

“Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?”
by Philip Yancey

Book excerpts for discussion at our Bible study

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p. 31:

“I begin with confession not in order to feel miserable, rather to call to mind a reality I often ignore. ... The well-known pastor Haddon Robinson begins almost every sermon with the same brief confession: ‘God, if these people knew about me what you know about me, they wouldn’t listen to a word I said.’ ”

p. 66:

“We know well what happens when human beings form such unequal alliances: the dominant partner throws weight around and the subordinate mostly keeps quiet. God, who has no reason to be threatened by the likes of us, instead invites a steady and honest flow of communication.”

pp. 81-82:

“And yet, it appears, prayer was no simple matter even for Jesus. I once wrote an article titled ‘Jesus’ Unanswered Prayers,’ and it gave me wistful comfort to review the record of Jesus’ prayers and find that in respect to prayer, too, he fully shared the human condition. Like the people who write me letters, Jesus knows the heartbreak of unanswered prayers. His longest prayer, after all, centers in a request for unity, ‘that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.’ The slightest acquaintance with church history (at recent count 34,000 distinct denominations and sects) shows how far that prayer remains from being answered.

“I included in my list of problematic prayers the night when Jesus sought guidance for choosing the twelve disciples whom he would entrust with his mission. ‘Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God,’ Luke records. ‘When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.’ Yet as I read the Gospels I marvel that this dodgy dozen could constitute the answer to any prayer. They included, Luke pointedly notes, ‘Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor,’ not to mention the ambitious Sons of Thunder and the hothead Simon, whom Jesus would soon rebuke as ‘Satan.’ When Jesus later sighed in desperation over these twelve, ‘How long shall I put up with you?’ I wonder if he momentarily questioned the Father’s guidance back on the mountainside.”

p. 87:

“I believe in miracles, but I also believe they are *miracles*, meaning rare exceptions to the normal laws that govern the planet. I cannot, nor can anyone, promise that prayer will

solve all problems and eliminate all suffering. At the same time, I also know that Jesus commanded his followers to pray, certain that it makes a difference in a world full of opposition to God's will.

“For whatever reason, God now tolerates a world in which fathers abuse their physically disabled sons, children live with congenital birth defects, breast cancers metastasize, and distressed young people commit suicide. Why does God so rarely step in and bring miraculous intervention to our prayer requests? Why is suffering distributed so randomly and unfairly? No one knows the complete answer to those questions.”

pp. 93-94:

“Unlike Abraham, Moses turns argumentative from the very first meeting. He tries false humility: *Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh?* When that fails, he marshals other objections: *I don't know your name ... and what if the Israelites don't believe me ... I have never been eloquent.* God answers each one, orchestrating a few miracles to establish credibility. Still Moses begs off: *O Lord, please send someone else to do it.* Patience runs out and God's anger flares, but even so God suggests a compromise, a shared role with Moses' brother Aaron. The famous exodus from Egypt thus gets under way only after an extended bargaining session.”

“... after seeing a pharaoh's state-of-the-art army swept underwater, after following a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, after receiving miraculous supplies of water and food (some of it digesting in their bellies at that very moment)—after all that, the Israelites grow afraid, or bored, or 'stiff-necked' in God's diagnosis, and reject it all in favor of a golden idol made for them by Moses' sidekick brother, the very Aaron God had recruited by way of compromise.”

“God has had quite enough. ‘Let me alone, so that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven. And I will make you into a nation stronger and more numerous than they.’ Moses knows well the destructive power God can unleash for he has seen it firsthand in Egypt. *Let me alone,* God says!”

“Moses rolls out the arguments. *Look at all you went through delivering them from Egypt. What about your reputation? Think of how the Egyptians will gloat! Don't forget your promises to Abraham.* Moses flings down a sack of God's own promises. For forty days and forty nights he lies prostrate before the Lord, refusing food and drink. At last God yields: ‘Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.’ Moses proceeds to win that argument, too, as God reluctantly agrees to accompany the Israelites the rest of the way.

“Sometime later, the tables have turned. This time Moses is the one ready to resign. ‘Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their

forefathers?’ And this time it is God who responds with compassion, calming Moses, sympathizing with his complaints, and designating seventy elders to share the burden.

