

Prayer and Providence: Why the Recent Study On Prayer Should Be No Surprise

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There is no doubt that skeptics are running wild about the alleged ineffectiveness of prayer based on a recent, extensive study. This seemingly plenary study is touted as “the largest study of prayer” concluding that “it provided no benefit to recovery of patients who had undergone cardiac bypass surgery.”^[1] No doubt this will rattle the cages of firm believers in prayer - particularly evangelicals who find God’s miraculous interventions in human affairs to be more prevalent than traditional views. But I believe that the study fails to falsify the effectiveness of prayer while it remains true that prayer cannot necessarily be legitimized in scientific study due to several unmitigating factors. Hence, as I have personally suspected, the study actually confirms what I believe Christians should expect - relative indifference.

Before the skeptic begins to drool at yet another “easy target” seeking to “explain away” good methodological studies disconfirming the supernatural, I am recommending that Christian evangelicals alter their attitudes about what prayer entails. Mistakenly, many ill-informed Christians perceive prayer to be much like rubbing Aladdin’s lamp and bringing to fruition certain “wishes” in order to carry out personal desires. And, as the study insinuates, prayer is a sort of medical remedy achieved via divine intervention every time it is employed. So, naturally, such studies would hope to accomplish the same results as studies in everything from prescription drugs to herbal remedies.^[2] My admonition here is not so much about the research on prayer but about Christian adherents who anticipated positive results from such studies as though prayer always enacted healing results on demand. I do not propose a retreat from the effectiveness of prayer due to modern science but a presentation of genuine x-factors that preclude any fail-safe methodology that could be exercised in such a study. This is to say that in theory we should not expect such studies to ever show conclusively that prayer “works” - at least in the Genie conception of prayer. Due to the inability to account for these special x-factors that, in most cases, could not be controlled, such experiments in prayer will always yield inconclusive results thereby casting unnecessary doubt on the dynamic interventions of God.

The study consists of a massive investment of 2.5 million dollars and had the benefit of being conducted in six medical centers. The *Los Angeles Times* (hereafter just *Times*) article reports that this study consisted of over 1,800 patients in a “randomized and blinded trial” so that this issue could finally be laid to rest. The study ended up showing that “prayers had no beneficial effect on patients' recovery 30 days after surgery” with the interesting consequence that “59% of patients who knew they were being prayed for had complications, compared to 51% of the patients who did not receive prayers” where the “difference was not considered statistically significant.” It was speculated that stress about needing to be prayed for (since the prayed-for patients were informed that they were being prayed for) prompted atrial fibrillation (a fluttering of the heart when stressed). Whether the study’s results can be “laid to rest” or not (which remains as a matter of desperate debate on both sides), Christians should not be surprised as to its findings. Let us first look at some *unlikely* x-factors that appear to me to be dubious responses to the study’s results.

Disputable Claim #1: God chooses to not be tested, and so He intentionally made the results inconclusive. There is a ring of truth to the generic notion that God does not play into one’s test of God as though He were a trained dog prepped to perform on demand. But this objection goes beyond that. Though we accede God’s personal decisions in when, where, and how He is going to act, it is difficult to accept that God would be vindictive in purposely thwarting any personal investigation. What is more likely is that miracles are simply not common occurrences (see X-Factor #1 below). A claim suggesting that God is rejecting a self-directed investigation smacks of an *ad hoc* supposition that appears to be an auxiliary

hypothesis solely designed to avert the problematic results of the study. For I cannot think of why this would be true. Perhaps the claimant means to invoke the words of Jesus during His temptation high atop the temple where He retorts to the devil, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”^[3] This is a plausible suggestion but in the end trivializes Jesus’ response. Since it was understood that God preserves during times of danger, Jesus means to scorn any intentional endangerment in order to prove God’s promise - perhaps to the consequence of forfeiting the right to that expectancy. Or, more weakly, to discourage any open exhibition of such a promise. But in the case of the prayer study, it is seeking purely to catch the results as they normally play out (not an intentional endangerment of people with the sole intent of seeing if prayer, then, will effectuate healing). It is purely the seeking out of the natural consequences of what *already* occurs and to monitor the results. If prayer were to result in statistically significant healings, it should simply be a matter of natural observation that such is occurring. Since the study lacks the intentional staging of endangering persons in order to provoke divine intervention, then I find this response to be relatively inadequate.

