

Prayer – Seeing Things from God’s Perspective

I like flying (in a plane, of course). It gives me a new perspective. From thousands of feet up I can see snow-capped mountains, arid deserts dissected by dry watercourses, cultivated fields in neat rows, meandering rivers, busy highways, rugged coastlines, clouds, beautiful sunrises and sunsets, and occasionally other aircraft. I have flown on and off most of my adult life and, with a few exceptions, have enjoyed it.

But from time to time I think about where I am. From the relative comfort (never easy because I have long legs) of a spacious wide-body jet, watching a recent movie or interpreting airline food, it is easy to think that we and our fellow-passengers are alone, safe and in a “big space”. It is easy to forget that, from 40,000 feet, the reason the landscape below seems so small is that we are a long way above the surface of the earth. From the vantage point of someone on the ground looking up at the jet passing overhead, we *are* a long way up, and the aircraft looks very, very small in a huge expanse of nothing. We are vulnerable, to the elements, the reliability of the plane and the potential for mechanical or pilot error. We make an assumption that we will reach our destination, and forget that such a conclusion is only our perspective, which may turn out not to be correct after all. Witness the recent disappearance and protracted search for Malaysia Airlines flight 370.

When there is turbulence, our perspective can change quickly; we recall airline accidents attributed to clear air turbulence, severe tropical storms, lightning (I have been in a plane struck by lightning, when the electrical systems appeared to fail, for a few long seconds) or engine problems.

It is hard to keep a balanced perspective when things seem to go wrong. When our heads tell us that there is a chance, even if it is a small one, that disaster could be just around the corner and there is nothing we can do about it.

I went through a period when I was actually terrified of flying, until God spoke to me out of Deuteronomy, in the Old Testament: “The eternal God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deuteronomy 33:27). That changed my perspective completely. Thereafter, and for a long period, I boarded successive aircraft with a prayer “Lord, please hang on”. Not as a talisman, because Christians do sometimes perish in aircraft accidents, but knowing that the Creator of the Universe has things under control is comforting.

It takes a change in perspective, or the way we view the world and life, to enable us to begin to see things from God’s point of view.

“Not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). Jesus’ prayer, on the eve of his crucifixion, did not change the reality of the cross, but was a powerful perspective that has inspired millions of Christians in times of difficulty for many centuries since.

There will be times in each of our lives when we reach the same conclusion: events may not change but the way we process them can.

Perspective often enables us to see things differently to those around us. Guided by the Holy Spirit and faith in our Heavenly Father we are strengthened and enabled to face up to the reality called "Today" with a world view and attitude that are not dictated by the agendas or caprice of others. This is not denial, giving up or escapism; Christians are enabled to call reality for what it is, but look at it differently. Yes, there are alternative ways of looking at reality.

Prayer equips us to see and articulate things from God's perspective. The way Noah saw the rain, Abraham saw Ishmael and Isaac, David saw Goliath, Paul saw his beatings and shipwrecks, the reformers saw imprisonment and the stake, or Christians in the Soviet Union saw the gulags. The way Jesus saw the cross, "For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

Most of us have not witnessed such extremes, but what we do experience seems big to us and in our own way we have to come to grips with what we are going through and make decisions about how to view our lives.

There are four reasons I believe prayer gives us new perspective in life.

First, by bringing our lives and needs, and those of others, to God in prayer, we are acknowledging that we are limited and affirming that He is not. He is all powerful, all knowing, He is present everywhere. Nothing in our lives takes Him by surprise. He knows what we are going to pray before we do so, but still waits for us to take the step. This changes things; it gives us hope and a new context through which we can interpret our situations, our relationships and the world around us.

All too often we come to God in prayer hoping that He will click His fingers and change our personal circumstances; when this does not happen we become discouraged. In fact, the Bible teaches us that when our hearts are changed we see those circumstances differently. That is why the Apostle Paul could declare that, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:11-13). The end result is that prayer changes us.