“Moses did not win every argument with God. Notably, he failed to persuade God to let him enter the Promised Land in person (though that request, too, was granted many years later on the Mount of Transfiguration). But his example, like Abraham’s proves that God invites argument and struggle, and often yields, especially when the point of contention is God’s mercy. In the very process of arguing, we may in fact take on God’s own qualities.”

pp. 101-102: “History is the story of God giving away power. After entrusting the human species with the gift of free choice, God invited its representative to act as partners, even to argue and wrestle with the One who created them. Yet, virtually everyone God picked to lead a new venture—Adam, Abraham, Moses, David—proved disappointing in part. Apparently God committed to work with human partners no matter how inept.

“Jesus stayed on earth barely long enough to assemble a dozen followers (no less flawed), to whom he handed the keys of the kingdom of God. Against all odds the movement took off, and the human partnership has not stopped since. We are ‘God’s fellow workers,’ the apostle Paul said. We collaborate with God’s actions in the world. And as God’s coworkers we are encouraged to submit our request, our desires, our petitions in prayer.

“Even as I write these words, however, warning bells go off. Something has changed since biblical days. Adam carried on conversations with God, Abraham bargained like an auctioneer, Moses saw a burning bush, Samuel heard God’s audible voice, the disciples spoke to Jesus in the flesh. God irrupted in human history. Does that still happen today?”

“Some years ago I wrote a book (*Disappointment with God*) in an attempt to understand what lay behind these irruptions and why they seems so sporadic. The ten plagues orchestrated though Moses, for example, followed four centuries of God’s silence. The prophet Samuel’s call came at a time when ‘the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.’ In search of a pattern I studied every miracle reported in the Bible, every appearance by God, every word that God spoke.

“I concluded that much of our current disappointment comes from an expectation that God will act in the same spectacular ways today. We too want to hear God’s voice from a bush ablaze, to have our diseases healed and our relatives resurrected. We read the rousing stories from the Bible, hear stirring sermons about them, pray in faith—and don’t get the same results.

“Looking closer, I detected an Old Testament pattern of God as the reluctant intervener in history. God waits, chooses a partner, moves with agonizing slowness, does a few

miracles, then waits some more. In the Gospels supernatural activity again bursts out, with power radiating from Jesus. Yet Jesus, too, intervened selectively, performing miracles not as a cure-all but as *signs* of God's rule."

p. 102: "I know Christians who yearn for God's older style of a power-worker who topples pharaohs, flattens Jericho's walls, and scorches the priests of Baal. I do not. I believe the kingdom now advances through grace and freedom, God's goal all along. I accept Jesus' assurance that his departure from earth represents progress, by opening a door for the Counselor to enter. We know how counselors work: not by giving orders and imposing changes through external force. A good counselor works on the inside, bringing to the surface dormant health. For a relationship between such unequal partners, prayer provides an ideal medium."

p. 117: "I interviewed a Chinese pastor who spent two decades in prison; even so, annually he leads several hundred converts in a prayer of commitment on the banks of a river, everyone present knowing that the act of baptism may well lead to their own arrest and imprisonment. 'What can Christians in the rest of the world do for you?' I ask, and every time without exception I get the same answer. 'You can pray. Please tell the church to pray for us.'

"The first few times I heard that answer, I wanted to say, 'Yes, of course, but we honestly do want to help. What else can we do?' I have since learned that Christians who have no access to earthly power truly believe prayer gives them access to a greater power. They see prayer, in fact, as our strongest weapon against invisible forces. They believe the apostle Paul's words: 'For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.'

"When the prophet Daniel got no answer to his prayer, he withdrew for three weeks of fasting and spiritual discipline, puzzled by the silence of God. Finally a creature with a countenance dazzling as lightning arrived to explain the delay: 'But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia.' What seemed to Daniel like one more case of unanswered prayer had, in ways hidden to him, sparked a battle among unseen combatants in the spiritual realm.

"The question that obsesses modern thinkers, 'Why do bad things happen?' gets little systematic treatment in the Bible because Bible writers believed they knew why bad things happen: we live on a planet ruled by powers intent on blocking and perverting the will of God."

pp. 124-125: "[Dietrich] Bonhoeffer grasped the nature of prayer as partnership with God's activity on earth. He scolded German Christians who retreated into piety while

resigning themselves to the evil around them ('That's just the way things are'). We cannot simply pray and then wait for God to do the rest. At the same time, Bonhoeffer cautioned against an activism that opposed the forces of evil without drawing on the power of prayer. The battle against evil requires both prayer and prayerful action.

"During the 1960s and 1970s prayer almost vanished from the campuses of mainline Protestant seminaries, which emphasized the social gospel. Talk about a private life of prayer made a person suspect and might even provoke a lecture on the dangers of pietism. As a result many Protestants began visiting monasteries in search of spiritual direction. They learned from activists such as Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton that social action unsupported by prayer may well lead to exhaustion and despair.

