

Burbank Leader

In Theory: Pray alone, or in a group?

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A study published in the September issue of the Southern Medical Journal, titled "Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Proximal Intercessory Prayer on Auditory and Visual Impairments in Mozambique" involved examining two groups of people — 14 with impaired hearing and 11 with impaired vision — before and after members of a local church prayed for their healing. The subjects reported a small but statistically significant improvement in hearing and vision following the prayers. Critics of the study say it did not account for psychosomatic factors (such as the placebo effect), the pre-existing beliefs of the patients, and the small number of patients studied.

What do you think? Is there strength in numbers? Do you believe group prayer works better than praying alone. Or does it all get to God either way, regardless of the numbers?

Answer:

There have been numerous studies aimed at proving or disproving that praying for people who have various types of illnesses or conditions does or does not have a positive effect.

At present, the scientific community seems to be leaning in the direction that prayer for people, whether they know that it is happening or not, does not have a measurable effect on their physical health either way. That being said, there may still be positive effects from intercessory prayer or thought.

For the people who are praying or focusing their energy for the health and wellbeing of another person, they may well receive a positive effect from the feeling that they are making a difference in the life of their friend or loved-one — physically, spiritually or psychologically. When a person about whom we care deeply is suffering, there can be a great deal of solace in the feeling that we are making a difference in his or her life.

And for those who know that others are praying for or meditating on their good health, the positive effect on their sense of wellness can be given an enormous boost. Just knowing that others care how we are doing can make us feel better and give us the strength to persevere. There often seems to be a power in their prayers and thoughts that can give us spiritual comfort.

So whether prayer for others can heal them physically or not, we should not discount its positive value. With so many difficulties in our world, we need all the positive energy we can give and get.

Prayer, by whatever name we may call it, can change lives.

The Rev. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills,
La Crescenta

As a Catholic, I believe firmly in the power of prayer. I also believe that the highest form of prayer is the celebration of the Mass. The Mass is a communal celebration. The assembly gathers to hear the word of God together and to come to the altar to pray the great eucharistic prayer. Afterward, we share the consecrated bread and wine which is the body and blood of Christ.

Catholics believe that, through the Mass, we as a community are formed into a living sacrifice of praise of the Father. We hold that Christ is the victim and the priest at each Mass and that his offering of himself is fully accepted by the Father.

Does this powerful prayer of the Mass affect the assembly gathered? The intentions offered? The forgiveness, the healing, the peace prayer for? I have no doubt and neither does any other Catholic Christian who celebrates the Mass in full, conscious and active participation.

As a matter of fact, the greatest gift that we, as Catholics, can give one another is to say: I will remember you at Mass. If someone is sick, troubled, facing an operation, suffering, in psychological or physical pain, we say: I will remember you at Mass. If a loved one dies, we say: I will remember you, your family and your loved one at Mass.

All prayer is good. We need both prayer alone with the Lord and prayer in community. The first actually prepares us for the second.

Prayer alone with the Lord is powerful. Prayer with the community is most powerful, for the Lord himself said: "Where two or three are gathered in my name I am in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20).

Finally, however, we need to bear in mind that the Lord answers all prayer. His answer, whatever it is, is always for our benefit and for the good of others. That is why we celebrate prayer of adoration, contrition and supplication, but we know that the greatest and most powerful is the prayer of thanksgiving. The Mass is the highest form of the prayer of thanksgiving.

The Rev. Richard Albarano

St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church,

Burbank

Regarding the topic of the power of group prayer, the first thing that comes to mind are the words of Jesus: "Whenever two or more are gathered together in my name, there am I in their midst" (Matthew 18:20).

In Unity, we believe that the "Name" of Jesus represents the nature of the spiritual, or Universal Christ Presence. A simple interpretation of this scripture quote would tell us that whenever we join our prayers, in the name or nature of the Universal Christ, which is the spiritual self indwelling every human being, we acknowledge the same overcoming power that Jesus demonstrated.

