



Can we change the mind of God?

This question is the result of several questions you all submitted having to do with the power of prayer, the perfection of God, and the regrets God has for certain actions such as appointing Saul king.

Regrets have to do with mourning the consequences of our actions. And God's regrets indicate that we humans can impact God and lead God to a different course of action.

Of course, this is the purpose of intercessory prayer...to ask God to do something that presumably God was not planning on doing. In terms of Jesus' ministry, Mother Mary got things started.

My God, my God... turn this water into wine.

Jesus' first miracle is rather odd and a bit troublesome (especially for a teetotaling Baptist!). He is not healing some sickly child or feeding hungry people but helping the wedding feast remain lively by turning about 150 gallons of water into wine!

At first Jesus refuses. Perhaps He believes He should not deal with minor details, only high and lofty ones shaping the fate of the cosmos. Or perhaps He fears He will become a parlor trick for all of His closest friends. After all, He knows human nature and instead of

transforming people's souls He will be busy at every Super Bowl party making sure the wings, chips and guacamole last through the whole game!

However, for me, it is how this miracle comes to pass that intrigues me. Not only does Mother Mary have the audacity to make this request (demand?), but in the midst of Jesus' obvious protestations, she presumes it will be done in a way only a mother can. In this small thing, Mother Mary changed the divine mind; this one little act is the thin edge of the wedge opens up surprising and perhaps even unnerving possibilities.

I apologize; this week rather than a neatly wrapped sermon that ties all things together, we will entertain an increasing series of Biblical confrontations with God that illuminate the interplay between divine will and human determination. This sermon may take away some of our comfort of an idealized God (that we don't find in scripture) but at the same time embolden us to seize the power God created us with – the power to challenge and change God.

It begins with a seemingly harmless request.

My God, my God... give me this day my daily bread.

This is the simplest form of intercessory prayer that Jesus taught us. But notice it is not really a request. It is a demand disguised in humility – *give this to me*. Furthermore, in the midst of common conceptions of God, intercessory prayer seems out of place. Would God not feed us if we fail to ask?

When we move these prayers into the realm of healing for others it becomes even more complex. Since we speak of God's plan for our lives, that God is all goodness and power, and the Spirit knows what we need before we ask, then why do we ask God to heal? Would God not do it if we did not ask? Had God decided not to act but when there are enough requests God does something about it? None of these questions are easily answered but it is clear that Jesus tells us to ask for what we want. In John's gospel he says, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, *ask for whatever you wish*, and it will be done for you."

The popular notions of God derived from ancient, platonic Greek thought envisioned God as some immutable (unchangeable) force which would render intercessory prayer irrelevant. If God is unchangeable then there is no point in trying to get God to do something. God either will or will not do it. Period. Even our translation of the divine name exposes our bias. We normally render *Yahweh*, as "I am who I am" but some Hebrew scholars believe the more accurate rendering is, "I will be what I will be." This is the God who is becoming, the God of the Bible who is constantly influenced by interactions with human creations.

Jesus Himself has an inkling of changing God the Father's mind. Not excepting the end of His prayer, "...not my will but thy will be done", He in fact first asks, "...if possible take this cup from me." Jesus is no martyrous fool eagerly seeking out pain, torture, and death for glory's sake.

Christians often hesitate to challenge God for two reasons. We feel it is blasphemous and we feel it is denying the perfection of God. Neither is Biblical. Donald Harman Akenson writes:

The ancient Israelites, in other words, discovered a more realistic God than that descended from the tradition of Greek thought... the God of Hebrew Scripture is meant to be an "embodiment of what is, of reality" as we experience it.

Anyone who reads the Bible can see it is not a whitewashed version of history. In addition to the deeply flawed characters, there is tragic death, famine, isolation, anger, confusion. All the emotions, hardships and challenges we experience on a daily basis. And because it is not a whitewashed version, we see people not only making meek requests but aggressively imploring, even wrestling against the divine will.

My God, my God... bless me or else!

We are familiar with Jacob's wrestling through the night with God and as dawn arrives despite God's request he refuses to let go until God blesses him. The word *Islam* means "to submit", which typifies that religion's understanding. But the word *Israel*,

the name given to Jacob and to God's people, means "to wrestle", to wrestle with God.

The importance of this wrestling cannot be overstated. In the past few centuries, we have turned scripture into a monologue a one-way communication from God, but Jacob's encounter shows us that not only have people wrestled with God, but that God responds. Abraham bargains with God in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, fearing God will slay the good with the bad. That exchange feels like Abraham is talking God down off the precipice of reckless violence. God agrees to Abraham's request.