Disputable Claim #2: The test was not representative of the praying culture in general. What this disputation amounts to is either the sample size was too small or that the sample’s selectivity was not adequately diverse enough, or both. First, I find any charges of bias or poor selectivity to be unwarranted. The study was primarily funded by the benign Templeton Foundation which has no dog in the fight.^[4] Moreover, the patients did not know if they were being prayed for or not which, as the *Times* article emphasizes, is “the gold standard for scientific proof.” Complaints about the sample size should also be surceased because the study incorporated over 1,800 patients - more than adequate for such an investigation. Perhaps the disputant is concerned about the quality of those doing the praying. The study *Times* article reports that “Two Catholic monasteries and one Protestant group offered the prayers.” While such a complaint might be significant for members of competing world religions in general or non-mainstream Christian religions in particular, evangelicals would be hard-pressed to dismiss the study on ecclesiastical grounds (unless one thought little of the Catholic contribution). But without further specificity of the demographics, it would still be difficult to downplay the significance of the Protestant group’s role. For those adopting a Reformed perspective, this might nonetheless constitute a problem in the study for the praying participants could be *a priori* ruled out as effective. But even without resolving the problems of rejecting the Catholic believers’ effectiveness, those prayed for by the Protestant group should have seen statistically significant positive results. Yet such results failed to occur.

Disputable Claim #3: The prayers were not genuine but manufactured. It seems apparent that one of the possible disqualifications for answered prayer is lack of earnestness. If members pray without seeking legitimate answers to their prayers and do so only to fulfill Christian “obligations“, then such prayers may go unanswered. While this could be possible with respect to *some* of the participants, it is hard-pressed to fault *all* of the participants as having a lack of earnestness. The problem becomes morally complicated in assuming that those involved are conducting the prayers dishonestly, for this would entail that Christians are generally dishonest people - an unsatisfactory implication of this disputable claim.

So, despite some well-intentioned responses to the study as an account for the apparent lack of effectiveness of prayer *per* its conclusion, these three disputable claims may not be the most robust x-factors that can be proffered. But, lest the Christian lose heart, there are several legitimate x-factors I believe avert the negative conclusion anticipated by skeptics. Let’s take a look at these.

X-Factor #1: Miraculous events are rare events of history. One of the most prevalent misconceptions about prayer proffered by well-meaning evangelicals is that God exhibits his power more frequently than commonly understood. This phenomenon is based primarily in the vagary that God does not operate any differently today as He used to during previous eras of human history. This misconception is based primarily on the analogy of history - that history is basically static and unchanging. However, just like any person can change their *modus operandi* from one moment to the next, it is not theoretically inconceivable that God could not as well. Complaints about God “changing” would not fair as support for the verisimilitude of history since changes in operation do not constitute the type of changes forbidden by Scripture. The Bible guarantees that God’s fidelity and character are unchanging aspects of His being, but it does not follow that certain external operations therefore cannot change. For example, on September 11th, 2001 God knew the truth “Today, hijacked planes are colliding with the World Trade Center.” However, into the next day and even unto today that statement has changed from being true to being false. Despite protests by informed philosophers that presentism may not be true, there are self-contained

situations within the Bible that do not depend on adopting presentist ideas of divine temporality. The Bible makes it very clear that

“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.”^[5]

