How does one pray about cancer?

# And what would happen if we didn't?

by Frederick A. Niedner in the March 30, 2016 issue

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Last summer brought my circle of friends and family to our knees. Most every place we found ourselves became a prayer closet. At one point, a massive, summer wildfire bore down on Holden Village, a Lutheran retreat center in Washington's Cascade Mountains. Thousands of us who hold that place sacred watched anxiously from afar. In e-mails and social media, friends of Holden pleaded for prayers, and recipients complied.

During that same time, cancer threatened my family from multiple directions. Friends and loved ones responded with kindness, compassion, and encouragement. Most everyone said, "We will pray for you." My family and I have offered abundant thanks for all that praying and feel buoyed up just thinking about it.

I can't help wondering, however, about the details and unspoken assumptions implicit in all those prayers, including my own. How exactly does one pray about cancer? Do we ask for miracles, hoping that God will somehow make cancer cells suddenly cease acting like cancer cells? Do we pray, even if only to cover our bases, that God would provide special guidance to the efforts of oncologists and surgeons?

What would happen if we didn't pray? Would the doctors' efforts prove less effective? Does God have a supplication meter that provides prayer-intensity readings that dictate whether and where divine intervention is warranted or for

whom chemotherapy will succeed? Does an army of prayer warriors prevail upon God even as a solitary, faithful child's prayers go unheard?

Sometimes it seems as if we unwittingly treat God like some kind of cosmic concierge or super Siri who stands ready to do our bidding, whether we're praying about misplaced files and crucial ball games or cancer cures and climate change. Can even God keep track of all this incessant begging and beseeching?

A host of spiritual advisers are available to teach us how to pray. Type *prayer* into Amazon's search engine, and it brings up more than 115,000 book titles. Prayer theory is big business, but most of it relies on the Bible's ancient, oft-rehearsed pronouncements concerning prayer. Over 100,000 authors earn royalties by offering to help sort out the mysteries and confusion that the Bible's conglomeration of teachings can produce.

"Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation," God assures believers in Psalm 91:14–16. "Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you will receive it, and it will be yours," Jesus promises (Mark 11:24). Given such blanket assurances, we are not surprised to hear Paul urge his friends, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17), although Jesus advised against piling up words as though God doesn't know what you need even without your prayers (Matt. 6:7).

We read that the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective (James 5:16), but that those of the wicked go unheard (1 Pet. 3:12). "There is no one who is righteous, not even one," Paul declares (Rom. 3:10), so theoretically at least, nobody's prayers get through despite all those earlier promises.

When the phone rang this summer with news of my granddaughter's leukemia diagnosis, I happened to be writing a devotional piece about the story of that Syro-phoenician mother who interrupted Jesus' attempt at having some sabbatical time. Her daughter was deathly ill, and the mother refused to take no for an answer. Never before had I known this parent's desperation so intimately. I joined her without hesitation. "Lord, have mercy!" I prayed—screamed, actually—all the while knowing that in that same stretch of days long ago in Galilee and Judea, many little ones died despite their parents' fervent, faithful prayers. What made me think that among all the millions of prayers heaved to the heavens that day, God might hear

mine?

More and more this wild tangle of unanswerable questions has reduced the complexity of my prayers. Instead of using prayer as a tool for controlling my circumstances, it has become a way to set myself in God's presence and cast myself and my loved ones on God's mercy. Hence, "Lord, have mercy!" remains one of the longer prayers I still borrow and repeat. Perhaps that puts me in the Anne Lamott school of prayer and supplication. She writes that the best prayers she knows are "Help me, help me, help me" and "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

More and more I find the second of those prayers has supplanted the first. Years ago I habitually prayed for safety while strapped into the seats of 90-ton aircraft as they strained to get off the ground. Today I give thanks for my life and my family. Whether death comes in a fiery crash or on a quiet deathbed, I hope—and pray—that my last words will be expressions of gratitude, not screams of panic.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us that the Spirit gives us words to pray in times of trial and desperation (8:15). The Spirit induces us, like a midwife at a birthing stool, to cry, "Abba, Father"—short for the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, and the one he prayed, at least in part, as he sprawled in agony, sorrowful unto death, on the night when he was betrayed. Perhaps no prayer has been repeated more often, and few prayers have been so misunderstood. Each petition of the Our Father addresses God with imperative verbs, boldly demanding that God, right now, once and for all, fulfill God's promises and make the world new. This prayer also puts the petitioner at God's disposal as a here-and-now agent of God's mercy by whose flesh and blood God will, for the moment anyway, restore God's sacred reputation in the world, bring on God's rule of mercy, and feed the world today with tomorrow's manna, the messianic feast.

The gospel according to Mark's theology of the cross would have us see that while Jesus' own prayers appear to go unanswered, he serves as God's response to the cry of abandonment he utters in the words of Psalm 22. Forever after, all who cry out in the same darkness find they are not alone. He got there first and awaits our inevitable arrival. As Luther preached so often, that Jesus descended into the depths of God-forsakenness means that no matter how far any one of us might sink, even there he is Lord for us.

Although she never meant her words to become public, Mother Teresa wrote about the darkness and loneliness that overwhelmed her for long periods. “The place of God in my soul is blank,” confessed this woman who devoted her life to the care of the abandoned. And yet, “If my darkness is light to some soul—even if it be nothing to nobody—I am perfectly happy—to be God’s flower of the field.” The truest blessing we find and the only faithfulness we exercise in the times of clawing emptiness may well come not in being able to see an answer to our prayers, but in finding ourselves the embodiments of God’s merciful response to another’s prayers for mercy.

Sharing the bread of sorrow then becomes an unexpected foretaste of the feast to come. We share it in hope, knowing that the phone will ring yet again with news we dread and that in the profound weakness which includes our tortured, overthought theologies, we won’t know how to pray as we ought. Once more we’ll have little more to rely on than another promise Paul articulates in that letter to the Romans (8:26–27). When our words and minds go blank, or should our faith fail altogether, the Spirit prays for us with sighs too deep for words.

We may lose our grip, but the Spirit will not let us go. In the absence of God, the Spirit groans in the inarticulate petition of the one who shrieked wordlessly on Golgotha.

Then comes death, and utter silence.

And after that, singing. Once more we shall have words, and myriad ways of giving thanks.