The Power of Prayer
Chris Tompkins, Psychology Today 1.24.26

Growing up, I only associated things like prayer and faith with religion. I was also only familiar with one type of prayer: the prayer of request or supplication. I thought to pray meant to ask for something. If you Google the word "prayer," you'll get hundreds of images of clasped hands, seemingly begging for something.

The act of prayer isn't only passive, beseeching, or religious. To pray is to align our thoughts and focus our intentions. Prayer can act as a protective factor by providing individuals with comfort and a coping mechanism to manage stress during difficult situations.

According to research, prayer can reduce stress, anxiety, and negative emotions, often functioning as a coping mechanism that can promote overall well-being by providing a sense of connection to a higher power and fostering feelings of support and control, particularly when faced with challenging situations.

In a study called "Prayer and Its Relation to Cognitive Processes," authors Harris and Paloutzian note that prayer involves "a wide range of cognitive processes, including perception, language and inner speech, affect, self-concept, memory, decision-making, planning, and social cognition."

When we pray, we're trying to connect to something greater than ourselves and, according to research, activate health-promotive psychological mechanisms such as structure, meaning, and hope. Prayer may be useful insofar as it changes how individuals appraise stressful events.

This week, I've been thinking a lot about prayer and what it means when we say, "I'll pray for you." I live in Los Angeles, and the devastation from the fires has been heartbreaking. Many friends and family members have said, "I'm keeping you in my thoughts and prayers."

Through scientific research, such as neuroimaging techniques like fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) or EEG (electroencephalography), we can now measure our thoughts and feelings. That's not to say when we pray it's like waving a magic wand and whatever it is we pray for magically appears. But behind every thought and prayer is a subtle process, such as neural activity or physiological response, that can influence our well-being.

When we offer prayer as a means of support and to focus our intention, there's a shift in our psychological and physiological state that influences our behaviors and interactions. Whatever we're praying for may not change, but we change. Our actions, decisions, and responses are affected. We may find ourselves sitting next to someone at a restaurant. We strike up a conversation that leads to the creation of an event. The event we work on inspires others to take action in their community.

The ripple effects created by sitting next to a stranger at a restaurant result from consciously connecting to something greater than ourselves. This is the power of faith. This is the power of prayer.

Whether we believe this to be true or not, our thoughts create. Whether we believe in the power of prayer or not, inspired action results in aligned thinking. Author Blake Chastain wrote in *Exvangelical + Beyond*, “Just because something is abstract doesn't mean it can’t have real meanings and consequences. Feelings, thoughts, sensations — all these things are physical reactions to chemical processes in our bodies, but they create an infinite interior space we call consciousness.” We are powerful creators, and when we align our thinking and use prayer as a coping mechanism to promote overall well-being, we are taking powerful action.

Using Faith to Navigate Life’s Toughest Moments

One of my friends asked me recently about faith and what it means to have faith the size of a mustard seed. They told me about their experience growing up with religion and wondered about the purpose of having faith in a world of challenges. Growing up religious, I learned faith came in sizes, and if we had faith, even the tiniest bit, we could somehow influence that for which we prayed and convinced God to grant our request. We could live a life free from challenges.

This thinking is flawed and makes us bad or good, depending on a situation's outcome. If we pray and the outcome is what we prayed for, then our faith is strong enough. If we pray and it doesn’t result in the outcome we desire, then it’s our fault — we must not have had enough faith.

I told my friend, “Having faith the size of a mustard seed is to say our faith, like a seed, grows depending on how well it’s tended to. It doesn’t mean we influence what we pray for depending on whether our faith can be weighed on a scale. It means peacefully letting go of what we think is the best outcome and knowing in our hearts we’ll be okay.” If we nurture and tend to our faith, over time, it does grow. And whatever happens in our life, regardless of the challenge, we know and trust, that there’s a much bigger plan at play. We aren’t good or bad and neither is the outcome. Whatever unfolds, we have faith that it’s for the highest good.

This doesn’t discount the pain we experience during a difficult challenge. Challenges can be overwhelming, especially when they involve health or natural disasters. What it does do is give us an expanded view from which to see a challenge and embrace the fullness of life. When we look at our lives linearly from now until the end, we see challenges as inconvenient, bad, or even tragic. If we imagine standing at the end of our lives and looking backward, we’d be more open to considering the lesson each challenge can give.

When I look back on my life, the most painful experiences have taught me the most. Honoring our pain, as well as our process, while remaining open, can help a challenge strengthen not only our faith but our inner resolve. I’m still grieving from the tragedy that has affected the city I’ve lived in, and loved, for 16 years. I’m taking time to grieve and to be sad, and I’m also having faith and praying. And I will keep praying for the guided action I trust I’m supposed to take.

Directing our thoughts, strengthening our inner resolve, and taking action is powerful. Whether we call it prayer or not, having faith in something greater than ourselves and helping create positive change on the planet is only a thought, or prayer, away.