"In my travels overseas I have seen the clear results of prayerful action. Christians have held a strong belief in a powerful and good God and an equally strong calling to live out the qualities of that God on a damaged and rebellious planet. For this reason, wherever Christian missionaries have traveled they have left behind a trail of hospitals, clinics, orphanages, and schools. To preach God without the kingdom is no better than to preach the kingdom without God."

p. 127: "Sometimes, like the boy who asks his parents to solve a math problem while he plays video games, we ask God for things we should be doing ourselves."

p. 132: "... the well-known Serenity Prayer: God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference."

p. 133: "Throughout, the Bible depicts God as being deeply affected by people, both positively and negatively..."

Ask and it will be given to you.

And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.
... The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer.

You do not have, because you do not ask God."

p. 134: "When God sent the prophet Isaiah, the most God-connected person of his day, to inform King Hezekiah of his imminent death, Hezekiah prayed for more time. Before Isaiah had left the palace grounds, God changed his mind, granting Hezekiah fifteen more years of life.

“In sort of a negative proof of the power of prayer, three times God commanded Jeremiah to stop praying; God wanted no alteration in his plans to punish a rebellious nation. Prayer had, after all, softened God’s resolve before. ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned,’ the prophet Jonah proclaimed to a heathen city, but ‘when God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.’ Four times the Old Testament reports that God ‘relented’ or ‘changed his mind’ in response to a request, and each shift forestalled a promised punishment.’ ”

pp. 134-136: “... a god bound by the unchanging qualities of love and mercy must forgive a sinner who prays repentantly. God changes course in response to the sinner’s change in course, and does so because of those eternal qualities.”

“We can picture God as an aloof monarch, removed from the details of the world. Or we can picture God as a caring parent with traits of love, generosity, and sensitivity—an infinite Being who personally interacts with and responds to creation. Accordingly, God considers prayers much as a wise parent might consider requests from a child.

“Andrew Murray, himself a Calvinist, concluded that ‘God does indeed allow Himself to be decided by prayer to do what He otherwise would not have done.’ ”

p. 142: “For thirty-three years Jesus has stripped himself of the prerogatives of God, including omniscience and a timelessness that sees all history in a flash. (He once admitted he did not know the time of final judgment and healing of the earth, though the Father did.) In this prayer, however, he bridges time and eternity, recalling for a moment his stunning existence before volunteering for this violent planet: ‘And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.’

“Jesus is reminiscing about life before planet Earth, eternity before time. ... From the beginning, before the beginning, God willed to share with other creatures the love and fellowship—the *life*—enjoyed in the godhead before creation, now, and forever. Despite all that has happened and is about to happen, God is committed to restoring creation to its original design, to regaining perfect intimacy and love with human beings. Jesus’ prayer renews the vision, for himself and for us.’

“In a few other places the New Testament gives hints of God choosing us ‘before the creation of the world.’ God’s grace, claims Paul, ‘was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time,’ with Jesus ‘chosen before the creation of the world but revealed in these last times for your sake.’ Our eternal life was promised ‘before the beginning of time.’ Thus the essentials of hope—God’s love, heaven, grace, resurrection—the Bible specifically grounds outside of time and creation.”

pp. 149-150: “In his sermon ‘The Parable of the Importunate Widow,’ Helmut Thielicke notes that ‘God is doing nothing less than offering to his praying church a part in his government of the world.’ The giants of history, Thielicke says (thinking of his contemporaries Hitler and Stalin), stride across the stage under the delusion that they are directing the drama of the world, whereas in reality they are only bit player permitted onstage for a moment.”

p. 152: “All too often pray-ers use God’s presumed changelessness as an excuse not to pray: ‘If God has already decided the future, why bother?’ ”

“Persistent prayer keeps bringing God and me together...”

p. 154: “Like a child who quits badgering a parent, I have sometimes found that I get an answer to my persistent request after I have learned to do without it. The answer then comes as a surprise, an unexpected gift of grace. I seek the gift, find instead the Giver, and eventually come away with the gift I no longer seek.”

“We may ask for relief from trials and instead get patience to bear them. We may pray for release from prison and instead get strength to redeem the time while there.”

p. 162: “[Henri] Nouwen decided on a more realistic prayer regimen of half an hour each day. At first his thoughts ran wild, like untamed animals. He kept at it, telling himself, ‘Since I am here for this half hour anyhow, I might just as well pray.’ The sense of awkwardness gradually faded, and in time he felt his soul settling down to a more calming rhythm. It may seem that nothing happens when you pray, he observed. But when you stay with a routine, over time you realize that something indeed has happened.”

p. 176: “Work out animosity toward enemies not by gossip or hostility, but by informing God of their injustice and asking God to set things right.”