Moreover, there are indications in the New Testament that the healing on demand accorded the apostles was not a regular feature of Christianity (due, admittedly, to the fact that the Church was being born and was being authenticated by the apostolic healings and spiritual gifts^[6]). One such example is that Paul himself apparently is unable to heal on demand at the occasion of Trophimus' sickness where he confesses to Timothy “I left Trophimus sick in Miletus” prompting Timothy to “do [his] best to get there before winter.”^[7] It has also been suggested that no prophet existed during the Maccabean period between the two Testaments which suggests a pre-New Testament changing of God's *modus operandi* prior to the age of grace.^[8] I believe these factors make it more plausible than not that it is not beyond divine providence for there to be a move from being revealed in an exterior way to an interior way as long as God's plans are effectuated. Since it would be terribly ambitious and virtually impossible to prove that a static program of exterior revelation throughout all ages would accomplish the same result, we are under no obligation to demand static revelation for God. Hence, preclusions to the waning of miracles should not be considered *a priori* established.^[9]

X-Factor #2: Healing is not guaranteed on demand. The Bible nowhere makes it plausible to suggest that healing is to be *guaranteed* for the believer. Neither do I think God *should* necessarily act this way since God is, for all intents and purposes, not really interested in only the optimal health of His followers. God's priority is for each believer to stand firm in the faith which may entail that some believers will not be healed of their infirmities. Full and unmitigated healing is to occur at the general resurrection, not in the present life. If these are even possible observations (as they clearly are) then it is not necessarily true that healing ought to be guaranteed. On *a posteriori* observations alone, the Bible gives examples of healing unrealized. Most notably, the apostle Paul prayed diligently to eliminate his “thorn in the flesh”^[10] but God explicitly responds that “it” will remain for His glorification. If healing is not guaranteed and perhaps rare, as appears quite plausibly the case, then we have already reduced the positive outcome to an already diminished expectation.

X-Factor #3: Unknown people could have prayed for the officially not-prayed-for patients. I think the study makes a detrimental assumption - that others unofficially part of the study are praying for the patients' recovery. The *Times* article reports that “Researchers said they didn't ask family members of the sick people to stop praying because it would have been unethical to do so.” Indeed, it would have been. However, this amounts to a problematic auxiliary - that possibly *everyone* was being prayed for. This entails that the rate of recovery could not be compared to a control group since the control group itself may have received prayer (the significant feature of the experimental group).

X-Factor #4: The patients could have prayed for themselves. Similar to the fact that others may be praying for the patients not sanctioned by the study, we cannot discount the minds of the patients themselves. For they may be praying for themselves. This now adds insult to injury. In any study about prayer, I suspect anyone put under physical duress would be likely to consider prayer as a way for the infirmed to recover.

X-Factor #5: Non-believers may be able to have such prayers answered. It is customary for Christians, and other exclusivist religions, to discount the effectiveness of prayers offered by non-believers. I suspect this is perhaps generally true, but I do not think it is necessarily true. After all, God answers everyone's prayer for salvation (which necessarily entails that God has answered the prayers of non-Christians if it is true that one is not a Christian until, minimally, salvation has been applied to the person). Moreover, I can find no reason to think why God would not choose to answer any non-believer's prayers. It seems to me that as long as the offered prayer were not contrary to God's will, the possibility of God responding to the prayer for the benefit of, say, someone else is not unreasonable. Scripturally, we have similar precedent. Recall the Matthean passage where Jesus says the following:

“Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”^[11]

The implication here is that someone can enact the power of God but not actually *belong* to His fellowship. In this dramatic example, you have “evildoers” not intimately known by Christ that are performing exorcisms and miracles. Since the decision to permit or enact any miraculous intervention is the providence of God, we may have good grounds for supposing that some prayers offered by non-believers may be answered. This, then, would constitute a subtle problem with the study’s selectivity of its sample.

X-Factor #6: The plausibility of demonic influence could diminish successful results. While it is obviously true for Christians that God is active in promoting His own will, it is equally well-understood that demonic beings are actively threatening God’s beloved followers so that they fall and are rendered ineffective as evangelists in the world.^[12] One of the oldest stories told in the Old Testament is the suffering of Job, a righteous non-Israelite in the Orient. He was said to be quite wealthy and an active follower of God. In a dialogue between Satan and God Himself, Satan challenges Job’s motives for belief suggesting that it is only in Job’s comfortable life does he follow God. In one of the most notable experiments of antiquity, Job’s life takes a turn for the worst - culminating in the loss of all his possessions and his servants. Though Job failed to understand why God permitted his suffering in this situation, he “did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.”^[13]

