Arm-Twisting with the Almighty

by David G. Myers

Modern prayer experiments bring to fruition the grand experiment envisioned in 1872 by an anonymous Briton who threw down a prayer test challenge to believers.

The experiment was a simple one. Choose "one single ward or hospital" for three to five years of sustained prayer by "the whole body of the faithful." Will its patients’ healing and mortality rates surpass those in comparable hospitals elsewhere? The proposal triggered a national "prayer-gauge controversy" that raged for a year. For many people, the very idea of testing prayer—and God—was outrageous.

If experimenting with prayer offends, said Victorian polymath Francis Galton, then why not examine the efficacy of spontaneous prayers? Galton collected mortality data on people who were the subjects of much prayer, such as kings, and reported that they did not outlive others. Moreover, the proportion of stillbirths suffered by praying and nonpraying expectant parents appeared similar.

And there things stood quietly for a century, until American researchers decided they would experiment with prayer. The study that did most to stimulate both scientific and popular interest in prayer was Randolph Byrd’s 1988 report of “Positive Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer in a Coronary Care Unit Population.” Byrd randomly assigned 393 coronary patients either to a no-prayer group or to a group that would receive prayer from three to seven “born again” intercessors.

For six of 26 outcomes, the prayed-for patients did better. Although there were questions about whether the person recording the data was entirely ignorant of the patient assignment, the widely publicized conclusion was that prayer worked.

For the other measures—such as length of hospital stay and even mortality—there was, however, no difference between the prayer and no-prayer groups. The ambiguous results helped inspire Dr. Herbert Benson, director of the Mind-Body Institute at Harvard University, to propose in 1997 a substantial, well executed and elegantly simple experiment called the Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer, also known as STEP.

In STEP, which was funded by the John Templeton Foundation, more than 1,800 consenting coronary bypass patients were assigned to one of three groups: one that knew that it was being prayed for by volunteer intercessors, one that did not know for certain whether it was being prayed for but was, and another group that did not know for certain whether it was being prayed for but wasn’t.
After becoming aware of the STEP experiment from Templeton staff and Herbert Benson, the lead investigator, I filed a statement “Why People of Faith Can Expect Null Effects in the Harvard Prayer Experiment.” I put this on record in 1997 so that such Christian thinking about prayer would not seem, if offered now, like after-the-fact backpedaling or rationalization. I also wrote two more articles for the Reformed Review expressing my Christian and scientific skepticism about the prayer experiments while acknowledging the more intriguing and persuasive evidence of correlations between religiousness and health.

In the intervening nine years, while we awaited the results from this unprecedented mother of all prayer experiments, other prayer experiments surfaced:

- A 1997 experiment on “Intercessory Prayer in the Treatment of Alcohol Abuse and Dependence” found no measurable effect of intercessory prayer.
- A 1998 experiment with arthritis patients reported that no significant effect from distant prayer was found.
- A 1999 study of 990 coronary care patients—who were unaware of the study—reported about 10 percent fewer complications for the half who received prayers “for a speedy recovery with no complications.” But there was no difference in specific major complications such as cardiac arrest, hypertension and pneumonia, with the median hospital stay the same 4.0 days for both groups.
- A 2001 Mayo Clinic study of 799 coronary care patients offered a simple result: “As delivered in this study, intercessory prayer had no significant effect on medical outcomes,” the study said.
- A 2005 Duke University study of 848 coronary patients found no significant difference in clinical outcomes between those prayed for and those not.

Amid these negative results, one stunning result challenged my prediction. “Prayer works,” said a headline in The New York Times magazine after a 2001 Journal of Reproductive Medicine article reported that prayed-for women undergoing in vitro fertilization experienced a 50 percent pregnancy rate—double the 26 percent rate among those not receiving experimental intercessory prayers. When suspicions about the study emerged, one of the study’s authors pleaded guilty to criminal business fraud and was sentenced to prison. The article’s Columbia University co-author removed his name from the “study,” with which it turned out he had no direct involvement.

Climaxing this string of negative or discredited results comes what may be the coup de grace for intercessory prayer experiments: intercessory prayer in the STEP experiment had no effect on recovery from bypass surgery. If these had been clinical tests of a new drug, the pharmaceutical industry would surely, at this point, say “enough.”

But imagine that these experiments had confirmed the intercessory prayer’s clinical efficacy. How big would the “God effect”—if that is how we would have viewed it—need to be to be added to the list of recommended medical treatments? Might affluent but ill people effectively outsource prayers for their healing by paying distant people to pray, in the confidence that God will be counting votes? And if a now-proven God were to be arm-twisted into reliably
responding, would faith be required any more?

Or do we err in viewing the “God effect” as a mere slight subtraction to, for example, the number of stillbirths or coronary deaths? In the historic Christian understanding, God is not a distant genie whom we call forth with our prayers but rather the creator and sustainer of all that is. Thus when the Pharisees pressed Jesus for some criteria by which they could validate the kingdom of God, Jesus answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed. . . . For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

The Lord's Prayer, the model prayer for Christians that I pray every day, does not attempt to control a God who withholds care unless cajoled. Rather, by affirming God's nature and human dependence even for daily bread, it prepares one to receive that which God is already providing. Through prayer, people of faith express their praise and gratitude, confess their wrongdoing, voice their concerns, open themselves to the spirit, and seek the peace and grace to live as God's own people.