

# Scientific Research of Prayer: Can the Power of Prayer Be Proven?

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## Introduction

Throughout time, the power of prayer has been questioned by science. The analytical mind of the scientist calls for proof of the existence of a higher being. These scientists, both the faithful and nonbelievers alike, have produced studies into the affects of prayer on our physical as well as spiritual well being. Although most of us, who possess the belief that prayer can and does work, do not require physical, quantitative proof of the power of prayer, it is interesting to read the results of these studies.

### **Was a scientific study of prayer and its effect on heart patients done?**

One of the most quoted scientific studies of prayer was done between August of 1982 and May of 1983. 393 patients in the San Francisco General Hospital's Coronary Care Unit participated in a double blind study to assess the therapeutic effects of intercessory prayer. Patients were randomly selected by computer to either receive or not receive intercessory prayer. All participants in the study, including patients, doctors, and the conductor of the study himself remained blind throughout the study, To guard against biasing the study, the patients were not contacted again after it was decided which group would be prayed for, and which group would not.

It was assumed that although the patients in the control group would not be prayed for by the participants in the study, that others-family members, friends etc., would likely pray for the health of at least some of the members of the

control group. There was no control over this factor. Meanwhile all of the members of the group that received prayer would be prayed for by not only those associated with the study, but by others as well.

The results of the study are not surprising to those of us who believe in the power of prayer. The patients who had received prayer as a part of the study were healthier than those who had not. The prayed for group had less need of having CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) performed and less need for the use of mechanical ventilators. They had a diminished necessity for diuretics and antibiotics, less occurrences of pulmonary edema, and fewer deaths. Taking all factors into consideration, these results can only be attributed to the power of prayer.

### **Did prayer lower blood pressure?**

The August 31, 1998 issue of *Jet Magazine* questioned whether prayer could lower blood pressure in high blood pressure sufferers. Again the obvious conclusion was reached. The magazine reported of a study conducted by Duke University Medical Center in Durham, NC. This study had over 4,000 participants over the age of 65. The study found that those who pray and attend religious services on a weekly basis, especially those between the ages of 65 and 74, had lower blood pressure than their counterparts who did not pray or attend religious services. They found that the more religious the person, particularly those who prayed or studied the Bible weekly, the lower the blood pressure. According to the study these people were forty percent less likely to have high diastolic pressure or diastolic hypertension than these were who did not attend religious services, pray, or study the Bible.

Dr. David B. Larson, president of the National Institute for Health Care Research in Rockville, MD, who co-authored the study, also says that prayer can lower high blood pressure. *"The at-risk population of people with illnesses, such as the elderly seem to be helped if they have faith and religious commitment."* Dr. Larson states: *"Faith brings a calming state which helps decrease nervousness and anxiety with coping with day to day stress."*

### **How does prayer effect people who lack health care?**

In the *Essence Magazine* May 1997 issue, Allison Abner writes that African-Americans have historically turned to faith in times of illness and other crises. She cited Luisah Teish who states: *"Because of limited access to quality health*

*care and our distrust of the medical establishment we have occasionally relied on spiritual healing through such practices as prayer and the laying on of hands, Most of us, at some time have used prayer chanting or proverbs as ways to guide, direct, and heal ourselves." "Now," states Allison, "Our beliefs are being backed by medical research," Science is setting out to prove what most of the faithful already know--prayer does work.*

### **Has a prayer study been done on the life of twins?**

The December 1998 issue of *Mc Call's Magazine* raised the question: How does prayer heal? The article notes a study done at the Virginia Commonwealth University Medical College of Virginia in Richmond, which studied 1,902 twins. They found that those who were committed to their spiritual lives tended to have less severe depression and a lower risk of addiction to cigarettes or alcohol. The healthful lifestyles of the spiritually rich and faithful clearly contribute to their well being, They tend not to smoke or drink or not do either excessively. Their marriages are more stable and their spiritual communities form a network that can catch and support people when they are ill.

### **What effect does prayer and religion have on life?**

To delve into religious attitudes and their impact on health, Koenig and his co-researcher, Kenneth Paragament, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, studied 577 hospital patients age 55 and older. One 98-year-old woman with pneumonia and congestive heart failure looked upon her illness as God's plan for her. She prayed often for the health and well being of her family and friends. These attitudes were associated with a serene response to stress and low levels of depression. All signs of well being that nurture joy in living might even extend one's life.

While positive feelings toward a higher power seemed to foster well being, negative thoughts about a deity had the opposite effect. For example, a woman in her late 50's with lung cancer left her church in her 20's, became involved with drugs, and now feels her illness must be a sign of divine disapproval. She got poorer scores on tests that measured quality of life and psychological health than the 98-year-old woman.

### **What do atheists think about prayer?**

Noted atheist Dan Barker, a spokesperson for the Freedom from Religion Foundation says the findings of the above research are no big surprise. Prayer and religious beliefs can have a placebo effect, just like a sugar pill. Barker, who was once a Christian Fundamentalist preacher before developing serious doubts about his religion, states that one of the strongest factors in recovery from an illness is a sense of connectedness with a community and people who care about you. Even if we mumble our prayers only when we are ill or if there is no God to hear them, the new research indicated that religious thoughts could help to heal.