There are other Biblical characters that have taken it even further than Jacob.

My God, my God...why are You not living up to Your end?

We see Jeremiah question God's reliability, *"Please step in and help me... Your help seems as uncertain as a seasonal brook, like a spring that has gone dry,"* and Gideon deny God's presence, *"If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us. Where are all the miracles our fathers told us about...the Lord has abandoned us!"*

These encounters with God are very confusing and unsettling. Did Moses really change God's mind? Why did God not help Gideon until after he questioned His faithfulness? Wasn't Jeremiah a big whiner? I think it would take much more exploration to address these questions than we have time. The short answer is we will never know. Not in this life. For our purposes this morning the important thing is we can be honest with

God. We can ask, implore, wrestle and challenge God. God will listen and God can handle it.

This is especially important in times of shock, devastation, and tragedy. Some people in the midst of great loss have no trouble trusting God's love, care, and faithfulness. There is utter and perfect trust in God's will that brings peace at all times and in all things. However, these people of perfect trust are clearly not the people of the Bible and not most of us following Christ today. We are frail and faulty, fearful who at times walk the life of faith with wobbly knees, but we need not be timid with our thoughts before God.

Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, whom the Washington Post calls "the most famous Rabbi in America", is the international best-selling author of 29 books. He felt that many people in the wake of the 2012 elementary school shooting in Sandy Hook were hesitant to challenge God on the matter of not defending the helpless. *"Where was God when Adam Lanza shot each of these children multiple times? [And if God was watching over them] ...which I as a religious man firmly believe, then why didn't He stop it?"*

Rabbi Boteach believes popular religion is too quick to defend God or consign God to be our comforter in chief. He writes:

It's about a prevalent and fraudulent belief in world religion, captured in the president's otherwise moving speech, that when tragedy strikes our first impulse should be to defend God rather than rail and thunder against the injustice of it all. God's first

role is not supposed to be as our consoler-in-chief. Rather, He's supposed to be our foremost guardian. If He could split the Red Sea than He can stop an .223-calibre Bushmaster rifle's bullets. If He could bring down the walls of Jericho then He could have made the walls of the Sandy Hook school impregnable to monsters. And if he could revive the dead with Elisha then He could preserve the life of these small children.

Rabbi Boteach, and more importantly, scripture, remind us that not only is it okay to rail in the midst of God's seeming absence, but the failure to do so can lead inadvertently to believing that the God of action is only the God of the past. Scripture promises that the Lord will protect us from all evil. Why didn't God protect those children?

My God, my God...why have You forsaken me.

The voice of abandonment by God in Psalm 22 and before the cross is the most pointed and poignant expression of defiance and frustration in scripture. Its expression may make us feel ungrateful and unfaithful. But if that is what we feel in our gut, God wants us to voice it. C.S. Lewis famously expressed his anger, frustration, fear, isolation, and numbness in the wake of his beloved wife Joy's death in his book, *A Grief Observed*. After her cancerous death he writes:

Go to God when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain and what do you find? A door slammed in your face and a sound of bolting and double bolting and after that silence...

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Not that I am in danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him... So this is what God is like deceive yourself no longer...

The expression of these raw, visceral emotions is often the path to a measure of peace. Knowing that one of the great apologists of the 20th century felt anger and confusion gives us comfort that we might do the same.

Our courage to challenge God serves at least two purposes that are intertwined. When tragedy strikes, the expression of raw emotion can bring healing. The second purpose grows from the first. Rabbi Boteach says:

The role of religion is not to make us compliant. Rather, faith galvanizes us to make the world a better place. That means fighting evil and protecting life. It means building hospitals and developing medicines. And it also means demanding of God that He show Himself in history and help us to make the world a safer place.

Being in relationship with God as scripture demonstrates really is about being in a relationship. We can ask God for little favors like turning water into wine, demand our daily sustenance, debate God on the merits of certain actions, and even question God's justice, love and presence.

Perhaps part of the joy and purpose [dare we say thrill!] God had in creating humanity is the challenge and interplay God experiences and is shaped by in our

interactions. God did not create humans to be sycophantic lap dogs, just like we would not want our children to obsequiously agree with everything we said. We would probably take them to the doctor!

Of the many profound attributes of God is perhaps God's willingness to tolerate our 274finite, sometimes petulant ways, in order for us to know and be known by God is among the most amazing. From as simple a thing such as wanting extra wine for a party, to calling for justice at the death of innocent lives; God listens to it all.

Perhaps Job, in all of his trials, complaints and sorrow, said it best, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him. *Nevertheless I will argue my ways before Him.*"

My God, my God, thank you God, for listening.

Amen.