“It’s all right to express impatience to God, asking for a speeded-up answer to prayer—and even to spell out God’s own interests in achieving the desired results.”

p. 177: “I get the sense, reading Paul’s prayers, that he cares more for others’ well-being than for his own. Do I have the same passion for the spiritual welfare of my friends and family? The prayers of Paul expose by contrast the immature prayers I often hear at church meetings—and my own prayers—which tend to revolve around physical and financial well-being.”

p. 178: Great prayers of the Bible:

Genesis 18:	Abraham's plea for Sodom.
Exodus 15:	Moses' song to the Lord.
Exodus 33:	Moses meets with God.
2 Samuel 7:	David's response to God's promises.
1 Kings 8:	Solomon's dedication of the temple.
2 Chronicles 20:	Jehoshaphat prays for victory.
Ezra 9:	Ezra's prayer for the people's sins.
Psalms 22:	A cry to God for help.
Psalms 104:	A prayer of praise.
Daniel 9:	Daniel's prayer for the salvation of Jerusalem.
Habakkuk 3:	A prophet's prayer of acceptance.
Matthew 6:	The Lord's prayer.
John 17:	Jesus' prayer for his disciples.
Colossians 1:	Paul's prayer of thanksgiving.

p. 180: "... practical advice abounds. Many popular guides recommend a formula based on the acronym ACTS, for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication."

p. 183: "For me, the words of prayer are less important than the act of remembering. I look for the spaces, the interstices, in my life. Lying awake at night, insomniac. Soaking in a bathtub. Driving. Biding time while my computer reboots. Sitting in a ski lift. Standing in line at a check-out counter. Waiting for someone who is late. Riding on a public bus or train. Exercising. Lengthy church services, I find, offer prime opportunities for prayer. Instead of fidgeting or staring at my watch during a lull, I pray."

p. 191: "Jesus taught a model prayer, the Lord's Prayer, but otherwise gave few rules. His teaching reduces down to three general principles: Keep it honest, keep it simple, and keep it up. Mainly, Jesus pressed home that we come as beloved children to a Father who loves us in advance and cares deeply about our lives. Ask young parents what is the correct way for their toddlers to approach them and you will probably get a puzzled look. Correct way? Being a parent means you do your best to remain available to your children and responsive to their needs. As Jesus said, if a human parent responds with compassion and not hostility, how much more will God."

pp. 203-204: “I find no self-evident reason for God’s silence [to my prayers]...”

“I ask God to use the time of spiritual dryness to prepare me for future growth. Jesus hints at such a process in his analogy of the vine: ‘Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.’ As any vintner or rose-grower knows, the act of lopping off lush branches, which at first seems cruel and destructive, actually causes the pruned shoots to grow back more productive than ever. A vintner explained to me that he refuses to irrigate his vines because the stress caused by occasional drought produces the best, most tasty grapes. Seasons of dryness make the roots run deep, strengthening the vine for whatever the future holds.

“In the words of Henry Blackaby, ‘You can respond to the silence of God in two ways. One response is for you to go into depression, a sense of guilt, and self-condemnation. The other response is for you to have an expectation that God is about to bring you to a deeper knowledge of Himself. These responses are as different as night and day.’ ”

p. 205: “I once heard a theologian remark that in the Gospels people approached Jesus with a question 183 times whereas he replied with a direct answer only three times. Instead, he responded with a different question, a story, or some other indirection. Evidently Jesus wants us to work out answers on our own, using the principles that he taught and lived. Prayer, I find, often operates the same way. In the difficult and sometimes frustrating act of pursuing God, changes occur in me that equip me to serve God. Maybe what I sense as abandonment is actually a form of empowerment.”

p. 216: “I have prayed for ... neighbors, friends, and relatives, and by any reasonable standard of judgment I must conclude that the prayers have gone unanswered.

“My own emphasis in prayer has moved from petition to companionship, and I no longer agonize over the issue of unanswered prayer as I once did. Yet I know that for many people unanswered prayer forms a barrier that blocks any desire to keep company with God. What kind of companion who has the power to save a life or heal a disease would sit on the sidelines despite urgent pleas for help? In a sense every war, every epidemic or drought, every premature death or birth defect stands as an accusation against the teasing promise of prayer.”

p. 223: “The Bible also makes clear that prayer may go unanswered because of a flaw in the person praying, not the prayer itself. Adam and Eve experienced a blockage so severe that God had to come searching for them. Psalm 51 records David’s plaintive plea for reconnection with God after his sins. And a rebellious King Saul inquired of the Lord and heard no answer, which led him to consult a witch.