Yes, it helps to have group prayer. The belief of one faithful mind and heart is multiplied with increased energy, when that one mind and heart is joined by others who are focusing upon the same prayer. For instance, I may receive a telephone call at our church office from an individual who is requesting prayer for healing. I will then ask our church prayer ministry to join with me in prayer for that individual's improved health and strength. After 30 days, the prayer request for health will be sent to Silent Unity (the 24-hour prayer ministry located at Unity Village in Lee's Summit, MO) where the prayer request will be kept in the Prayer Room for an additional 30 days.

At a minimum, the individual prayer request for health has now been personally blessed by hundreds of people. That same prayer request becomes part of the continuous prayer energy of Silent Unity (which celebrated its 120th Anniversary on Sept. 9). There are over 900 Unity ministries worldwide. I don't know exactly how to

calculate how prayer groups exist in each church ministry, but I do know that what started out as one telephone call to our local Unity Church in La Crescenta has now connected with the increased energy and high spiritual vibrations of a great multitude of loving hearts and minds.

Of course, the power of group prayer, meeting after the name and nature of Jesus Christ, has a great effect upon the prayer results for the individual who requested a healing blessing.

The Rev. Jeri Linn

Unity Church of the Valley,

La Crescenta

I believe that prayer is a powerful force; through prayer, miracles can be accomplished, including the healing of the sick. I highlighted that several weeks ago in my In Theory column that addressed faith healing.

Having said that, a controlled, scientific study of the power of prayer, as described in the article is, at the very least, misguided. From a scientific perspective, the controlled group is too small, and there are too many variables within the controlled group to give reliable results.

Apart from that, the premise of the study is flawed. It is based on the idea that, if a group of religious people get together and pray, the targeted individuals will be healed. This is a misunderstanding of how God works.

Yes, the sick may be healed through their own faith and the faith of those called in to prayer for them, but healing is ultimately based on the will of God. Not all individuals are appointed to be healed, even with the showing of the requisite faith.

This fact does not diminish the existence or power of God. It merely is a statement of how God works. Our role is to have faith and to exercise that faith for righteous purposes. The rest is left up to God.

Rick Callister

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,

La Canada

The prayer of even one person can make a huge impact when it is offered for others' good and for God's glory.

James 5:16 urges us to "confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." James illustrates this by reminding us that the prophet Elijah, a man who in nature was no better than any of us, prayed that God would show his power and glory by withholding rain for three-and-a-half years. God answered that man's prayer. And when Elijah prayed that the rain would return, God again answered. God allowed this to remind his people that they had violated their agreement with him and to urge them to return to him to once again receive his goodness. If they turned from spiritual self-destruction back to God, God would restore their souls and heal their land. That principle is true for modern-day America, as well.

We see effective individual and group prayers in both the Old and New Testaments, so I don't think we can establish a "quota" or a "formula" for how many people it takes for a prayer to be answered faster or more fully. But the Bible does give specifics regarding the kinds of prayer God does answer. We are to ask in faith (James 1:6) and not with merely selfish motives but for others' good (James 4:3). We should pray according to God's will as revealed in the Bible (1 John 5:14), because no amount of prayer will move him to deny himself or to do something inappropriate.

Finally, Jesus Christ taught that we should pray in accordance with who he is and what he wants to accomplish: "And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13).

And when God answers, we shouldn't forget to thank him through our Lord Jesus Christ (Hebrews 13:15).

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church,

Burbank

For me, the deeper question is not "What kind of prayer works, but "Does prayer work?"

And what does "work" mean, exactly? Negotiating an outcome? Changing God's mind? Getting God to intervene?

And what does the idea of prayer "working" imply about the nature of God? Does God really sit idly by, letting mayhem take its course, unless someone prays for a different outcome and does it right? What kind of egomaniacal God is that?

If you must know, the issue goes even deeper: Does God cause things to happen?

That might be the theological question of the day. Many who struggle with their belief or unbelief in God do so because of what they think God causes. ("How could God kill babies, let war and violence happen, take my spouse in a car accident, let my mom get cancer?") The God many don't believe in is a God who causes or allows the wrong things to happen, thereby appearing fickle, mean-spirited, powerless or pointless.

