

Is the Purpose of Prayer to Produce a Placebo Effect?

In various ways the Christian faith is being diluted by universalism. One writer recently advocated Hindu practices of meditation as beneficial, claiming that they purified the mind and heart. The trouble is that the union of body, mind, and soul that is being sought does not, according to the Bible, come through human effort. One of the essential errors in mysticism also is that a person can, by good living and contemplation, achieve a vision of God on this earth.

Recently, in the Toowoomba *Chronicle* (24/07/99, p. 35) it was reported that Dr Herbert Benson, president of the Mind/Body Medical Institute, which is associated with Harvard Medical School, has studied the “placebo effect” of belief or “remembered wellness”, as he prefers to call it. He said, “If you believe that something, be it a pill or a prayer, will relieve a symptom, the belief will revive the memory of not having the symptom. We can turn on a rash, [or] vanish warts by belief”

We do not deny that a person’s attitude to sickness has a good deal to do with how he copes with it. However, we have to say that, according to the Bible, people are not encouraged to pray because prayer itself makes them feel better. Christians do not pray because a better feeling that is produced by going through the motions of prayer will improve their health and well being. If that were so, it would not matter which God a person prayed to, as long as the placebo effect was produced. A placebo is a pill that people are given that contains nothing medicinally helpful, but with the expectation that the person who takes it will think he is getting better. The benefit hoped for is the change in thinking.

Look at the Gospel we are hearing today about the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21-28). She lived in the area of Phoenicia near Tyre and Sidon. Her trouble was not something that would be dispelled by imagination or a better attitude. Her daughter was suffering terribly from demon-possession. Obviously her own Phoenician gods had not helped. She sought out Jesus, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!” Now that was prayer. It was directed to the true God. It was not offered for the sake of a placebo effect. It was not based on the act of praying itself as if it could produce the required placebo effect. In fact, she was not praying for herself, but for her daughter. It could not even come into the category of “faith healing”, because her daughter’s faith was not in focus, but her own.

Jesus did promise that prayer that is made in faith in His name, with confidence that there will be an answer, would be heard. In fact, His promise is remarkably general, “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer” (Mt 21:22). This is not simply a placebo, as if the union of body, mind, and soul is what produces a cure. The reason for His promise rests on the kind of God the Father is.

What we learn from this incident is the value of persistent, clinging faith in prayer in spite of apparent rebuffs. Both Jesus’ disciples and Jesus Himself made her progress difficult. The disciples said, “Send her away, because she keeps shouting after us.” Then Jesus said, “I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the family of Israel.” Her great need impelled her persistence. She came and bowed down before Him, and said, “Lord, help me!” This was no placebo effect in operation.

Then Jesus said something that would have driven some people right away, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the pet dogs.” The apparent answer to her prayer was that she was being called a dog! Yet her great need drove her to grasp at what looked like straws. At least Jesus had not used the word *kynes*, for street dogs, the kind that licked Lazarus’ sores, but *kynaria*, pet dogs. That was her way out of this baffling maze. If she was a pet dog, she was going to try to get at least what pet dogs hope for, some crumbs. “Yes, Lord, yet even the pet dogs eat some of the crumbs that fall from the table of their masters.” What we are looking at in her is not some kind of relaxation response that prayer produces, which can counteract harmful effects of stress! It is the true God, who is all-powerful, all knowing, and loving, putting her faith through a hot testing on the one hand. On the other hand there is what led Jesus to comment, “O woman, your faith is great! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

All of which leads us to ask precisely what faith is. It is not a human work, which by its own power produces an effect. It is the reception by a desperately poor person of God’s gracious gift. We look to Him out of our desperate need. We look for forgiveness and reconciliation from Him and for help in physical need, because He is the gracious Giver, the only source of restoration in what He has created.

From this point of view, in spite of Jesus’ comment about a great faith, we should hesitate to say that a strong faith can achieve what a weaker faith cannot. The difference between a strong faith and a weak faith is that the weak faith can more easily let God’s gift drop to the ground. Salvation comes through faith, and even a spark of it, even a

weak faith, receives it. The person who looks for strength in his faith as an inherent power is giving evidence of a weak faith! The answer to prayer depends on God who is the Giver, His grace and mercy, wisdom and power. If human beings, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to their children, our Father in heaven will give the Holy Spirit, the summary of all God's gracious gifts, to those who ask Him.

This incident reminds us of the parables that Jesus told about persistence in prayer. There was the parable about the woman who kept going back to the unjust judge for justice, so that the judge defended her cause just to get her out of his hair (Lk 18:1-8). There was the parable about the friend who insistently knocked on his neighbour's door at midnight for some bread. The friend was given his request, not because the man was his friend, but because he was persistent. He wanted to avoid the embarrassment of neighbours' switching on their lights to find out which hard-hearted man was the cause of that commotion in the middle of the night. The lesson is that, for the person who continues to knock, the door will be opened (Lk 13:5-10).

Is this a placebo effect? Prayer is not producing as an easy alternative to what might be achieved by other means. It is not going through a religious practice for the sake of enjoying longer, healthier, happier lives. We pray to God for our own sakes, but God is worshipped and praised, not for the sake of enabling us to produce the results we want in ourselves, but for His own sake. If God's answer to our prayers to Him is that He gives us a better attitude about the difficulties we have, praise Him for that; but let us not call our prayers placebos!

Benson said, "The body possesses a physiological counterpart to the fight or flight response: the relaxation, response, which comes about as a result of repetition, be it a word, a sound, a prayer, a phrase, jogging, knitting, meditation or yoga." Prayer is not magic. Magic hopes, by the repetition of the right words, to gain an automatic result. However, there is a world of difference between persistence in prayer to the true God, which includes repetition of the same request, and the repetition of anything at all, even jogging, without reference to the power, wisdom, and mercy of the only true God, the Giver. Jesus talks about prayer being made in His name. That is not simply saying "OM" over and over, like a Hindu! The difference is between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, and what is ultimate, eternal life by God's grace, and what is penultimate, better health during this life.