“Sometimes sin disrupts communication with God. In the midst of a jubilant psalm of praise, one author admits, ‘If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have

listened.’ No one expressed this truth more plainly than the prophet Isaiah, who reported these words from God:

When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even if you offer many prayers,
I will not listen.
Your hands are full of blood;
wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds
out of my sight!
Stop doing wrong,
learn to do right!
Seek justice,
encourage the oppressed.
Defend the cause of the fatherless,
plead the case of the widow.”

p. 226: “Contradictory Prayers”

“Nothing draws a nation to prayer like war. During the Middle Ages, prayers in Europe used to end, ‘Lord, save us from the Vikings. Amen.’ We like to see ourselves as united in pursuing a just and righteous cause. The problem is, our opponents usually see themselves the same way.”

“The most devastating war in American history, the Civil War, claimed pray-ers on both sides. The devout Southern general Robert E. Lee made a startling contrast to his Northern opponent, the profane and sometimes-drunken Ulysses S. Grant. One of Lee’s favorite generals, Stonewall Jackson, refused to fight on Sunday unless attacked, and held worship services for his troops. Confederate President Jefferson Davis called for Southerners to observe days of prayer, confident that ‘it hath pleased Almighty God, the Sovereign Disposer of events, to protect and defend the Confederate States hitherto in their conflict with their enemies, and to be unto them a shield.’ ”

p. 230: “No Fixed Formula”

“Even after spelling out some of what we do wrong in our prayers, however—especially after spelling that out—I must repeat that prayer does not work according to a fixed formula: get your life in order, say the right words, and the desired result will come. If that were true, Job would have avoided much suffering, Paul would have shed his thorn in the flesh, and Jesus would never have gone to Golgotha. Between the two questions ‘Does God answer prayer?’ and ‘Will God grant my specific prayer for this sick child or this particular injustice?’ lies a great pool of mystery.”

pp. 231-232: “I take odd comfort in the fact that the Bible itself includes numerous prayers that went unanswered. Although we can only speculate why God does not answer a given prayer, these biblical examples lay down useful clues.

“After leading the Israelites through the wilderness for forty years, Moses pled with God to allow him to accompany them across the Jordan River before he died. God refused this request as punishment for Moses’ past outbursts, which so rankled Moses that four times in his speeches to the Israelites in Deuteronomy he lashed out, blaming them for God’s refusal. On other occasions Moses had talked God into ‘changing his mind.’ Not this time.

“King David spent a week, prostrate and spurning all food, praying that his infant son not die. As a consequence of his grievous sin, that prayer went unanswered: David and Bathsheba lost the child. Nevertheless, a later union led to the birth of Solomon, who would rule over Israel’s Golden Age.

“Four characters in the Old Testament—Moses, Job, Jonah, and Elijah—actually prayed to die. Fortunately for them, God ignored their requests.

“Several times the armies of Israel prayed for victory over their enemies, only to suffer humiliating defeats. Each event prompted soul-searching. Did the army act precipitously, against God’s orders? Had some soldier committed a war crime that displeased God?

“The prophet Habbakuk [sic] prayed for deliverance from the Babylonians; Jeremiah prayed that Jerusalem not be destroyed. Both prophets’ prayers went unanswered, and each struggled to explain the reason to a defeated nation. ‘You have covered yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can get through,’ lamented the prophet in a book aptly titled Lamentations.”

pp. 234-235: “Jesus could have said something like this: ‘I am bestowing the gift of prayer. You must realize, of course, that humans cannot have perfect wisdom, so there are limits as to whether your prayers will be answered. Prayer operates like a suggestion box. Spell out your requests clearly to God, and I guarantee that all requests will be carefully considered.’ That kind of statement about prayer I can easily live with. Instead, here is what Jesus said:

I tell you the truth if you have faith and do not doubt ... you can say to this mountain, “Go, throw yourself into the sea,” and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.

Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

You may ask me for anything in my name and I will do it.

“These represent just a sampling of the New Testament’s sweeping claims made in plain language. Some preachers seize on these passages as a kind of club, flogging the church for not taking them literally and faulting believers for having too little faith. But how to account for the unanswered prayers of Jesus and Paul? And how can we reconcile the lavish promises with the actual experience of so many sincere Christians who struggle with unanswered prayer?”