Even believers have a sort of schizophrenic theology of prayer. If pressed, most people realize they don't believe in a puppeteer God who manipulates human events. But we can't seem to help ourselves from praying our hopes and dreams; it feels right to share those with God. It feels wrong not to pray in gratitude, when good things happen or bad things are avoided. And Christians believe that Jesus knows what human pain and suffering is like, and longs to hear our broken hearts, in sympathy and love.

Maybe, whether prayer "works" or not, it's a good enough thing to share our hearts with God, for the sake of God's companionship and compassion, and for knowing that we're not alone, as we face whatever it is we have to face.

Prayer isn't about outcomes; it's about relationship — a depth-to-depth divine-human dialogue, marked by transcendent honesty. Prayer is about mutual self-revelation, opening the most genuine truths of our souls to God, and God revealing God's deepest self to us — because that's what lovers do; that's what a good relationship is.

And maybe that's what heals us.

The Rev. Amy Pringle

St. George's Episcopal Church,

La Cañada Flintridge

"You do not have, because you do not ask God" (James 4:2 NIV).

If there is to be any miraculous intervention from heaven, it requires calling upon God and asking. It doesn't pay if you don't pray, but if you aren't one of God's people, then the asking privilege isn't even available.

It's astounding how many folks expect things from God but simultaneously reject him, then blame him for not being good, if he exists at all, because he doesn't answer them. Christians love God and pray for others knowing that the answer is his prerogative, but we still have to ask. It's a relationship.

Many testify to having experienced wellness after having their concerns presented to God, but there are many that simply continue in faith, recognizing that this world is not heaven, and for now they must endure life's difficulties. For those that receive blessing, God is thanked.

No doubt some prayer is divinely attended, while others may be, as the article suggests, psychosomatic. Having people rally for your cause, plying God with fervent requests on your behalf is so mentally inspiring that it likely facilitates wellness, and God is still glorified for giving us bodies that self-heal. I believe this explains why even cults report answers to prayer. They pray to the nameless "power" or the benevolent "energy," yet they still claim healings. The Bible also warns of counterfeit miracles, and no doubt healing could derive from malevolent sources to keep eyes off the biblical God that alone saves. It's like the weirdo that gives candy to children just to lure them into his car. Candy is dandy but not worth the ultimate consequence.

I don't believe that God requires requisite numbers of Christians praying before he can act, but his purposes are certainly served when they are numerously at the task. Just as we have a vertical connection to God, we must also have the lateral connection with our fellows. As God says, "Pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16 NIV).

The Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church,

Montrose

Prayers always reach God under all circumstances, and are heard regardless of whether one prays in solitude or with others. Nevertheless, Judaism does teach us that when one prays with others, there is an added strength to the prayer; in fact, Jewish law states that there are some prayers that can only be said with a quorum of 10. The reasoning behind this is that spirituality is meant to increase our interaction with others, thus making the community a central part of our lives. Being a part of a community is essential to our physical and spiritual well-being, and enables us to better cope with life's many challenges. When faced with a crisis, it is always so

much easier to manage when you have others holding your hand and sharing their experiences from similar situations.

As this study shows, prayer is a very powerful medium for healing.

Religious texts from many faiths have long presented the idea that prayers, in addition to invoking the mercy of God, also help the person praying and put him or her in a positive mood that is very conducive to healing. Praying to God and believing in his ability to heal gives a person the strength necessary to endure medical treatment and the hope required to persevere even under the most strenuous circumstances.

I would encourage anyone who finds themselves in a medical predicament — even more so if it is a dire one — to dust off that prayer book or Book of Psalms, take a few moments to meditate, and tap into that all-merciful, all-powerful healing spirit of the divine. Better yet, pick up the phone and call your rabbi, priest, minister or imam and ask him or her to join you. You will be surprised how much it will change your attitude for the better and help you transform despair into hope.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center,

Glendale