

# The power of prayer?

Sept. 30, 2018

Text: James 5:13-20

**There was** a church about the size of this one in central Illinois. A prominent member was dying of cancer. A group of 10 or 15 members read this passage from James, believed firmly, and started praying fervently for healing. The sick person got sicker and was admitted to the hospital. The group prayed even more fervently and enlisted as many people as possible to pray.

The sick person died. The group went into the hospital, marched up and down the halls, called on God and prayed to raise the person from the dead. My uncle was the local doctor, and he knew the people. When a hospital official asked if they should call the police, he said no, they won't hurt anyone, and they won't do this for long. A couple of days later, they left.

The primary result of this set of events was a church split. The group that believed 100% in the power of prayer as expressed in James left and joined with others to form a new "Bible church." They believed the sick person would have been healed if the rest of the congregation had prayed properly.

The rest of the church held differing beliefs.

What are we to make of this passage, and this example? Even aside from its ties between sin and sickness, it is troubling. Bringing it closer to home, how do we deal with the reality that one member of our church dies of cancer, while another one is healed? Is it a matter of prayer? Of holiness? Of God being fickle or picking favorites?

I'll come back to that, but first I want to open up a few more aspects of prayer.

**People ask for** a lot more than healing. One of my pet peeves is football players who pray that their team will win. One player whose team won at the last minute crowed, "To God be the glory! I just prayed so hard for this, and God didn't let me down."

Really? Does God change the score of football games? Is one player or team more faithful or fervent than the other? Why don't Notre Dame and TCU and Brigham Young and other church schools win all their games?

What about those who pray for material blessings – wealth, riches, a bigger house, and on and on. And the flip side, if wealth is a blessing from God, is poverty punishment?

Why do some of us pray over our food? Do we think that will make it more healthy or nutritious? Do we think God wants to hear us say Thank you, out loud?

Why do we bless backpacks and pets and new houses? What are we really asking for – better grades, less peeing on the carpet?

And if we really believe James, why can't we pray like Elijah and bring rain to California? Do we have too little faith, or too many sins?

You can see that I have a few problems with this passage and how it is often read.

**I had my own experience.** When my first marriage fell apart, I prayed for understanding. I was torn up inside, I begged, I pleaded, over and over. I got nothing. Finally, in desperation, I begged God, "If I can't have understanding, would you *please* grant me your peace." To my amazement, I immediately felt peace descending over me. It was a physical presence as well as spiritual and emotional. And frankly, it scared me. I had never experienced anything like that.

As I reflected on it over the following days and weeks, I realized I had been fighting with God, pleading for and demanding something I couldn't have. When I asked for what I could have, I got it. The holy spirit had descended on me. I had begun the turn from anguish toward healing.

Now, looking back more than 25 years later, I am growing toward a different understanding. I now believe that the power of that prayer was NOT in what God did or did not do to or for me. It was what that prayer did within me. When I finally let go of seeking knowledge and started seeking healing, I made a critical internal shift in the direction I needed to go.

**Sometimes I assist** with or lead this church in communion. As I serve the bread and juice, I often offer the people I'm serving a brief blessing. Why? Do I think I have any power to focus God's attention on you? No. I do it because of the expression on someone's face. You want a blessing and are happy to receive one. I do it for you.

When I'm guest minister, like today, I make notes of your prayer requests. Then when I lead the prayer, I mention as many as I can, either by name or by a shared concern. Do I believe doing this will affect who gets their wish? No. I do it because some who have asked for prayer want to hear it. It brings a little comfort, or a little relief, to your hearts.

James 5:15-16 says, "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." It sounds like a guarantee, but we know life doesn't work that way, no matter how devout we are.

One of the dangers of literal belief in this passage is that when people pray fervently and their loved one still dies, some experience a crisis of faith, and leave altogether. If God chose not to answer my prayer, to hell with God and the church.

**Philip Gulley** is a Quaker minister, writer and speaker. He's far enough out on the progressive end of the spectrum that some conservative Quakers have called for his removal from ministry or even from the Society of Friends altogether.

He describes the all-*powerful* God, then the all-*loving* God. He concludes that these two perceptions cannot coexist. An all-powerful, all-loving God would heal *everyone*. All would go to heaven and none to hell, if such places actually exist. But deeply faithful people do suffer and die.

He concludes that God does NOT have the power to heal individuals. God created people, gave us minds and tools and hearts and spirits and evolution, and it is up to us to use all of them. God loves us and wants us to use our hearts, our science, our compassion for each other.

Humans may benefit from prayer, but not due to direct intervention by God. Both the one who prays and the one prayed for may feel comforted, a sense of community.

As a young person, Gulley believed that fervent prayer would get God to do or grant things that God would not otherwise do or give – but not anymore. Gulley no longer practices intercessory prayer – that is, asking for things. He now says prayer, for him, is “a heightened awareness of God’s presence in creation, in others, and in myself.” He resolved to pay better attention to his life and to divine presence, to be grateful and to give thanks to nature, to people, to kindness, to compassion and thus to God. This, he says, is what Paul called praying without ceasing.

These thoughts, this chapter on prayer in his book, *The Evolution of Faith*, resonated with me so much that I scrapped the sermon I had written for today and wrote this one instead. Maybe I’ll give the other one another day.

I’m not 100% on the same page as Gulley, but I’m close. I don’t pray over my food. I practically never ask God for things. I rarely thank God for good things that happen. I mostly experience God through music, through nature and through other people. I believe God loves us and expects us to love each other and act accordingly, but it’s up to us. Whether we heal or sicken and die is pretty much up to us, our genes and our medical care.

I am sure that there is quite a diversity in our collective beliefs about such matters. I hope I leave you with some food for thought today.

**I will end** with Philip Gulley’s conclusion: “This is prayer: that I would in every circumstance be grateful, and in every moment be attentive to others, so that the Divine Presence in me might speak to the Divine Presence in others, and in the speaking, grace might flow and prosper.”