



Why People of Faith Can Predict Null Effects in the Harvard Prayer Experiment

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I have no quarrel with the scientific methodology of Herbert Benson's intercessory prayer experiment. By keeping patients "blind" as to whether they are being prayed for, the experiment controls for various possible natural explanations which might explain any healing power of one's own meditative prayers. Moreover, I sympathize with a scientist's wishing to replicate, with a larger sample and better controls, well-publicized smaller scale studies which some people believe confirm the supernatural power of intercessory prayer. Finally, I believe there is accumulating evidence of links between faith and health (and I report such evidence in my *Psychology*, 5th edition).

As a person of faith, I nevertheless have three reasons for expecting that intercessory prayer will *not* exhibit significant healing powers for the cardiac care patients of this experiment. Indeed, along with many other Christians and Jews who worship the God of the Bible, my understanding of God and God's relation to the created world would be more challenged by positive than null results.

1) *The idea of prayer being tested is more akin to magic than to a biblical understanding of prayer to an omniscient and sovereign God.* In the biblical view, God underlies the whole creation. God is not some little spiritual factor that occasionally deflects nature's course, but the ground of all being. God works not in the gaps of what we don't yet understand, but in and through nature, including the healing ministries that led people of faith to spread medicine and hospitals worldwide. Thus, while our Lord's model prayer welcomes our acknowledging our dependence on God for our basic necessities ("our daily bread"), it does not view God as a celestial vending machine, whose levers we pull with our prayers. Indeed, would the all-wise, all-knowing, all-loving God of the Bible be uninformed or uncaring apart from our prayers? Does presuming that we creatures can pull God's strings not violate biblical admonitions to humbly recognize our place as finite creatures of the infinite God—as ones who, loved by God, have dignity but not deity? No wonder we are counseled to offer prayers of adoration, praise, confession, thanksgiving, dedication, and meditation, as well as to ask for what shall (spiritually, if not materially) be given. Prayer, J. I. Packer has written, "is not an attempt to force God's hand, but a humble acknowledgement of helplessness and dependence."

2) *Even for those who believe that God intervenes in response to our prayers, there are practical reasons for expecting null effects:*

- *The "noise" factor:* Given that 95 percent of Americans express belief in God, all patients undergoing cardiac bypass surgery will already be receiving prayer—by spouses, children, siblings, friends, colleagues, and fellow believers and/or congregants, if not by themselves. Are these fervent prayers a mere "noise factor" above which the signal of additional prayers may rouse God? Does God follow a dose-response curve—more prayers, more response? Does God count votes? Are the pleading, earnest prayers of patients and

those who love them insufficiently persuasive (if God needs to be informed or persuaded of our needs)? Are the distant prayers of strangers participating in an experiment additionally needed?

- *The doubt factor*: To be sure, some Christians believe that prayers, uttered in believing faith, are potent. But are there any or many people of faith who also believe that prayers called forth by a doubting (open-minded, testing) scientist will be similarly effective?

- *"God is not mocked"*: As Christians recalled during the great British prayer test controversy of 1872 (over a hypothetical proposal for a similar experiment), Jesus declared in response to one of his temptations that we ought not "put God to the test." Reflecting on a proposal to test prayers for randomly selected preterm babies, Keith Stewart Thompson questions "whether all such experiments come close to blasphemy. If the health outcomes of the prayed-for subjects turn out to be significantly better than for the others, the experimenter will have set up a situation in which God has, as it were, been made to show his (or her) hand." C. S. Lewis observed, regarding any effort to prove prayer, that the "impossibility of empirical proof is a spiritual necessity" lest a person begin to "feel like a magician." Indeed, if this experiment were to show that numbers of prayers matter—that distant strangers' prayers boost recovery chances—might rich people not want, in hopes of gaining God's attention, to pay indulgences to others who will pray for them?

3) *The evidence of history suggests that the prayers of finite humans do not manipulate an infinite God.* If they could and did, how many droughts, floods, hurricanes, and plagues would have been averted? How many stillborn infants or children with disabilities would have been born healthy? And consider the Bible's own evidence: How should the unanswered prayers of Job, Paul, and even Jesus (in petitioning that the cup might pass) inform our theology of prayer? If the rain falls on my picnic does it mean I pray with too little faith—or that the rain falls both on those who believe and those who don't? Should we pray to God as manipulative adolescents—or as dependent preschoolers, whose loving parents, already knowing their children's needs, welcome the intimacy?

Although I expect that testing prayer will not prove a fruitful way to bridge science and religion, I applaud the Templeton Foundation for its efforts to build such bridges and to welcome diverse views and approaches. If my prediction of no demonstrable effect of experimental prayers proves correct, perhaps some good may come of this unprecedented, massive Harvard prayer experiment. The publicity and debate generated by the experiment may stimulate healthy reflection on God's relationship to the natural and human world. Moreover, as Henri Nouwen once suggested, clearing the decks of some of the false gods of popular religion may prepare our hearts for the God of the Bible. Although the Bible does not promise that we will be spared sorrow, humiliation, misfortune, sickness, and death, it does offer a perspective from which to view such events, a promise that God is beside us in our suffering, and a hope that out of defeat and suffering and even death we may gain new life.

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My commission expires 12/2/98

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