“Another explanation focuses on the ‘fine print’ that modifies the lavish promises. Virtually all of them contain a qualifier, such as ‘whatever you ask *in my name,*’ or ‘*If you remain in me and my words remain in you.*’ The assurance of answered prayers, still sweeping in its scope, comes with conditions. Am I abiding in Christ? Am I making requests according to his will? Am I obeying his commands? Each of these underscores the relationship, the companionship with God. The more we know God, the more we know God’s will, the more likely our prayers will align with that will.” [my emphasis]

p. 239: “When I visit places like Nepal and China, I come upon a paradox of answered and unanswered prayers. On the one hand, I hear remarkable stories of miracles. For example, the first Nepalese became a Christian in 1950. Now the church numbers more than half a million, and Nepalese church leaders estimate that 80 percent of the converts have resulted from physical healings: a Christian prays for a sick neighbor who then gets well. I have interviewed European and American doctors who work there as missionaries, and they admit that they have no scientific explanation for some amazing recoveries they have seen. David Aikman’s book *Jesus in Beijing* reports a similar pattern of apparent miracles in China

“On the other hand, Christians in Nepal and China tell horrific stories of oppression, imprisonment, and torture. My Japanese friend introduced me to a Chinese pastor revered as one of the four patriarchs in the unregistered church, a giant of faith who spent twenty-three years in prison because he refused to halt his church activities. Pastor Yuan told me with great excitement of a miracle: during his long sentence in a prison near Mongolia, he worked daily outdoors wearing nothing but a light jacket in the harshest winter weather and never caught a common cold or influenza. I marveled at his story, but inwardly I could not help wondering why God answered that prayer and not the thousands of prayers from church members pleading for his release.”

p. 240: “I have a book titled *Prayers of the Martyrs*, which reproduces actual prayers of martyrs from AD 107 (Ignatius of Antioch) to 1980 (Archbishop Oscar Romero). I find it shocking how few prayed for deliverance as in the background lions roared, gladiators sharpened their swords, or, in Romero’s case, assassins fastened ammunition clips onto their automatic weapons. The martyrs prayed for families left behind, for steadfastness of faith, for strength to endure death without shame. Some thanked God for the privilege of suffering, surprised they would be counted worthy. Some forgave their persecutors. Very few asked for a miracle.”

p. 244: “To pray ‘God, please help my neighbor cope with her financial problems,’ or ‘God, do something about the homeless downtown’ is the approach of a theist, not a Christian. God has chosen to express love and grace in the world through those of us who embody Christ.”

p. 245: “I see in Paul’s response to that disappointment [of many Jews turning to Christ] an ideal pattern of coping with an unanswered prayer. In the first place, he did not simply make a request and resign himself to God’s decision. Paul the human agent put feet to his prayer, making a habit of going first to the synagogue when he entered a new town, often at great personal cost as his visits led to riots.”

“Apparently, however, Paul did grow weary. In his most elegant letter, he sets as his centerpiece (Romans 9-11) a passionate passage, a verbal wrestling match with God in which he struggles openly with this the great unanswered prayer of his life.

“Paul acknowledges one important side benefit (the ‘surprise factor’) of this most distressing development: the Jew’s rejection of Jesus led to his acceptance by the Gentiles. It seems strange, he admits, that the Gentiles who did not pursue God’s gift attained it whereas the Jews who did pursue it have not attained it—not yet, anyway.”

p. 258: “In Jesus’ day miracles abounded. He changed the weather at least once and performed many miraculous healings. I notice, though, a selective quality to Jesus’ miracles. In his first miracle he turned water into wine in order to salvage a wedding celebration. Why this occasion, this particular use of his powers? He brought a young girl back to life, but how many others died in Israel that day? He healed a paralyzed man by the pool of Bethesda, but John says nothing of what happened to the other disabled persons lying around the same pond.”

pp. 259-260: “Am I expecting a miracle as an entitlement?”

“I think again of the letters in my file cabinet, many of them from people who prayed urgently for a miracle. One couple announces that God has answered their long-suffering prayers for a baby while another gives up and begins the arduous process of adopting a Chinese baby. My pastor once heard a woman stand in church and breathlessly tell of her two-year-old son who fell into a swimming pool, was revived by artificial respiration, and recovered completely. ‘Isn’t God wonderful!’ she exclaimed. Sitting in the audience was another woman whose son also fell in a swimming pool, was pulled from the water, and never regained consciousness.

