

How clear, for you, is the difference between faith and magic, or faith and superstition?

When you pray, what is it that, deep down, you believe that you're doing?

If you're prayers are answered, how and why do you think that happened? Similarly, if you're prayers go unanswered, how do you explain that to yourself?

What's going on, do you think, when we pray?

It really is worth having a poke around in all this, because, even if we don't fully understand prayer, or how it works, we likely do have some ideas floating around in our minds about prayer, about what we're doing when we pray; and our lurking ideas about prayer will absolutely be connected to our theology, our beliefs about God, whether we're consciously aware of it, or not. The way we engage with prayer really does reveal our deepest beliefs about the powers at play in our lives and in the world, our own power, and the power of God.

Prayer is the very core of all Christian life, and I'm going to wager that for many, if not most of us our most common forms of prayer are prayers asking for help from God or healing, prayers seeking forgiveness, and prayers of thanksgiving. So, what do we think speaking these prayers, or holding them in our heart, is *doing* what are they *for*? If we're hoping for a miracle, or that somehow our prayers to God might influence or change the course of events in our life or in the world, in what way is that different from magical or superstitious thinking?

Our scientific, technological age doesn't leave much space for magic or miracle, but this is a recent thing for humans. For most of human existence, the world was absolutely 'alive' with all kinds of supernatural forces; where, today, we may see an essentially controllable world, made up of us, plants, animals, and objects, and all the empty space between, our ancestors lived in a world thick with energies and presences of all sorts that played a significant, proactive role in influencing nature and all of life, including ours.

For the early Christians, reality was 'alive' and filled with really real supernatural presence.¹ Our Scriptures are loaded with stories of divination, the use of oracles, curses, miracles, marvelous healing events, even the raising of folks from the dead. Always extraordinary, events like these were, for the ancients, nonetheless an absolutely accepted part of life. In the first century, Jesus was far from alone in being able to do incredible things, supernatural things, there was miracle-workers, sorcerers, healers, witches, and magicians all over the place.

As part of this thick reality, the early Christians shared with the Jews of the time, and the pagans they lived amongst, an absolute belief in the presence and influence of evil. It was the forces of evil that were responsible for sowing chaos, bringing misfortune, derailing lives, making otherwise good people do bad things.

¹ see this article for some interesting background: <https://aeon.co/essays/early-christians-struggled-to-distinguish-themselves-from-pagans>,

And so, much of early Christian prayer, gesture, and ritual, were in continuity with the most ancient rites, ways the faithful actively participated in the effort to resist, push back and drive away the evil forces that would otherwise carry the world and its people into destructive and disruptive chaos.

Evil was taken seriously, as a real thing, with real presence, and real impact, and prayer was taken seriously as an important way to fight it, by even the most ordinary of folks.

Despite this now being the 21st century, and despite we humans now believing ourselves to be far more intelligent than our ancestors in all things, given the state of the world today, can we really be so confident our ancestors were wrong about the reality of evil. Do we really have a better explanation for why there's so much ongoing and unrelenting human-created suffering in the world.

Given all we now “understand” – why is it that the value of human life, why is it the value of the life of this planet, *today*, is minimized in the fight over land, resources, power and profit; the *violence*, for power and profit. Surely, surely the ways the folks in power are behaving, in this highly educated and deeply rational age we're living in, surely the decisions and actions that bring so much suffering in their wake, in this country and in nations around the world, surely it can't call just be the result of someone's upbringing, or pathological personality traits, or any particular political ideology.

Can we be so sure that the horrors we're living through can be sufficiently explained without invoking the very real presence of evil in the world?

The materialist worldview, that is, that the only *really* real stuff is what we can experience directly with our senses, see and touch, this worldview doesn't leave any room for God. The faith-based world view has space for God, but for many in this dominant culture, ideas of other supernatural possibilities remain far less intellectually appealing. For many in the church, we're far more comfortable assuming that the demonic possessions and the healings of Scripture, and the immense power of the Powers and Principalities spoken of by Paul in his letters, these were all just the ancients' stumbling and partial, uneducated assessment of something we now have a far more logical, rational, and correct explanation for.

But do we? Really?

The Lord's Prayer, which combines Jesus' direction on how to pray found in our reading today, with his direction from the Gospel of Matthew, The Lord's Prayer is essentially a prayer that would have us engage with the powers and the forces in this world that are working to prevent the reign of God:

Your Kingdom come

Your will be done – Jesus is telling us that using prayer, we have the power to bring God's reign into being, pushing back those other kingdoms, resisting the forces of all other wills - and this is the primary purpose of prayer, to destroy and obliterate evil.

Give us our daily bread: God, give us the nourishment we need for the effort, to stay in the effort, to join you, God, in co-creating a world in which there is justice and fullness of life for all

Forgive us, heal us so we're not tempted to align ourselves, in our pain, and in our brokenness, with the forces that would offer us a quick fix, the forces that have us think only of ourselves, our own needs and comforts

Save us from the time of trial: protect us from the forces that would cause us to doubt or forget your presence and power, God, your love and goodness, and our true purpose in the world

And deliver us from evil.

As we take God seriously, so must we, I believe, take the presence of evil seriously, just as Jesus did. Take seriously that evil is a force in the world, a force that's not only given in to, but also actively affirmed. Take seriously that prayer has the power to beat back evil, drive it away, set us and keep us free, and that that's what prayer is for, in all the ways it can done and offered.

The future depends on the intercessors, the ones who pray, the ones who imagine, envision, and then pray into existence a world free of domination, free from the powers and principalities.²

If the true power of prayer is to be known in the world, it must be more than wishing for something, more than magical thinking, or a habit of superstition. It is what we have to resist, to beat back, drive away, and ultimately defeat the forces of evil in this world. Prayer is powerful business and Jesus has taught us how to do it.

² This idea is adapted from that of Walter Wink "History belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being..." from: Walter Wink *The Powers That Be* (Doubleday, New York: 1998), 185