Jesus was on the Mount of Olives. He knew that he was about to suffer and die for our sins. So he prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”

Recognize the Attitude

Attitude in prayer is important. Jesus tells us not to show off in public when we pray, such as thanking Him for being better than someone else. Prayer also should not be mechanical but should flow from the heart. Jesus encourages us to a prayer life of sincere conversation with Him in which we thank Him, praise Him, confess our sins, and ask Him to meet our needs.

An Experiment

Some wonder if prayer really works. They hear reports of some pretty amazing happenings that are difficult to explain. Would you believe that many studies have been done on prayer? There is even a center for the study of the effectiveness of prayer.

In the latest study, 1,802 cardiac patients awaiting surgery at six medical centers were divided into three groups. All the patients were informed that they were involved in a clinical trial and gave their permission. Those in Group 1 were prayed for after being told that they might or might not receive intercessory prayer. Group 2 was the control group and was not prayed for after being told that they might or might not receive intercessory prayer. Group 3 received prayer after being told it would receive prayer.

Three Christian groups were invited to do the praying: two were Catholic, a monastery in St. Paul and a community of Carmelites in Mass. A Protestant group in Missouri also prayed.

The groups prayed from one to four times daily over a 14-day period just before a patient’s surgery, specifically asking for “a successful surgery with a quick and healthy recovery and no complications.” Those praying never met the patients but used the first names and the first initial of their last names.

The results were measured in terms of the number of medical complications encountered by the members of the three groups. Guess what? It turned out that the highest percentage (57 percent) of complications was recorded among members of Group 3, who were told they were being prayed for.

Now, most of these types of studies will state that they are not checking to see if God exists. Investigators will say that they are looking for natural causes involving mind-body interactions, such as if you have a positive attitude then you are more likely to come through a medical event more successfully. They see prayer as a technique for building positive attitude.

Frankly, it would be better, then, if that would be what is actually tested. What I found (on a listserv) was that unbelievers were quick to rejoice in what they saw as negative results. And then the defenders of prayer blamed the victims and suggested that telling Group 3 that they were being prayed for might have actually caused a negative outcome. Perhaps many in group 3 thought, “I must really be bad off... that they had to
call in a prayer team?” The reasoning is that they may have become emotionally discouraged and thereby raised their risk for complications.

Of course, having an attitude that one prays only as the last resort is so wrong. Exam week is no time to start praying (not that you shouldn’t if that is where you find yourself). The thing is that prayer should be regular and intertwined with daily life. It should not just be an emergency plan. When things go well, there should be prayerful acknowledgement. God even likes to hear about small things. No matter what, there should be constant communication with God.

The Problems of “Background Prayer” and False Prayers

There are even more problems with a study like this. If you would tell me that I might or might not be prayed for, and I was in the group that was not prayed for, I would still pray for myself. If I were in a prayer group and knew that there was a group not being prayed for, it would be difficult not to think of them also and include them even if I did not know their first names. I would not have to even verbalize a prayer for them. (Yes, I regularly pray for all control groups and end up confounding all of science.) Likewise, any health provider could be praying without the knowledge of those that are doing the study. God regularly hears our inner feelings, our groaning and moaning in our right hemisphere and acts on it. Being a less verbal male, I have always found great comfort in the fact that I do not have to say it just right... or at all. God knows my pains and my wants (Romans 8:26-27).

Scientific studies of prayer suffer from poor theology. The science we just covered DOES amount to a testing of God. Remember the devil tempting Jesus to jump off a building to see if God would save Him? Jesus said that it is wrong to test God.

It is likely that such prayer in a scientific study is not really prayer. Prayer is a function of our relationship with God. It is not a technical procedure to be performed in a particular dosage, with particular skill, expecting specific outcomes, at a particular time. The object of prayer is the important thing: God, our Father, who can do anything. And we reach God through Christ in prayer. It involves a pouring out of the heart. This is no place for doing cold science.

