himself to us via divine revelation. Because this Revelation has been recorded,
preserved, and thus compiled for us, God has already spoken to us through his word. He has given us the knowledge to be able to help ourselves – and has created us with the ability to help ourselves i.e. autonomy & self-sufficiency.

Conclusion

After analyzing prayer, we have seen that the answer to our prayers come primarily through scripture, and how scripture contains answers for the trends in prayer in today’s society. Taking this into account, we are to pray knowing that just as God already knows of what we ask for, he has already given us the answer, which should increase our confidence in God as a benevolent and caring listener who, while seemingly is silent and distant, is, in reality, very close to us. When praying, we may then fill our prayers with more thanks than requests, as God is a God who has not only promised but has delivered.

“12 It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” 13 Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” 14 No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.” Deuteronomy 30:12-14 NRSV
References

1) A simple google search will yield these results or similar results. The issue of answers what or how God answers does not address the question of why God doesn’t seem to answer.

2) 28 Fundamental Beliefs of the Adventist Church, belief 11


6) The issue with this tendency is that it does not explain how one knows such things are from God, and will also have to account for other things that happen, namely suffering.


8) Ibid. pg. 63


13) Ibid
   Pg 142

   Reference, 2000. Pg 184


18) Copeland, J. Mark. After This Manner, Pray: Understanding the Power of the Lords Prayer. South


    Commentaries. Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1989. Pg. 211

    Books, 1994. Pg. 188


    Press, 1985. Pg. 133, see also p. 133-137

24) See Appendix I

    Reference, 2000. Pg. 184

26) Nichol, Francis D. Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary. Vol. 6. 7 vols. Hagerstown, MD: Review and
    Herald Publishing Association, 1980. Pg. 1046

28) Nichol, Francis D. Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary. Vol. 6. 7 vols. Hagerstown, MD: Review and
    Herald Publishing Association, 1980. Pg. 1046

29) Ibid

    Eerdmans, 1984. Pg. 185

31) Longman, Tremper, William W. Klein, David E. Garland, Todd D. Still, Robert L. Thomas, Andreas J.
    Köstenberger, and Arthur A. Rupprecht. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Ephesians-Philemon. Grand
    Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006. Pg. 169

32) Nichol, Francis D. Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary. Vol. 7. 7 vols. Hagerstown, MD: Review and
    Herald Publishing Association, 1980. Pg. 146


34) Baker, William R., Ralph P. Martin, and Carl N. Toney. 1 Corinthians. 2 Corinthians. Edited by Philip
    wore their hoods over heads as legal protection against inappropriate advances from men” pg. 156

35) Nash, Robert Scott. 1 Corinthians (Smyth & Helwy’s Bible Commentary) Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys
    Publishing, Incorporated, 2018. Women with loosened hair would be a resemblance to prostitution in
    some of the pagan cults of the day. pg. 319

    Eerdmans, 1984. Pg. 175

    Baker Academic, 2009. Pg. 253

38) See Appendix I
39) https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2802370/ - DOI 10.4103/0019-5545.58288 ; to be fair, some attempt to make a case for this: http://godandscience.org/apologetics/prayer.html


41) McKnight, Edgar V., and Christopher Church. Smyth & Helwys's Bible Commentary: Hebrews-James. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2004. “Here, the bed-bound member is not a burden but one ‘prayed over’ by the church elders, who represent the community; the infirm one is not an untouchable but one anointed with healing oil. Here, the afflicted one is not a voiceless sufferer but one in communication with representatives from the church who stand ready to listen and, if sins are confessed, to speak the good news of God’s pardon.” Pg. 410

42) MacCartney, Dan G. James (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament). Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2009. The idea of being saved seems to be linked to health as a whole, and the idea of ‘raising up’ seems to be connected with the 2nd coming (pg. 256). It is important to note the resurrection language of this verse, the resurrection being the primary focus of the early church (Cf. 1 Cor. 15).


44) Also see http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/frequency-of-prayer/

45) Ibid reference 39

46) The point to illustrate here is that even other prophets received their answers via scripture, not always by visions and dreams. Since the vast majority of Christians do not receive visions or dreams for God, and since God has not limited his revelation by dreams and visions to individuals, we should utilize other sources of divine revelation, namely what has been recorded and preserved in the biblical account.

47) See my first paper on the doctrine of Preservation
Further Reading


Appendix I

A host of texts were surveyed on this matter and have been grouped into the following general categories:

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<th>Protection</th>
<th>Healing</th>
<th>Forgiveness/ Mercy</th>
<th>Praise/Thanks</th>
<th>Piety</th>
<th>Justice &amp; Trust</th>
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General Analysis of Selected Verses

**Protection:** Prayer seems to aid one against temptations and provides protection from sinful influences
**Healing:** Purpose is a huge factor in this section. We see that God healed Abraham & Isaac’s wives in order that they bear children in order to fulfill God’s promise for giving them numerous descendants. We also see, as in Numbers, how God will not always heal people right away but will allow them to be punished according to their deed (making God a God of justice as well as mercy). We also see how sincerity of prayer plays a role in Samuel, but again one must keep in mind that this was also done according to God’s purpose. Perhaps most important is that we see evidence of intercession in these passages, namely that God will work through the prayers of others in order to heal people. The people who prayed for others in this section have the following characteristics in common:

1) Were chosen by God for a specific purpose  
2) Said people have a close relationship with god and are also known for their piety  

In summary, these miracles occurred in order to fulfill God’s purpose and because of the intercession of the some of the chosen, and highly faithful i.e. close to God, people, namely prophets and apostles.

**Forgiveness & Mercy:** God is quick to forgive those who earnestly seek mercy and repent from their sin.

**Praise & Thanks:** It is important that, as God’s children, we do not always ask the Father, but we also how gratitude as it is only polite and proper. God also likes to know that His children are grateful
**Piety:** As seen previously, people with a close connection with God, usually prophets and apostles, were able to be a part of miraculous events. We must never forget that these abilities came from God, not the prophets or apostles themselves, and we must also keep in mind that these abilities were done in order to advance God’s purpose and will. The thing to keep in mind here is that the people who were generally a part of these miraculous events, being on the side of doing the action rather than receiving the action, were chosen by God, and therefore had a great deal of piety.

**Justice & Trust:** God desires justice. In prayer, one can request justice for their own situation. Trust is also seen as being a significant factor in prayer and is likely associated with faith (see Matt 17:19-20).