

Question: I've been praying every day for a friend who has cancer, but he doesn't seem to be getting better. What good does it do to keep praying?

Praying for a friend who suffers from what is often thought of as a “terminal” illness can be very discouraging at times. Thankfully, progress is being made almost daily on cancer resulting in many survivors. But this situation can severely challenge the faith of even the strongest believer. The words of many of the Psalms demonstrate that this is not a new problem.

A large portion of the psalms are prayers of believing saints from past generations who cried out in anguish as did King David: “Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray. In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation” (Psa. 5:1-3 NIV). But he also knew that no matter what happened he could always trust the Lord. Therefore, he continued to pray with confidence and ended his cry for help by saying: “I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety” (Psa. 4:8 NIV).

However, Jesus provides us the best example of continuing to pray and trust in God in face of whatever may come upon us in this world. The night before he was betrayed and crucified, he entered the garden called Gethsemane with his chosen disciples. After instructing them to pray that they would not fall into temptation, he went a stone's throw from them, knelt and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). He repeated this prayer three times. The Gospel of Luke says he prayed so earnestly his “sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:42). But it was not God's will to spare him from death on the cross. Had not Jesus submitted to God's will in death on the cross, our sins would remain unforgiven, and we would have no hope of a resurrection from the dead some day.

From this we should understand that prayer is a way to submit ourselves to God's will and to express faith in him. God answers our prayers out of his wisdom and in consideration of the long-term good. As much as we think we know what is best, our ability to know all the future problems or benefits is extremely limited. Only an infinite God can know these things.

Concern for the life of a dear friend can bring a sense of desperation. Such desperation prayers often assume that nothing good can come from sickness, poverty or death. The Bible affirms that even death does not separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39). No matter what happens, we must trust in his goodness. He may not solve all of our problems in this lifetime, but we can trust that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Don't stop praying for your friend. God is listening. It is possible that your friend may not survive. However, no matter what happens, you can count on the Lord to help his loved ones through this. You may be surprised by what happens.

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