Second, prayer enables God to open our eyes to see things we cannot when we are down on the ground, scratching around in the shrubs and fog.

Let me explain. I was recently in Puerto Rico, where I hired a car and drove to El Junque National Forest, the only tropical forest in America's national forest network. The park is spectacular. 200 inches of rain a year, in some areas, creates a jungle-like setting — lush foliage, crags, waterfalls and rivers.

At the top of one of the hills, with an amazing outlook to the surrounding mountains and panorama of the coast far below, is Yohaku Tower. From ground level one can see into the surrounding forest and there are glimpses of vegetation on nearby hills. If there is fog, as there was in patches when I visited, even those glimpses disappear in a sea of white. As you climb the circular staircase of the tower there are narrow lookouts, progressively giving slightly broader vistas. However, nothing beats the magnificent view from the platform at the top of the tower. Way above the forest canopy, there are no visual impediments, no obstacles; the outlook is completely different from the forest floor. Looking over the edge it is possible to observe people down below who still cannot see the forest for the trees. (It is hard to be objective when you are subjectively limited to on-the-ground thinking.) Only those who climb the tower can change their perspective.

When we are young, our experience is limited and our perspectives are naïve; when we get older we either become cynical or wiser; we stay on the forest floor grumbling or resigned, or we climb the stairs, learn from our experiences and allow our mindset to change. As God lifts our thinking outside of ourselves and our surroundings our vision of life and His plan becomes clearer; we start to see things the way He does. So, don't hug the metaphorical forest floor.

Paul prayed that the eyes of his readers would be "opened", in order that they might know the hope to which God had called them in Jesus Christ (read Ephesians 1:18-23). We need to claim that pray too.

Perspective is both a choice (we open our eyes) and a result of the Holy Spirit's revelation (He gives us enlightenment). Prayer is a way of facilitating both.

Third, seeing things from God's perspective allows us to know how He sees us as individuals. We have been made in His image. We are accepted by Him, because of His grace. We are forgiven. We are His children. He has a plan and purpose for each of us. Our lives have intrinsic meaning. Our circumstances are not a series of casual coincidences, as we move from birth to death, but part of a bigger picture, a broader canvass.

I have seen some of the world's greatest paintings; many have measured metres in diameter. The quickest way to lose sight of what a great work of art is all about is to get up very close and stare at the individual dots and lines; in life, it is also easy to critique at the micro level (there will always be things to criticize) and miss the bigger picture. The best way to appreciate the whole is to stand back and catch a vision of the complete canvass.

Two views, but two completely different perspectives. Through prayer we are able to stand back and reaffirm who we are in Christ; the Holy Spirit has our attention and can impart a greater understanding of what that means in our lives.

Fourth, prayer is a place of rest. Rest from our struggles, our fears and doubts. “Let the beloved of the Lord rest secure in him” (Deuteronomy 33:12). I like the word “rest”; it suggests desisting from work, quitting struggling. It is hard to think clearly when we are distracted. When we rest we can start letting go of worry and frenetic activity and begin thinking differently.

When prayer involves handing over to God things that are too heavy for us to carry, seeking His discernment about situations we are in, or simply thanking Him for who He is and what He has done, we find that we are able to enter into a new dimension of rest and trust.

In some religions prayer consists of vain repetition. In others it is about “psyching oneself up” to a higher plateau. However, genuine prayer is more than mindless formulae and compulsively repeated mantras. It is more than mindless subjectivism or psychobabble about possibility thinking, or having faith in faith.

Prayer that changes our perspective starts with opening up our mouths, hearts and minds deliberately, engaging with God in terms we understand, and allowing the Holy Spirit to speak to us and provide guidance, clarity, wisdom and reassurance.

Prayer enables us to see things from God’s perspective. It is not passive. By actively seeking the Lord and engaging with Him we allow His work to take place in our lives. This gives us a new way of looking at things. It is transformative.