

Some years ago, I got up one morning intending to have my hair cut in preparation for a visit to London, which was put off. So, I decided to put the haircut off too. But then there began the most unaccountable little nagging in my mind, almost like a voice saying: *Get it cut all the same. Go and get it cut.* In the end I could stand it no longer. I went. Now my barber at that time was a fellow Christian. The moment I opened his shop door he said, “Oh, I was praying you might come today.” And in fact, if I had come a day or so later I should have been of no use to him. It awed me; it awes me still.

But of course, one cannot rigorously prove a causal connection between the barber’s prayers and my visit. It might be telepathy. It might be accident. I have stood by the bedside of a woman whose thighbone was eaten through with cancer and who had thriving colonies of the disease in many other bones, as well. It took three people to move her in bed. The doctors predicted a few months of life; the nurses, a few weeks. A good man: laid his hands on her and prayed. A year later the patient was walking (uphill, too, through rough woodland) and the man who took the last X-ray photos was saying, “These bones are as solid as rock. It’s miraculous.”

But once again there is no rigorous proof. Medicine, as all true doctors admit, is not an exact science. We need not invoke the supernatural to explain the falsification of its prophecies. You need not, unless you choose, believe in a causal connection between the prayers and the recovery. The question then arises, “What sort of evidence would prove the efficacy of prayer?” The thing we pray for may happen, but how can you ever know it was not going to happen anyway? Even if the thing were indisputably miraculous it would not follow that the miracle had occurred because of your prayers. The answer surely is that a compulsive empirical proof such as we have in the sciences can never be attained.

Some things are proved by the unbroken uniformity of our experiences. The law of gravitation is established by the fact that, in our experience, all bodies without exception obey it. Now even if all the things that people prayed for happened, which they do not, this would not prove what Christians mean by the efficacy of prayer. For prayer is request. The essence of request, as distinct from compulsion, is that it may or may not be granted. And if an infinitely wise Being listens to the requests of finite and foolish creatures, of course He will sometimes grant and sometimes refuse them. Invariable “success” in prayer would not prove the Christian doctrine at all. It would prove something much more like magic — a power in certain human beings to control, or compel, the course of nature.

I have seen it suggested that a team of people — the more the better — should agree to pray as hard as they knew how, over a period of six weeks, for all the patients in Hospital A and none of those in Hospital B. Then you would tot up the results and see if A had more cures and fewer deaths. And I suppose you would repeat the experiment at various times and places so as to eliminate the influence of irrelevant factors. The trouble is that I do not see how any real prayer could go on under such conditions. “Words without thoughts never to heaven go,” says the King in Hamlet. Simply to say prayers is not to pray; otherwise a team of properly trained parrots would serve as well as men for our experiment.

You cannot pray for the recovery of the sick unless the end you have in view is their recovery. But you can have no motive for desiring the recovery of all the patients in one hospital and none of those in another. You are not doing it in order that suffering should be relieved; you are doing it to find out what happens. The real purpose and the nominal purpose of your prayers are at variance. In other words, whatever your tongue and teeth and knees may do, you are not praying. The experiment demands an impossibility. Empirical proof and disproof are, then, unobtainable. But this conclusion will seem less depressing if we remember that prayer is request and compare it with other specimens of the same thing.

Our assurance—if we reach an assurance—that God always hears and sometimes grants our prayers, and that apparent grantings are not merely fortuitous, can only come in the same sort of way. There can be no question of tabulating successes and failures and trying to decide whether the successes are too numerous to be accounted for by chance. Those who best know a man best know whether, when he did what they asked, he did it because they asked. I think those who best know God will best know whether He sent me to the barber's shop because the barber prayed.

For up till now we have been tackling the whole question in the wrong way and on the wrong level. The very question “Does prayer work?” puts us in the wrong frame of mind from the outset. “Work”: as if it were magic, or a machine — something that functions automatically. Prayer is either a sheer illusion or a personal contact between embryonic, incomplete persons (ourselves) and the utterly concrete Person. Prayer in the sense of petition, asking for things, is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine. In it, God shows Himself to us. That He answers prayers is a corollary — not necessarily the most important one — from that revelation. What He does is learned from what He is.

Prayer is not a machine. It is not magic. It is not advice offered to God. Our act, when we pray, must not, any more than all our other acts, be separated from the continuous act of God Himself, in which alone all finite causes operate.

It would be even worse to think of those who get what they pray for as a sort of court favorites, people who have influence with the throne. The refused prayer of Christ in Gethsemane is answer enough to that.

And I dare not leave out the hard saying which I once heard from an experienced Christian: “I have seen many striking answers to prayer and more than one that I thought miraculous. But they usually come at the beginning: before conversion, or soon after it. As the Christian life proceeds, they tend to be rarer. The refusals, too, are not only more frequent; they become more unmistakable, more emphatic.”

Does God then forsake just those who serve Him best?

Meanwhile, little people like you and me, if our prayers are sometimes granted, beyond all hope and probability, had better not draw hasty conclusions to our own advantage. If we were stronger, we might be less tenderly treated. If we were braver, we might be sent, with far less help, to defend far more desperate posts in the great battle.