

Covid Prayers

Hespeler, 26 September 2021 © Scott McAndless

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 20-22, Psalm 124, [James 5:13-20](#), Mark 9:38-50

Last month, a twitter thread went viral. It was posted by twitter user @TepidButterASMR and started out by saying, “If you search ‘covid prayers’ right now in Facebook posts the sheer amount of posts is crazy.” It went on from there to screenshot a number of posts of people begging for prayers from their friends and followers as they, or their loved ones, were sick with Covid-19 and struggling for their breath in hospitals, on respirators, lingering, some of them, on the very doorstep of death.

Now, to see anyone in that kind of extreme situation is, of course, heart-rending. One can only imagine the kind of fear and despair that they were struggling with. You can certainly understand and appreciate their desire to reach out for support from other people, in whatever form they can find it. I honestly think we’d all be better off if more people did that.

Previous Posts

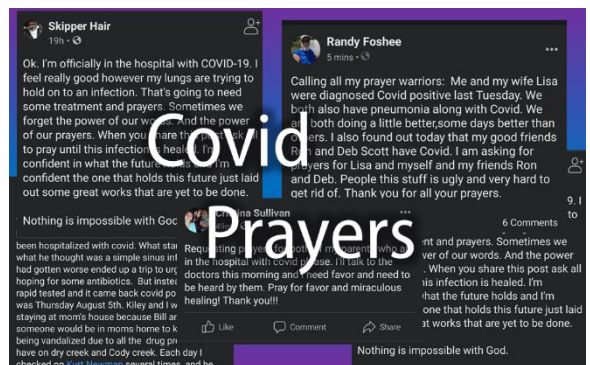
But the Twitter thread did not just document such requests. It also took the trouble to dig into some other previous posts made by the people involved. And it may not surprise you to discover that, in case after case, it turned up posts of vaccine skepticism, of people vowing that they would never get the vaccine no matter what, of people decrying all public health efforts to stop the spread of the virus including lockdowns, social distancing and the wearing of face masks. Oh yes, there were many references to masks as “face diapers” and many boasts about how they were the only person they knew who was brave enough not to wear one.

How we’re Feeling about Prayer

And, in many ways, that post is the perfect illustration of a lot of the ambivalence people in our society and even sometimes in the church feel right now about prayer. The Apostle James writes, **“Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.”** And I do want to affirm the truth of that statement here this morning. I do believe that prayer is powerful and effective. But there is also no doubt that the truth of that statement is often put to the test in real-life circumstances. And the pandemic in which we are living right now is certainly one of those circumstances that tests us.

Flood Story

You have probably heard the story about the man in the flood before, but it bears repeating in this situation. It was a man who had a house built on a flood plain. And, in the face of a hurricane, the warning went out that the flood waters were rising and that everyone needed to evacuate immediately. So, a police car came around to this man’s house



and told him that he had to leave for his own safety and security. But the man said no. "I have prayed and I believe that God will save me."

Well, the flood waters rose and before long the man had to abandon the ground floor of his house as it filled up with water. He was up on the second floor of his house when one of his neighbours came by paddling a canoe. "They say that the waters are just going to continue to rise," said the neighbour, "climb in the canoe right now and I will paddle you to safety." But the man said no, he believed that God would save him.

Finally, the waters rose so high that the man had to climb onto his roof. As he sat there, wrapped in a soaking wet blanket, a Coast Guard helicopter flew by. The pilot called out over the loudspeaker and told the man that the waters were still rising and he would soon be overwhelmed. He offered to lower a rope ladder and take him to safety. But the man said no. "I have faith, my God will save me."

So, the man died, swept away by the current. He went up to heaven and stood before the very throne of the king of kings. And the man said to God, "I believed in you completely. Why didn't you save me?" "Well," said the Lord, "I did send you a police car, a canoe and a helicopter. I'm not sure what you were waiting for."

Does God Save People who make Bad Choices?

So it is certainly tempting to apply that parable to our present situation. We can ask the question, is that how God would reply to those praying for healing from covid? "I did send you public health measures. I did send you a vaccine so revolutionary and so quickly created that it almost seemed like a miracle. Why are you asking me to save you, when you have turned down everything I sent you?"

But I will tell you something, I actually don't think that that is how God responds. I know there is all kinds of animosity out there against people who have willfully and without a medical reason resisted all efforts to control this pandemic. I feel that animosity sometimes too. It is maddening and frustrating. But I would certainly caution us against transferring our personal feelings to God. The God we have come to know through Jesus Christ is a God whose grace and mercy far exceeds anything that seems humanly possible.

God's Boundless Grace

So yes, I actually do believe that God's heart is open to the prayers of people who make foolish mistakes, who make bad decisions and are victims of misinformation. God's compassion extends everywhere. Indeed, thank the Lord that God does not judge us and our decisions before considering our prayers because none of us would be heard on those terms. We all gain a hearing before the throne of God based, not on our own actions, but on the basis of what Christ has done for us. Can I get an amen?

