



This Thing Called Prayer

DAVID MYERS

Prayer may not be magic, but it is mystical. In quiet meditation and prayer, we sense the reality of the living God. God speaks to us and we to God. As we do so we are changed.

What is this thing called prayer? Can our prayers change the course of remote events? Is prayer a sort of magic?

Careful here. Laboratory studies reveal that we easily delude ourselves into thinking we can predict or control random events. This "illusory thinking" has also been observed over and over again in the superstitious behaviors of gamblers, stock market speculators, and believers in the occult and paranormal.

Are we Christians exempt from superstition? Jesus warned us against false piety. If it is heretical to underestimate spiritual powers, is it not also heretical to think of God as a sort of celestial vending machine whose levers we pull with our petitions? Was such heresy not implied in the rationale that presidential aspirant Pat Robertson offered after asking God to steer hurricane Gloria away from his Virginia Beach television headquarters? "I felt that if I couldn't move a hurricane, I could hardly move a nation," he said then.

When religion is sold as magic, using exaggerated testimonials that falsely portray faith as a route to good weather, health, wealth, and success, the convert is set up for disillusionment. Exaggeration produces doubts in those who don't get the expected results

and provokes a sense of inferiority in listeners who compare their lives with the glamorous successes of their fellow believers. If we repeatedly hear people testifying, "God healed all my woes," but find that our woes remain, we may either feel guilty at our seeming lack of faith or we may begin to wonder if Christianity is a farce.

Surely God does care for us, more than we can ever know. The God of the Bible is a personal being who bids us to ask that we may receive. How then can we separate genuine prayer from false prayer, real faith from counterfeit faith, true Christianity from its glib caricatures?

One proposal has been to put prayer to the test. After all, some popular claims for prayer are stated in a straightforward, testable manner. Prayer is said to produce healings, money, parking places on busy streets, and even better grades on exams. During a prayer-test controversy in Britain during 1872-73 several scientists proposed an experiment: why not test the efficacy of prayer as we test any other remedy? Identify a group of patients who are suffering from a disease, administer the remedy to half, and see if it makes a difference. If that sounds offensive to those who remember Jesus' admonition "not to put the Lord your God to the test," then perhaps we should examine the efficacy only of prayers that have been spontaneously uttered. The British scientist Francis Galton collected mortality data on groups of people who were the objects of much prayer—kings,

David G. Myers is professor of psychology at Hope College and a member of Hope Church in Holland, Michigan. This article is adapted from his *Psychology through the Eyes of Faith* (with Malcolm Jeeves, Harper & Row, 1987).

clergy, missionaries—and found that they lived no longer. And consider, he said: If Christian parents pray for anything it is for the health of their unborn children. Yet the proportion of stillbirths suffered by praying and non-praying expectant parents appeared to be identical.

In analyzing the aftermath of any prayer, believers and skeptics are not going to settle their differences through experience. Both reason, "heads I win, tails you lose." If the thing prayed for happens, believers see this as one more proof that petitionary prayers work; if it doesn't, this indicates that God's will, taking everyone's known and unknown needs into account, is otherwise. In either case, the prayer is answered. Nonbelievers' reasoning is nearly the mirror image of this: if the prayed-for event happens, they see natural causes that led up to it ("It would have happened anyway"), and if it doesn't happen, that is one more proof that petitionary prayers don't work. Thus no amount of experience is likely to convince either the one who views life through the eyes of faith or the one who views life through the eyes of unbelief.

The prayer test challenge can, however, stimulate us to clarify our understanding of prayer. To believe in and wholeheartedly engage in petitionary prayer, must we agree that prayer disturbs nature's events in statistically verifiable ways? Job's experience reminds us that God does not play favorites; the rain falls both on those who plead with God and those who do not. Would we nevertheless be right to presume that, other things being equal, praying parents will have 5 percent fewer stillborn or handicapped babies than non-praying parents?

