

Does Prayer Work?

Fred wasn't sure he believed in God anymore. He was certain he didn't believe in prayer. For six months he had prayed that God heal his wife, Beth. She was diagnosed with cancer in March; by August she had died. He prayed several times every day. His children prayed. His parents prayed. The church prayed. Not a day went by that he didn't get an e-mail, letter, card, Facebook post that said someone else was praying for Beth. But she still died. Fred was empty, broken, lost. Prayer had been a comfort for many months, now he wondered what was the point.

Have you been there?

In April 2006, the American Heart Journal reported a “scientific” study claiming intercessory prayer doesn't work.¹ They established three groups. One was told they might receive prayer, and they did. One was told they might receive prayer, but they did not. One was told they would receive prayer, and they did.

Complications occurred in 52% of those who received prayer, but only 51% of those who did not. Further, complications occurred in 52% of those who were told they might receive prayer but 59% in those who were assured they would. Major events and 30-day mortality were the same in all three groups. Skeptics tout this study as proof that prayer doesn't work.

Are they right?

I could point out that **James 5:16** says the prayer of the righteous is effective. This study doesn't take into account who is doing the praying and their relationship with God. In fact, that is impossible for men to measure. I could also point out that the Bible verses this study is trying to test claim prayers offered in faith will be granted (e.g. **Matthew 21:22**). There is no way for this study to be able to assess the level of faith those praying had. Further, this study doesn't have the right control groups. Where is the group that was assured it would receive intercessory prayer, but then no prayer was offered? Where is the group that was told it would not receive intercessory prayer, but people offered prayers anyway? Where is the group that was told it would not receive intercessory prayer and then didn't? I could also point out the impossibility of scientific accuracy because they couldn't actually have a control group. How on earth could they be certain that even one single person had bypass surgery and nobody anywhere prayed for them? Can we assume absolutely no one prayed for them just because no one hired by the study did? I could also point out that with all of the factors already mentioned, this study actually proves that prayer is not a placebo or merely psychological help. If it were, then the folks who knew they were getting prayer would have done better.

I could point those things out, but I won't, because none of them address the real issue. The real issue is those who conducted this study don't understand what prayer is striving to do. We often think prayer is the means by which we bend God to our will. Certainly, I can point to biblical examples of people making requests and God granting them. But that is not the purpose of prayer.

The purpose of prayer is not to bend God to our will. Rather, it is to bend us to God's. Prayer is not for God's benefit; it is for ours. The purpose of prayer is not to inform God. It is to change us.

Notice Jesus' model prayer in **Matthew 6:9-13**. After offering praise to God, what is the first thing prayed for? “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (**Matthew 6:10**). What is the foundation of prayer? Not that I get what I want, but that I do what God wants. All of my requests must be predicated on that foundation.

Consider the example of Jesus' prayer in the garden before His betrayal: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (**Matthew 26:39**). The Father told

¹ <http://www.ahjonline.com/article/PIIS0002870305006496/abstract>

Jesus, “No,” to His initial request. He had to drink the cup. But notice Jesus’ prayer was that He wanted the Father’s will even more than His own. Prayer is intended to get us to that point.

Consider also Paul’s prayer in **II Corinthians 12:7-10**. Paul prayed three times that God remove the thorn in the flesh, but God denied His request. Did Paul think prayer didn’t work? No, he recognized God gave him what he needed even when he asked for what would have hurt him spiritually.

Sometimes, what we are praying for is not in our best interest and God knows that. Therefore, we should not view denial as ineffective praying, but rather that God knows what is best and what is best is not always what is easiest. In this study, there is no way to tell how the complications or lack thereof impacted people on a spiritual level helping them become more like Jesus and depend more on God.

Finally, the very passages that these folks are trying to test, such as **Matthew 21:22** demonstrate this nature of prayer. The concept of a prayer with faith is not stated in a biblical vacuum. According to **Romans 10:17**, faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. Thus, we can only pray a prayer in the ultimate faith that God will grant us our request if our prayer is based on God’s Word. What does this mean? This means many prayers are offered with the faith that God can do something. In fact, all of our prayers can be offered with that faith (**Ephesians 3:20-21**). However, not all of them can be offered with the faith that God will absolutely do what we’ve asked. We do know that prayers offered in faith about wisdom will be granted (**James 1:5-6**). We know that penitent prayers seeking forgiveness will be granted (**Luke 18:13-14**). To be completely honest, we have to admit that no prayers for health or safety have God’s biblical stamp of certainty on them. Can we let God know what we want in those areas? Sure. Will He sometimes grant our requests? Clearly. Consider Paul’s statements about Epaphroditus in **Philippians 2:25-27**. There is no biblical promise that this man would be healed. However, since Paul says his healing was a mercy to him, we can be assured he prayed for it. However, there is no promise that God will heal everyone we ever pray for or that if we pray for someone they will have no complications in their healing.

So, the long and short of this is prayer is working, not when we convince God to do something on our behalf, but when it draws us closer to God and His will. Here is the key, prayer truly offered as God directs in His Word, will always draw us closer to God and His will. While that can’t be tested scientifically, it is a fact.