None of that gives us a license to go out and do all manner of foolish things because we believe that God will bail us out, of course. Being a people of faith hardly means that we need to be reckless people who refuse to take reasonable precautions. But we should never deny the power of God's grace to overcome even our most obstinate foolishness.

Prayer vs. Reality

But that is just one issue with what James says that gives us some trouble in these trying times. The promise of James that, **"The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up,"** is

a wonderful promise, but it is a promise we often struggle with when we come up against the cold hard reality of life, maybe especially in these days. The simple truth of the matter is that many of those people who, in recent weeks, have been begging for those kinds of prayers, have not received the answer that they were hoping for, regardless of whether they did the right thing in terms of slowing the spread of the virus or not. Far too many have died, too many will continue to suffer with debilitating illness for some time to come.

Now, of course, the whole question of what to do about unanswered prayer is not a new issue in our time. It has always been there. But, with so many struggling in so many different ways, the question seems more urgent and more troubling than ever before these days. So I think we ought to answer the question, is the promise that James gives in his letter a nice sentiment that simply does not stand up to reality? The even more basic question is, why do we pray for people who are struggling if it doesn't always work?

The Healing Power of Community

I believe that James is saying many important things about prayer in this passage, but one thing he is not doing is giving us a guarantee of a certain outcome when we pray. First of all, he is teaching us the importance of community in the trials of life. James does recognize, of course, that there is a place for individual prayer. He writes, **“Are any among you suffering? They should pray.”** But when it comes to people dealing with some of the most severe problems, he gets a little bit more specific. **“Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.”**

He is making it clear here that prayer is, at least in part, about activating the healing power of the spiritual community. You see, human beings, as much as we may value our individuality, are designed to be social beings. When one of us is sick, we are all weakened. And when we all come together, there is healing power in that.

This is actually something that has been demonstrated scientifically. In double blind tests, it has actually been shown that patients who have people praying for them actually have better outcomes than people who don't. This is true even if they don't know that there are people praying, or if the people praying for them are complete strangers to them.

Prayer Effective Independent of Theology

And here is something that is particularly interesting. The research also shows that it doesn't matter what the people are praying or even what god they are praying to within what tradition. There is actually a power in community prayer that transcends any particular religion (even Christianity). And I do understand that. I think that James does too. When someone is really struggling, there is a real power in the community coming together on whatever terms.

For one thing, I know that we can all feel kind of powerless when someone we love is dealing with that kind of serious situation. The simple act of coming together, in some sense, and praying does give a communal outlet for that concern. It can replace that sense of powerlessness with a sense of purpose and of hope. And I cannot explain how, at least not in any scientific terms, that kind of energy going out from the community actually comes to have a positive influence on the person who is

struggling, but I have experienced that kind of very real effect as I've watched the difference that it makes when people are prayed for.

God's Intervention

So I really do believe that there is a power in prayer itself that is independent of the whole question of the intervention of God. But, of course, James does also tell us that God intervenes. **"The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven."** And I do believe that that is true as well. God does intervene and I have seen that many times. But I would caution us to be careful what we specifically take from that. Is James promising that, when we pray in this way, God will give us a specific outcome, the outcome we are looking for?

Salvation

I do not see him saying that. In fact, he seems to choose his words very carefully. **"The prayer of faith will save the sick,"** he says. And I hope you recognize that salvation, being saved, can take many different forms. Yes, when you are sick, being saved might mean being healed of your ailment. But that salvation might also take other forms. It might come in the form of the sick person finding peace, rest and being reconciled to their condition. Sometimes that salvation may come in the person being able to repair or be reconciled in an important relationship, even if they do not experience physical healing. Salvation may come in the form of everyone that this person loves being reconciled to an outcome to that illness that is ultimately inevitable. James promises that God saves, but, as we also must, he leaves it to God to judge what form of salvation is most needed given the situation.

Raising them up

James also makes this promise as a result of prayer, **"The Lord will raise them up."** But once again, this seems maddeningly vague. It could mean, of course, that the sick person will rise from their sick bed. But I would also note that the Greek word for resurrection, *anastasia*, literally means to stand up. So, at least in some circumstances, James may be saying that even the sickest may fall back on the hope and expectation of the resurrection. But that too, I hope, can give us comfort as we pray for those who are seriously ill, knowing that our faith can actually be enough to ensure for them the hope of resurrection.

It's not about how I React

I will admit that I can sometimes be rather skeptical when people who make bad choices, who do foolish things like refuse vaccinations that, at this point, are proved millions of times over to be hundreds of thousands of times less risky than covid itself – I will confess that I can roll my eyes when I see their requests for healing prayers. I might feel exasperated with them, but I am not God. God offers a grace to us that truly knows no bounds.

So I will never refuse to pray and I will never tell people not to pray. The power of prayer is real and effective. My advice to everyone is this. Listen to the science. Take your vaccinations. Most will experience them as an inconvenience at worst. Practice safe social distancing and wear masks when appropriate. And pray. Pray in the morning, pray in the noontime, pray in the evening and in the watches of the night. Prayer does matter, it is heard and it makes a difference. Am I right James?