Do We Know What Is Best?

But let us move on. Even when we pray for a particular outcome in a sincere talk with God through the grace granted by Jesus, we must be humble and realize that we do not know what is best for us and others. The complications in the study that we might judge to be a negative thing could actually be a good thing in the big picture. We may pray for something just as Job rightly prayed for his children, but God has something better in mind. There are things too wonderful that are beyond our understanding. In Matthew Jesus says, “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?” And before that Jesus says, “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

So when we pray, we must watch our attitude. Lord, grant me X. A particular result. A carefree, long, healthy life, perhaps. Maybe success and riches. The current Time magazine has an article on the prosperity gospel in which one would pray and expect to be rich if one is a strong Christian. Well, God will hear such prayer and answer it. He MAY grant riches or other requests... but the answer will be linked to what is best for us and others. God is active in His Creation; he will not give us harmful things. In cases of illness, God may decide that it is better to welcome the individual into heaven. With riches God will consider the effects on our faith-life. This is not the thinking of the world. They would claim that the prayer has not been effective.
Apparently Charles Darwin, the proponent of a mechanism for evolution, still held some faith in Christianity until his young daughter, Anne, became ill. When she died, he could not accept that answer from God and lost His faith. He failed to accept that God’s reasons are often beyond us.3

So when we pray, we should acknowledge the doing of God’s will in things. “Thy will be done among us.”

Imagine the spoiled child who asks for this and that without any thought of what is good and what is selfish.

**Trusting God for Good Answers**

The Christian rightly comes to the Father as a child who knows that this relationship is not earned or deserved. So we come in humility. We need to accept His answers. And we should trust our heavenly Father and know his love and so call him “Abba,” the Hebrew child’s first word for father, a special term of endearment that evokes remembering our special relationship of loving Father and child. Just like we say “Mama,” often for our entire life. Freshmen especially remember how “Abba” was used to note the close relationship of Reuven and his caring father in their reading of *The Chosen* by Potok. We trust our heavenly Father to give us what is good for us. We may ask for no complications during an operation but have to be ready for His better answer.

I believe it was the wife of Billy Graham who said that she prayed for a good husband, and if she had not, she said, she would have married the wrong man 10 times.

We should not test and demand specific, immediate results. We need to be open to different answers to our prayers. We should take our problems to the Lord and let him handle them.

**Trusting That God Can Do the Impossible**

This is not to say that we cannot be bold in prayer. Here is a bold prayer. I said to my wife, Jeanette, that I have told this story before. She said, “Tell it again and tell it your whole life.” So here it is briefly.

Some of you know that my youngest son was seriously injured in a high school football game. The doctors said that he had lost most of his anterior tibialis. One said that so much tissue had been removed that he would not be able to walk without an assistive device. His foot would drop. We prayed. And then the Martin Luther College community prayed in chapel. God’s answer was that he needs no device. If my son walked in here, you would not know that he had been injured. It was not overnight. A physical therapist, who happened to be a Lutheran Church— Missouri Synod member, worked with my son. When the insurance payments ran out, he said, “I will do it for nothing.” The recovery was so outstanding. One wonders what has all happened inside the leg. My son has a standing invitation to drop in at Mayo Clinic any time that he happens to be in Rochester, so that they can look at his leg again.

We CAN pray boldly and with trust because we know that our God can do more than we ask for. I may and should pray firmly for the success of an operation or end of an illness. But I do need to add that God’s will should be done.

Remember that Jesus prayed to the Father that He would NOT have to suffer and die on the cross. But He added that if it were God’s will— the way to do it— then He WOULD do it. He wanted God’s will to be done. And it was God’s will. This WAS the way to save everyone. But then the Father sent an angel to strengthen Jesus for the work ahead. He did not leave Jesus without any support. He is a loving Father. Thank God for this answer to Jesus that makes God OUR Father, too. Amen.