“God neither protects Christians with a shield of health nor provide a quick, dependable solution to all suffering. Christians populate hospital wards, asylums, and hospices in approximate proportion in the world at large. I asked Dr. Vernon Grounds, a seminary

chancellor and one of the godliest men I know, ‘Have you ever seen an undeniable miracle of physical healing?’ Without a flicker of hesitation he respond, ‘No, but I’m still hoping!’ He told me of a friend diagnosed with an untreatable kidney condition. Grounds prays daily for the man’s miraculous healing, fervently believing in God’s power to perform such a miracle even though in ninety years, he has never observed one.

“I prefer Vernon Grounds’s approach of humble, expectant faith to one that promises too much. Consider an incident from the 1990s, a scene described to me by a church leader who had witnessed it firsthand. A faith healer from the U.S. scheduled a crusade in Cambodia, a country with a tiny minority of Christians. Posters went up promising healing and deliverance for any problem. Peasants sold their cows, even their houses, and traveled to Phnom Penh for the rally. As a result of landmines left over from the Vietnam war, one in two hundred Cambodians is an amputee, and many of these flocked to the crusade as well. When the amputees were not healed, a riot broke out in the stadium. The evangelist had to be rescued by an army helicopter, which whisked him to the safety of a hotel. When the angry crowd poured out of the stadium and surrounded the hotel, the faith healer departed the country and returned to the U.S.

“‘You cannot imagine the impact on the struggling church in Cambodia,’ said the church leader. ‘It has set us back at least fifty years. We may never recover credibility here.’ ”

p. 264: “At the church I attended in Chicago, the pastor would sometimes offer a time for people to come to the front for prayer. ‘The worst thing that can happen to you is that you will have an experience of being profoundly loved. That’s not so bad, is it? And you just might hear the Master’s voice, “Your faith has made you whole. Go in peace, freed from your suffering.” ’ Each time, he emphasized that we in the church should offer love and support to those who suffer, not guilt and self-doubt. Over the years many people reported healings, not just from physical conditions but from addictions and sexual wounds. And all of us went away with an important reminder that God is a source of comfort, not torment.”

p. 264: “Am I prepared for the possibility that physical healing may not take place?”

p. 269: “Confession

“Sin can disrupt the relationship between ourselves and God in a way that jars the alignment of body, soul, and spirit. Confession restores the channel of communication with God while at the same time flushing away anxiety, guilt, fear, and other obstacles to health.

“I have mentioned the inner conversation what we all conduct at a level inaudible to those around us. When I struggle with guilt, I find that inner conversation revolving around myself: attempts to rationalize or explain away my behavior, resentment against

others who caused it, feelings of self-pity and remorse. Only confession can clear away that self-absorption and open my spirit to God's soft voice.

“Ed Dobson, the well-known pastor of Calvary Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, grappled with confession after contracting the terminal disease ALS. ‘When I was diagnosed, I thought, *If I’m going to die, I want to die with a clear conscience and whole relationships.* I know there were people I had offended, people I needed to ask for forgiveness. So I made a list and began calling.’”

pp. 270-271: “Jaime Cardinal Sin, the Catholic archbishop of Manila who played a key role in the People Power revolution there, liked to tell the story of a woman who attended his weekly audience to inform him she had a message from God. He brushed her off several times, but she kept coming back. Finally he said, ‘We Catholics have strict rules governing visions and message from God. I need to test your authenticity. I want you to go back and ask God about a particular sin I recently confessed in private. If you ask God and he tells you the answer, I’ll know your vision is genuine.’”

“The next week she returned and he quizzed her, a bit nervously, ‘Well, did you ask God about my sin?’

‘I did.’

‘And did God answer?’

‘Yes.’

‘What did he say?’

‘God said that he couldn’t remember.’

pp. 278-279: “For others, however, there comes a time when it seems clear that no amount of faith will gain the desired healing. “I have lived with Crohn’s disease for twenty-three years,’ writes Stephen Schmidt. ‘I know the disappointment, the rage, the ongoing reality that I will not get better. Period.

“ ‘So I come to the question of prayer with a very personal bias. I can pray my heart out and shout my defiance into eternity, but I will not be healed of Crohn’s’ disease, at least not now, until some new medical insight or drug is found. I have stopped asking God for a miracle.’ ”

“Schmidt goes on to say that he has accepted suffering as part of being human. He had to be healed of the need to be healed. Now he prays for strength to endure, for meaning in his suffering, for faith to believe in a good and loving God even when he has to go in once again for a painful surgical procedure.”