The problem of evil is not our immediate concern here (as important and fascinating a topic it is), instead we are interested in the devil’s contribution to Job’s situation - direct physical impairment. During the time of the Exile, it was common knowledge that some illnesses were the products of demonic infliction and divine punishment.^[14] We may have a case here for the perturbing of healing or the increase of sickness in any given individual - even believers! This is not to say that all illnesses are demonically caused - indeed, they are not - but that some causes for such illnesses could be demonically driven. Since Satan has a vested interest in hindering the saints of God, it should not seem infeasible for demonic activity to affect physical health. Therefore, we have yet another plausible x-factor that could alter a prayer study’s results.

In conclusion, some attempts at explaining why the recent results of a significant study on prayer do not conform with some Christians’ expectations, my proposal that such expectations will never be met since it is virtually impossible to conduct a study without the hindrances of certain x-factors enumerated in this essay. Though some claims against the study in defense of Christian prayers seem initially possible, further investigation shows them to be disputable. The x-factors I have proffered seem to be preferred difficulties with the study and are features that will perhaps prevent any significant results from any scientific investigation of prayer to reflect its benefits. *Caveat emptor!*

END NOTES

^[11] D. Gellene and T.H. Maugh, “Largest Study of Prayer to Date Finds It Has No Power to Heal,” *Los Angeles Times* (March 31, 2006).

^[12] Improperly understood, prayer has been conceived as being very much like a remedy - something with built-in natural laws put into play to effectuate the desired healing. But no where does the biblical literature support such a concept. Moreover, church history contains no substantial affirmations about on-demand healing for every situations. Paul’s rhetorical question “Do all have gifts of healing?” (1 Corinthians 12:30; NIV) suggests that healing is not a guaranteed occurrence. But this is not to minimize the fact that God does indeed heal through prayer when offered in faith (James 5:18). I can vividly recall a recent situation where perfect clarity of my faith in Jesus and in the present situation of my son, Alex, who was suddenly feeling immense pain - where I was suddenly compelled to pray for him - led me to outright pray in the name of Jesus for his amelioration. As if on cue, my son suddenly got up and confessed that the pain had disappeared. Glory be to God.

[3] Matthew 4:7 (*NIV*); cf. James 1:13.

[4] In one of their Frequently Asked Questions concerning the organization's perspective, they say, "Generally, approaches that deny the enduring importance of religion or reject large areas of well-established scientific research will not be well received even if they grow out of widely held metaphysical positions (such as ontological naturalism on the one hand or Biblical literalism on the other)" (http://www.templeton.org/grant_opportunities/grantadvice_ii.asp#ii.2).

[5] Hebrews 1:1-2; *NIV*.

[6] Hebrews 2:3-4. This is not to say that no occurrences of such manifestations thus occur today, for that would be to commit a non-sequitur. The earlier Pauline teachings on how to handle spiritual gifts and healings in conjunction with obviously extant gifts in the church suggest their ongoing endurance.

[7] 2 Timothy 4:20-21; *NIV*.

[8] See 1 Maccabees 4:45-46. The reference to "until a prophet should come" suggests that no prophet is currently present.

[9] Based on this analysis, it should be evident to suppose that this is not *a posteriori* true either.

[10] 2 Corinthians 12:7-9. It has been disputed that "thorn in the flesh" does not refer to a physical ailment. I am inclined to agree, in that I follow Craig S. Keener's observation, that it is a metaphor for the enemies of Paul (2 Cor. 11:26). But this means that Paul's prayer is perhaps for the amelioration of *social* distress that is obviously taxing on his life (he says that it "torment[s] me" - verse 7). Other interpretations, such as that the "thorn" refers to demonic oppression, would evoke the same scenario.

[11] Matthew 7:21-23; *NIV*.

[12] Matthew 13:24-39; John 8:44; Ephesians 6:12-13.

[13] Job 1:22; The entire story is recounted in Job 1:1-2:13.

[14] Here we may only suggest 2 Corinthians 12:7 as a possible biblical example.