

Response to a Statistical Study of the Effect of Petitionary Prayer

[A large-scale statistical study purporting to show whether petitionary prayer for recovery from illness has any effect, the 'Benson study' was published in April 2006. Patients who had had coronary artery bypass graft surgery at 6 US hospitals were randomly assigned to one of three patient groups. One patient group received intercessory prayer (for an uncomplicated recovery) after being informed that they may or may not receive prayer; one patient group did not receive prayer after being so informed; and one patient group received prayer after being informed that they would receive prayer. Individuals were prayed for by their first names only, and their identity was not known to those praying. Those praying belonged to one of three Christian groups. Complications occurred to 52 per cent of the first patient group, to 51 per cent of the second group, and to 59 per cent of the third group. The virtually identical figures for the first and second group, both of whom were uncertain whether they would receive prayer, was regarded as a 'negative result' showing that intercessory prayer has no effect. (The figure for the third group was regarded as a statistical freak.)]

Humans pray to God for many and various outcomes, good and bad; but among the most frequent petitionary prayers are surely prayers for the recovery of someone else from illness. But, as everyone knows, most illnesses follow a (statistically) largely predictable course, apparently independently of this stream of prayer. Theodicy provides good explanations of why God sometimes (for some or all of the short period of our earthly lives) allows us to suffer pain and disability.

Although they are intrinsically bad states, pain and disability often serve good purposes for the sufferer and for others. My suffering provides me with the opportunity to show courage and patience. It provides you with the opportunity to show sympathy and help to alleviate my suffering. And it provides society with the opportunity to choose whether or not to invest a lot of money in trying to find a cure for the particular kind of suffering. A good God gives us a deep responsibility for ourselves, each other, and the world (for whether and how we flourish); and the free choice of how to exercise that responsibility. And it is very good for us to have this responsibility. Although of course a good God regrets our suffering, his greatest concern is surely that each of us shall show patience sympathy, and generosity, and thereby form a holy character. Some people badly NEED to be ill for their own sake; and some people badly need to be ill in order to provide important choices for others. Only so can some people be encouraged to

take serious choices about the sort of person they are to be. For other people, illness is not so valuable.

But it is a Christian doctrine that God hears our prayers, and answers them (if it is good for us) in a way best for us. Yet when we pray for another person, God knows far better than we do whether it will be best for that person and others affected by him, that he should recover immediately or later or not at all. Many Christians are aware of this when they pray for those in need that God would answer the prayer 'as may be most expedient for them'; and a well-known prayer adds to this the clause 'granting them in this world knowledge of thy truth, and in the world to come life everlasting'. No sign of all that in the secular orientation of the prayer used by those praying in the Benson study 'for a successful surgery with a quick, healthy recovery and no complications!' God seeks better goals for all of us; and may well provide them for those prayed for despite the poverty of the petitionary prayer. After all, Christians believe that the salvation of the world was brought about partly by God's failure to answer the prayer of his Son in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me' (Luke 22:42). (The cup was that is of the Crucifixion.)

But, that point having been made, a quick healthy recovery without complications is clearly as such a good thing, even if there are better things; and if the former can be provided without loss of the latter, God would surely provide it anyway, whether we pray or not. So what is the point of petitionary prayer? The answer must be that sometimes, perhaps often, it is equally good that what we should pray for should occur as it should not occur; and that God wants to interact with us by answering our requests, so long as we ask for a right reason. God surely wants to do for the person praying what that person wants just because that person wants it for a right reason. One right reason is that he prays for a particular sufferer out of love and compassion for that sufferer. In the Benson prayer study, the people praying were NOT praying out of love and compassion for the particular sufferer for whom they were praying- they did not even know who that sufferer was.

Although the form of their prayer might (dishonestly) suggest that they wanted the well-being of the patient for its own sake, that was not why they were praying. They were praying in order to test a scientific hypothesis. Why should a good God pay any attention to these prayers?(You might say: in order to show us more evidentially that he exists. But if there is a God, he does not need to answer such prayers in order to do this - if he wanted to do so, he could fill the world with super-miracles. But there is quite a lot of evidence anyway of God's existence, and too much might not be good for us.) The negative result of the Benson study is entirely predictable on the hypothesis of a loving God who sometimes answers prayers of genuine compassion.

That what I have written is not an ad hoc hypothesis postulated to save theism from disconfirmation, can be seen by an analogy. Suppose that I am a rich man who sometimes gives sums of money to worthy causes, and that I am very well informed and I know just how useful (or not) different gifts would be. I receive many letters asking me to give such gifts. Some foundation wants to know if there is any point in people writing such letters to me - do they make any difference to whether

I give money to this cause or that? So the foundation commissions a study. Many people are enrolled to write letters to me on behalf of several causes rather than others in order to see whether subsequently I give more to those causes rather than to the other causes. In fact, let us suppose, I am normally moved by such letters; I think that the fact that many people take the trouble to write to me on behalf of some cause about which they care a lot is a reason for giving to that cause. But I now discover why I am suddenly bombarded with a stream of letters on behalf of certain causes; and I realise that on this occasion, unlike on other occasions, the letter writers have no deep concern for the causes for which they write. So of course on this occasion I pay no attention to the letters. (For the reasons why God allows suffering, see my *IS THERE A GOD?*, Oxford University Press, 1996, chapter 6; and for fuller discussion see my *PROVIDENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL*, Oxford University Press, 1998. For the substantial evidence of God's existence, see my *IS THERE A GOD?* and more fully *THE EXISTENCE OF GOD*, second edition, Oxford University Press, 2004. For the reason why too much evidence might not be good for us, see pp. 267-71 of that book.)

*This response to the Benson study was first published (in a more-or-less identical form) in *Science and Theology News*, 7 April 2006, <http://www.stnews.org/Commentary-2772.htm>.