“As I have admitted, I need more of the childlike faith that impressed Jesus. By temperament I accept too readily what life throws me and start to make adjustments. Instead, I should ask God for the vision to see what can be changed.

“For all its benefits, though, childlike faith has one major flaw: it stakes everything on the future, on a desired change. For some, that change never comes. If you wait until you are well or employed or married or whatever new state you are asking for, you may never get there. I have learned that I have no time in which to live out Christ’s life other than now. This very moment is all I can count on.

“In one of his letters Paul described himself as afflicted but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed. He learned a different level of faith, one that does not remove difficulty but nevertheless withstands, a fidelity in which weakness transforms into strength and prayers for healing melt into prayers of acceptance.”

p. 290: “A few years ago I wrote a book on the Old Testament, *The Bible Jesus Read*, in which I discussed the cursing psalms that called for revenge on enemies. I described a practice of taking a weekly ‘anger walk’ on the hill behind my home, during which I would represent to God the resentment I felt toward people who had wronged me. Forcing myself to open up deep feelings to God had a therapeutic effect. ‘Usually I come away feeling as if I have just released a huge burden,’ I wrote in that book. ‘The unfairness no longer sticks like a thorn inside me, as it once did; I have expressed it aloud to someone—to God. Sometimes I find that in the process of expression, I grow in compassion. God’s Spirit speaks to me of my own selfishness, my judgmental spirit, my own flaws that others have treated with grace and forgiveness, my pitifully limited viewpoint.’

pp. 301-302: “Knowing of my interest in prayer, a friend forwarded to me an email and asked for my opinion. I had received chain-letter emails about golf balls and money-making schemes, but never one pertaining to prayer.

“An American soldier in Iraq had learned that his wife back home had been diagnosed with stage four cervical cancer. Doctors gave a bleak prognosis. Feeling helpless, separated by half the world from his distraught wife, the soldier sent an email message to his church. Members of the church then forwarded his prayer request to all their contacts:

“Pray and forward. It only takes a second to hit ‘forward.’ Please do it and don’t delete this, your prayer can and perhaps will save her life. Please pray and ask everyone you know to pray for the HEALING of Cindy, removal of all cancer in her body so she may enjoy all that life has to offer, and to continue to be the wonderful mother to our 5-year-old son.

The email raised questions for my friend. Does prayer operate like a pyramid scheme—the more people who pray, the more likely the answer? Does a sick woman who happens to have praying friends stand a better chance for recovery than an equally deserving person who does not? Exactly how does prayer benefit someone other than the pray-er? And how can something I pray have an impact on another person without infringing on his or her free will?

Some of these questions, such as whether quantity matters, no one can answer with certainty. I learned of an earlier email campaign in which the sender promised that if one million Christians prayed, then Saddam Hussein would resign voluntarily, forestalling the impending war in Iraq—a prayer that obviously went unanswered. Surely prayer does not operate according to a mathematical formula in which God calculates the total amount of prayer-pressure being applied.

“Yet in places like South Africa and Eastern Europe, mass prayers did seem to make a difference. The Bible itself includes some examples, such as God responding to Israelite slaves in Egypt because ‘I have heard them crying out.’ The prophets pleaded with entire nations to repent and in some cases (notably Jonah’s Nineveh) they did. Paul solicited group prayers from places like Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome. Apparently the shared concern of many people has an effect.”

p. 309: “In one famous instance in U.S. history, the leaders themselves turned to prayer after reaching an impasse. In four contentious weeks the Constitutional Convention had failed to write a single word. Benjamin Franklin, a man not known for his piety, rose to address George Washington: ‘The longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth, that God governs in the affairs of men.’ He went on to state his fear that the various factions would argue their own interests and reach no agreement. ‘Without his [God’s] concurring aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel.’ Franklin then made a motion, ‘That henceforth prayers, imploring the assistance of Heaven and its blessing on our deliberations, be held in this assembly every morning.’ That practice continues in the U.S. Congress to this day.”

pp. 310-311: “What effect might it have if every Christian church adopted the name of one Al-Qaeda member and prayed faithfully for that person?”

“In a letter to his brother, C. S. Lewis mentioned that he prayed every night for the people he was most tempted to hate, with Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini heading the list. In another letter he wrote that as he prayed for them, he meditated on how his own cruelty might have blossomed into something like theirs. He remembered that Christ died for them as much as for him, and that he himself was not ‘so different from these ghastly creatures.’ ”