

Prayer isn't our work, it's God's

I mostly agree with Jeffrey Weiss about prayer. I think St. Paul would too.

by [Jason Micheli](#) in the [April 12, 2017](#) issue



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Read Jeffrey Weiss's article, "[My friends are praying for me. Does God care?](#)"

Jeffrey Weiss might expect a clergyman to critique his appraisal of the book of Job and to argue that "prayer works," as I heard from a TSA agent who recently squinted at the disparity between the precancer face on my ID and the one in the flesh before her. "I'll pray for you to be healed," she whispered as she checked my boarding pass.

But with a terminal cancer of my own—mine's in my marrow, as voracious as it is rare—I would tell Mr. Weiss this: I think you're exactly right to point out how the book of Job reveals the theological problem in how we often speak of prayer. God is incomprehensible. As God says to Job, everything that is did not have to be—a reminder woven into the opening line of scripture, "In the beginning . . ." We are, Job learns, contingent creatures. Our knowledge can never bridge the gap between us and our Creator. If this is true, you're exactly right to caution against the way we speak of prayer working.

To put it more bluntly: Isn't it ridiculous (and maybe even idolatrous) to think that through our supplications we can persuade God into doing something God might otherwise not do? You might be surprised to hear that I take it as self-evident that the answer to that question is yes.

The God of Job isn't a god we can manipulate—by spiritually sanctioned means—to do what we want. Too often when people tell me they'll pray for me, the implication left unsaid is that God is otherwise not already with me or at work in me and that if I'm not healed then somehow their prayers didn't work. Such an understanding of prayer is incompatible with the God of the book of Job, a God who is at every moment the reason there is something instead of nothing.

Not only do I agree with you, Mr. Weiss, I think St. Paul would too. After stating the obvious (none of us knows how to pray), St. Paul writes to the Romans that whenever we pray, no matter what it might look like, it's not actually we who are praying. Rather God, the Spirit, prays in us and through us.

This is what gets missed by so many of the people who tell me they're praying for me. Prayer isn't something we do. It's something God does.

Instead of a practice we perform for results we've predetermined, when we pray to God, we're prayed in by God. God is the impetus behind our prayers as much as the object of them. The very wants and desires we pray, runs St. Paul's argument, are themselves the handiwork of the ever-present God.

What's this mean when you're sick with stage-serious cancer and staring at the-house-always-wins odds? St. Thomas Aquinas doubles down on Paul's point when he argues, as Herbert McCabe paraphrases it, that "we should not say: 'In accordance with my prayer: God wills that it should be a fine day'; we should say: 'God wills: that it should be a fine day in accordance with my prayer.'" God wills our prayers as

much as God wills the fine day.

Let me put the point a bit more personally for the both of us. We should not say, “In accordance with the TSA agent’s prayer, God wills that I should be healed of my cancer.” We should say, “God wills that I should be healed of my cancer, in accordance with her prayer.”

That’s no guarantee I’ll be healed, and if I’m not healed, there’s no explanation behind it of the sort Job’s friends assumed. However, it is a guarantee that my desire to be healed, as well as the desire of all those praying for me, isn’t our desire alone or even originally. It’s a desire shared by—initiated by—the God who prays in us.

You’re dead-on that as contingent creatures we can never know the why behind the Creator’s doings. If we could, then God would not be God.

But as to your other suggestion, that God does not care about your friends’ prayers, I disagree. Not only does God care about your friends’ prayers, their prayers derive from and originate in God. Indeed, it’s not strong enough to say God cares about your friends’ prayers. Their prayers are, in fact, a sign—a sacrament, as we say in the church—of God’s love for you.

A version of this article appears in the April 12 print edition under the title “God prays in us.”