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- *The purpose and effects of prayer*
- *God's response to prayer*
- *Why there is suffering*

God unites the souls of each of you into a special bond this evening. What you shared with one another is certainly a major source for your growth and deeper understanding. The questions that you posed are vital in your strengthening your relationship with God's presence. Note that we say here not with *God*, for that relationship is constant, but with God's presence—your perception of God's presence.

The issue of prayer is a sticky one, for the more it is discussed, the more questions are raised. Prayer above all other considerations is a power. It is energy. For prayer to work, as you would put it, it must somehow be received by humankind, for it is only humans who have the ability to reject reception or to welcome it. God does not reject a prayer because it is offered with motives centered upon self, for that is for so many the condition of human life. A child's first goals in life are self-satisfying. As the child grows into maturity, those goals may become directed outward. As was mentioned when you were last together, it is your objective to become selfless. So it is with prayer. Prayer is the response of humanity to the perception of God. As the perception of God evolves, so may prayer also evolve.

It was mentioned this evening that there is no one way to pray, and that we wish to underline. There are many cultures based on nonwestern religious philosophies whose prayers are much different than your own. God does not ordain that to be effective their prayers must be as yours are or vice versa. The prayer uttered in faith is a prayer offered in love whether or not there is a sense of self-centeredness or self-serving. It is not important, therefore, that you be concerned about the mechanism of prayer. It is vital, rather, that you be concerned enough to pray.

You wonder about the effects of prayer, the effects on God, the effects on the individual for whom you pray, and the effects upon the one who prays. Let us look at God. Prayers do not set God into action, for God's power and presence are already existent without prayer. It is also true, as you've discussed, that God does not somehow choose sides which determine who shall suffer and who shall not. All the prayer in the world will not shift the burden of suffering from one to another. It is not God's will that one suffer a particular affliction. It is true that life contains within it an unequal distribution of suffering, but that is neither the choice nor the will of God. God does not bring suffering upon people. But if God does not create the suffering, and if God is all powerful and ever present, you may ask why God permits suffering.

The suffering which occurs is permitted because it is part of human life. Were suffering to be eliminated entirely, human life would lose the potential that it has for encouragement of spiritual growth. If there is no suffering, then you neither deal with

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your own afflictions nor the afflictions of others. The way you deal with such difficulties, be they your own or those of others, has a great bearing upon your spiritual development. It is for that reason that suffering is allowed to persist in human life.

When you pray to God that someone, be it yourself or another, be relieved of suffering, you are praying that the suffering in reality may be effectively accommodated within life. By that we mean that the one who suffers may grow, indeed grow beyond the suffering so that its influence and impact is lessened. If you were to pray that someone be freed from all difficulty and that were indeed achieved, the one who suffers would be denied one of the chief sources of life's growing influences upon the soul.

Prayer to God that something take place, even unrelated to suffering, does not galvanize God into action to make the event occur. So what is the use of praying, if you cannot move God into action? The purpose of prayer is to open the subject of that prayer. It is to throw open the shutters to allow more light to enter the spiritual room. The sun is shining indeed, but it is part of the human condition that shades are drawn and the light is filtered and dimmed. Prayer opens those shades. Rejecting the activity of prayer ensures that the shades will remain closed. It is as simple as that. So it does quite definitely matter that you pray.

Your friend's frustration and, yes, anger are most understandable. Her feelings are shared by everyone who has prayed fervently for a specific resolution, only later to be denied the specific resolution sought. One is forced in those circumstances to ask two questions: one, is there a God, and two, does it make a difference if one prays? The first question you know to be answered in the affirmative. The second question will plague you from time to time throughout your lives. That is normal. If you make a telephone call to another house and the receiver is picked up and there is no answer, you may question whether anyone is listening. As you speak into the phone despite your questioning, your voice is heard at the other end. You may not receive a direct response to that which you offer, but the communication is a fact.

When you pray to God, much of why you pray is motivated by a faith that the receiver is open at the other end. You have a faith that God hears what you mean. You must therefore be willing to exercise faith that there is indeed a response. You may not hear the response. You may see no visible evidence of a response. In fact, you may find that after praying that which you seek appears to be further from your reach. But such indications do not give evidence of a silent and unresponsive God. God's response is actually your response and the response of the one for whom you may be praying.

How is it that God's response is yours? If you pray for your own healing, God's response is that you are more receptive to God's presence. That is God's response; it is yours. As God is not away from you until you pray, you must recognize therefore through simple logic that God must be with you. You cannot pray expecting something to occur if it already is a fact. All you can really do is to pray for human response.

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Your acknowledgment in times of stress that in some way God is a part of the situation and you are a part of God will have a marked effect on your response, your feelings, yes, even your physical responses. You know how much emotion plays a part in physical ailments. What is faith other than an emotion? It is a conviction that there is much to be received. It is a willingness to be receptive to all that is. With such faith much healing takes place. It may be physical healing, emotional or spiritual healing, but healing it most certainly is.

Prayer therefore is a positive response on your part to God's presence everywhere. You pray to God for your own help and you will see yourself through. You pray to God on behalf of another, and despite what you may observe, God's aid is assured for you are opening the other to God.

Such prayers on behalf of another may be motivated selfishly or selflessly. A prayer offered on behalf of another which has as a generating element a self-centered wish is still a valid prayer. Both you and the other grow, because although you may be motivated with some level of self-centeredness, you are really trying to surround another with healing, and that is unselfish. You grow; the other grows.

The most significant growth, of course, is selfless prayer. If you ask to be open to God's presence in your lives, that is not a selfish prayer. That is a prayer of giving yourself over to God. It is not a prayer generated by the desire for self-fulfillment but rather spiritual fulfillment.

Prayer is an enormously complex activity, experienced on many different levels simultaneously and otherwise. Let yourselves be led in the direction of prayer within an understanding that it does make a difference, that it does open humanity, that prayer does not activate God.

In the final analysis prayer becomes a natural act of the soul. It is the voice of the soul calling to the collective spiritual body of God. There are individuals who attempt to squelch this act of their souls. Such effort diminishes the soul's ability to maintain contact with God, and therefore denies a means of growth. Allow your souls to reach God. Prayer is the way your souls communicate with one another. Prayer is the way you communicate with God and one another.

When we pray for you, it is the means by which our souls are in contact with you. The fact that you are receptive at this moment to these messages is because you are allowing your souls open communication with us. You are removing yourself, enabling spiritual contact to be solidified. You reach us through prayer. We respond through prayer. We reflect God's guidance by way of prayer. Without our prayer, we are unable to focus God's presence clearly upon your souls and thereby upon your lives.

Our prayers are for your growth and continued openness. Our prayers are for a clearer vision of God's love, and we thank you for your prayers on our behalf. Through

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them we are gratefully strengthened and are more able to provide direction in return for your lives.

We convey God's love and peace to each of you. Cherish those moments when you are at peace and give thanks to God that you are receptive to that peace. We bless each of you with God's presence.

Amen.