

Prayer works—but not in the way so many suppose

I'm facing terminal cancer and receiving the prayers of many. Beyond the implicit problems, I've found ways to see what it means to ask God for healing.

By [Jason Micheli](#)

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Jeffrey Weiss [recently wrote about planning his "no thanks" to cancer treatment](#). Here is my reply.

Mr. Weiss, perhaps you expect a clergyman to critique your appraisal of the book of Job and to encourage you that “prayer works,” as I heard from a TSA agent who recently squinted at the disparity between the pre-cancer face on my ID and the one in the flesh before her. “I’ll pray for you to be healed,” she whispered as she circled and checked things on my boarding pass.

With a terminal cancer of my own—mine’s in my marrow, as voracious as it is rare—I actually think you’re exactly right to point out how the book of Job reveals the theological problem at the heart of how we so often speak of prayer. God, as the book of Job insists, 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, Mr. Weiss, 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 down the-house-always-wins odds?

St. Thomas Aquinas doubles down on Paul's point when he writes, "We should not say 'in accordance with my prayer, God wills that it should be a fine day,' we should say that 'God wills it to be a fine day, in accordance with my prayer.'"

God wills our prayers, says Aquinas, as much as God wills the fine day.

Let me put Aquinas's 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 that '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 churchy 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, as contingent creatures we can never know the why behind the Creator's doings. If we could, then God would not be God.

But 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.

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