Dr. Larry Dossey writes about the placebo effect mentioned earlier by Dan Barker and physicians who have looked at the tremendous amount of scientific studies on prayer. As Dr. Dossey states: *"That is difficult to do considering that bacteria, fungi, and germinating seeds are not generally considered to be susceptible to suggestion."*

### **Does prayer effect plant seeds?**

In a study on germinating seeds done by Dr. Franklin Loehr, a Presbyterian minister and scientist, the objective was to see in a controlled experiment what effect prayer had over living and seemingly non-living matter. In one experiment they took three pans of various types of seeds. One was the control pan. One pan received positive prayer, and the other received negative prayer. Time after time, the results indicated that prayer helped speed germination and produced more vigorous plants. Prayers of negation actually halted germination in some plants and suppressed growth in others.

In another experiment two bottles of spring water were purchased. One container was used as a control, receiving no prayer; a group prayed for the second. The water was then used on pans of corn seeds layered in cotton, with one pan receiving the prayer water and the other receiving the control water. The pan receiving the prayer water sprouted a day earlier than seeds in the other pan. The prayer seeds had a higher germination and growth rate. The experiment was repeated with the same result each time.

### **What effect does prayer have on microorganisms?**

Dr. Dossey, in his book, *Be Careful What You Pray For*, looks closely at experiments with microorganisms. He states, *"Skeptics who do not believe in the effects of distant intentions say that any observed result must be due to the*

*expectation of the subject- or the power of belief and thought.*" Dossey argues that if bacteria respond to outside intentions by growing more slowly when prayed over, than control groups not receiving prayer, then one cannot dismiss this result by attributing it to negative suggestion.

Bacteria presumably do not think positively or negatively. Another major advantage of microorganisms in studies of distant mental intentions has to do with the control group. If the effects of intercessory prayer, for example, are being assessed in a group of humans who have a particular illness, it is difficult to establish a pure control group that does not receive prayer. The reason is that sick human beings generally pray for themselves; or outsiders pray for them, thus contaminating the control group, which by definition should not receive the treatment being evaluated.

In studies involving microbes, this notorious "*Problem of Extraneous Prayer*" is totally overcome because one can be reasonably certain that the bacteria, fungi, or yeast in a control group will not pray for themselves. And that their fellow microbes will not pray for them.

If the study involved negative intentions instead of positives, the advantages remain the same. The thoughts of microorganisms do not influence its outcome.

Jean Barry, a physician-researcher in Bordeaux, France, chooses to work with a destructive fungus, *Rhizoctonia Solani*. He asked 10 people to try to inhibit its growth merely through their intentions at a distance of 1.5 meter.

The experiment involved control Petri dishes with fungi that were not influenced in addition to those that were. The laboratory conditions were carefully controlled regarding the genetic purity of the fungi and the composition of the culture medium, the relative humidity, and the conditions of temperature and lighting.

The control petri dishes and the influenced dishes were treated identically, except for the negative intentions directed toward the latter. A person who was blind to the details of the experiment handled various manipulations. The influences simply took their stations at the 1.5 meters and were free to act as they saw fit for their own concentration. For 15 minutes each subject was assigned five experimental and five control dishes. Of the ten subjects three to six subjects worked during a session, and there were nine sessions.

Measurement of the fungi colony on the Petri dish was obtained by outlining the boundary of the colony on a sheet of thin paper. Again, someone who did not know the aim of the experiment or the identity of the Petri dishes did this. The outlines were then cut out and weighed under condition of constant temperature and humidity. When the growth in 195 experimental dishes was compared to their corresponding controls, it was significantly retarded in 151 dishes. The possibility that these results could be explained by chance was less than one in a thousand.

Dr. Daniel I. Benor, who has evaluated all the known experiments in the field of distant healing in his landmark work healing research, calls this study "Highly significant."

### **Does physical distance effect prayer?**

The researchers William H. Tedder and Melissa L. Monty from the University of Tennessee replicated the experiment. The goal of this study was to inhibit the growth of the fungus from the distance of one to fifteen miles. Two groups participated. Group one was made up of Tedder and six others who knew him and frequently interacted with him over a year and a half. Group 2 consisted of 8 volunteers who either did not know Tedder or did not interact with him frequently.

When the growth differential between the experimental and control dishes were compared, group one was highly successful. The likelihood of explaining their results by chance were less than 3 in 100,000. Group two was less successful. Their likelihood of a chance explanation was 6 in 100. Why was group one more successful? The researchers theorized that because of their established rapport with Tedder they might have had greater expectation and more motivation of a positive outcome than group two had.

In a post-experiment questionnaire, the group one subjects indeed responded more positively to questions about how they perceived their ability to inhibit the fungal cultures at a distance. Note: This is a clear example of faith in prayer verses doubt.

The fact that prayer is non local, that it functions at a distance, and that spatial separation does not diminish the affect means that it does not have to be intrusive. There is cross-cultural evidence that prayer does work. The factors that seem to affect the outcome of these studies are qualifies of consciousness,

like caring, compassion, empathy, and love. When you take these qualities away the outcome of the study is changed. In, fact according to Dr. Dossey, if you flip these "empathetic, warm feelings" to the negative, frequently the subject is affected. In experiments a bacterium died and plants withered when subjected to the negative influence.

### **Conclusion**

These studies have shown conclusive evidence of the power of prayer. Time after time the outcomes of these tests have shown the reality of the force of a higher being and our ability to communicate with Him.

We have also learned from viewing the results of these studies that the expectations we have while praying factor into the outcome of our prayers. Though the faithful will always believe that there need not be any physical evidence of the power and effects of prayer, science has come a long way toward showing just that-prayer is real, and it works.

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