To suppose so is to separate God from creation. In the biblical

Before they call I will answer, while
they are yet speaking I will hear.
—Isaiah 65:24

Pete De Ritter



view, the "God factor" is not a mere 5 percent but 100 percent. One does not need a manipulative conception of prayer to induce God's involvement in the world; God is everywhere and at all times already involved. Thus when the Pharisees pressed Jesus for some criteria by which they could validate the kingdom of God, Jesus answered, "You cannot tell by observation when the kingdom of God comes. There will be no one saying, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' for in fact the kingdom of God is among you."

What, then, is the Christian's proper prayer?

First of all, it is a declaration of praise and thanksgiving for God's infinite goodness and an acknowledgement of sin and the need for forgiveness. Notice the elements of our Lord's model prayer:

Our Father in heaven,
 hallowed be your name,
 your kingdom come,
 your will be done,
 on earth as in heaven.
 Give us today our daily bread.
 Forgive us our sins
 as we forgive those
 who sin against us.
 Save us from the time of trial,
 and deliver us from evil.
 For the kingdom, the power,
 and the glory are yours,
 now and for ever. Amen.

Christ's prayer contains no attempt to manipulate God. It does not attempt to cajole a miserly god into doing what he would not have the goodwill and good sense to do anyway. It has the quality of a confessional statement, affirming God's nature and our dependence upon God's grace. It therefore prepares us to receive that which God by nature is already providing. The petitions that God's will be done and that forgiveness be given for debts seek what is intrinsic to

God's nature. The petition for daily bread serves to reinforce the sense of God as gracious caregiver, of humanity as dependent and anticipating children, and of our lives as daily saturated by God's providence.

Prayer may not be magic, but it is mystical. In quiet meditation and prayer, we sense the reality of the living God. God speaks to us and we to God. As we do so we are changed. Sinking to our

If each day I carry to the Lord one cup of sin and pour it out at the foot of the cross, he fills my cup with one day's supply of grace. Never more; never less.

If each day I bring him one heart filled with gratitude and praise, he gives me enough love and compassion for one day's journey. Never more; never less.

If each day I offer him my weak soul for his anointing, he gives me strength for one day's tasks. Never more; never less.

If each day I bring him one day's pain, one day's tears, he gives me one day's supply of peace and joy. Never more; never less.

If as I continue my life's journey I remember to spend the first hour of each day with him, he will provide me with whatever I need for that one day. Never more; never less.

Nancy Dornier
 Kalamazoo, Michigan

knees or bowing our heads reminds us of our humble dependence. Prayers for others make us more aware of their needs. To paraphrase the devotional writer William Law, there is nothing that makes us love people so much as praying for them.

Prayer may also be viewed as a response, as an effect rather than a cause, as a time not of asking

"What are we to eat? What are we to drink? What shall we wear?" All these are things for the heathen to run after, not for you, because your heavenly Father knows that you need

them all. Set your mind on God's kingdom and his justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well. (Mt. 6:31-33, New English Bible)

Paul echoes Jesus' thoughts: "The Lord is near; have no anxiety, but in everything make your requests known to God in prayer and petition with Thanksgiving. Then the peace of God, which is beyond our utmost understanding, will keep guard over your hearts and your thoughts, in Christ Jesus." Paul urges us to petition God, and we are promised an answer: not that of scientifically provable effects, but the peace of God that satisfies the deeper cravings of our being.

Jesus himself prayed that if it be God's will, the cup might pass. It did not, but his strength was made equal to the burden. In confessing his private longings and community with the Father, Jesus found the grace to endure. If our Creator loves us as an all-loving parent would love a child, then we, like children, can communicate with God without ceasing. We can share even the little concerns of daily existence—anything that is worth worrying about—much as a child would do with its parents or as two intimate friends do with one another. We can surrender every corner of our lives in prayer—including prayers of petition and intercession. We pray in the confidence that prayer is a means of grace whereby we will grow and be sensitized to the presence of God.

And let us not forget prayer's multiple purposes. Through prayer we thank and praise God, we humbly confess our sin and acknowledge our dependence upon God's grace, we express our concerns, and we seek inward peace and the strength to live as God's people. □