

Evidence Relating to Answered Prayer for Healing

By Peter S. Williams

Perhaps the most widely claimed contemporary public experience of the supernatural would be the claim to have witnessed miracles of healing in answer to prayer. According to a 1996 *Time* magazine poll 82% of adult Americans believe in the healing power of personal prayer, while 73% believe that praying for someone else can help cure their illness. A 1997 *Newsweek* poll showed that 79% of respondents who said they prayed regularly said they believed God answers prayers for healing. Clearly, not all miracle claims are true. Some claims are mistaken, while some are fraudulent. However, neither mistaken identity nor impersonation disproves the existence of the genuine article. Moreover, there is evidence that at least *some* claims to have witnessed miraculous healing in answer to prayer are accurately describing reality.

Atheist Richard Dawkins acknowledges that: ‘the alleged power of intercessory prayer is at least in principle within the reach of science. A double-blind experiment can be done and was done. It could have yielded a positive result.’ⁱ The study Dawkins cites did not yield a positive result. However, the failure of a particular double-blind study on prayer for healing to produce a positive result does not count against the Christian understanding of God, including the hypothesis that He *sometimes* answers prayer positively. It counts against the hypothesis that God *always* answers prayer positively, but few if any believers accept such a hypothesis!

Dawkins comments:

Needless to say, the negative results of the experiment [it would be more accurate to state that the study had a ‘null’ result rather than a ‘negative’ result] will not shake the faithful. Bob Barth, the spiritual director of the Missouri prayer ministry which supplied some of the experimental prayers, said: ‘A person of faith would say that this study is interesting, but we’ve been praying a long time and we’ve seen prayer work, we know it works, and the research on prayer and spirituality is just getting started.’ Yeah, right: we know from our faith that prayer works, so if evidence fails to show it we’ll just soldier on until finally we get the result we want.ⁱⁱ

Dawkins portrays Barth as claiming to know *from un-evidenced faith* that prayer can lead to real world changes directly after he quotes Barth claiming to know this *from personal experience!*

Dawkins also fails to note that several other scientific studies on prayer *have* reported positive results.ⁱⁱⁱ For example:

- In a study published in the *Southern Medical Journal* ‘Dr [Randolf] Byrd divided 393 heart patients into two groups. One was prayed for by Christians; the other did not receive prayers from study participants. Patients didn’t know which group they belonged to. The members of the group that was prayed for experienced fewer complications, fewer cases of pneumonia, fewer cardiac arrests, less congestive heart failure and needed fewer antibiotics.’^{iv}

- Dr Dale Matthews documents how volunteers prayed for selected patients with rheumatoid arthritis: ‘To avoid a possible placebo effect from knowing they were being prayed for, the patients were not told which ones were subjects of the test. The recovery rate among those prayed for was measurably higher than among a control group, for which prayers were not offered.’^v

More recently:

- A 2010 field study on proximal (rather than remote) intercessory prayer for healing conducted by Candy Gunter Brown et al, published in *Southern Medical Journal*, found that: ‘First, Mozambican subjects did exhibit improved auditory and/or visual acuity subsequent to PIP interventions. Second, the magnitude of measured effects exceeds that reported in previous studies of suggestion and hypnosis.’^{vi} Brown comments: ‘I found highly significant improvements in hearing and statistically significant improvements in vision following PIP. Out of 11 hearing subjects, two had thresholds reduced by over 50 dBHL. One subject, Jordan, was presented as deaf and mute since birth and made no responses to sounds at 100 dBHL; after PIP, he responded to 60 dBHL tones, imitating sounds in a hoarse, raspy voice. Out of 11 vision subjects, three improved from 20/400 or worse to 20/80 or better. Before prayer, Maryam could not count fingers from one foot away; after one minute of PIP, she was reading the 20/125 line on a vision chart.’^{vii}
- In 2012 Oliver, IN & Detney, A. published ‘A randomized, blinded study of the impact of intercessory prayer on spiritual well-being in patients with cancer’ in the journal *Alternative Therapeutic Health Medicine*. Their study showed that: ‘Participants with cancer whom the research team randomly allocated to the experimental group to receive remote intercessory prayer showed small but significant improvements in spiritual well-being.’^{viii}

Such results provide *prima facie* verification of the ‘efficacy’ of prayer. They certainly show that Dawkins fails to grapple with the full range of available data on this subject. Indeed, a systematic review of the efficacy of distant healing published in 2000 concluded that ‘approximately 57% (13 of 23) of the randomised, placebo-controlled trials of distant healing . . . showed a positive treatment effect’.^{ix} Again: ‘David R. Hodge, an assistant professor of social work in the College of Human Services at Arizona State University, conducted a comprehensive analysis of 17 major studies on the effects of intercessory prayer . . . among people with psychological or medical problems. He found a positive effect.’^x Hodge’s meta-analysis featured in the March 2007 issue of *Research on Social Work Practice*:

This is the most thorough and all-inclusive study of its kind on this controversial subject that I am aware of . . . It suggests that more research on the topic may be warranted, and that praying for people with psychological or medical problems may help them recover . . . Overall, the meta-analysis indicates that prayer is effective.^{xi}

Case Studies in Healing

While the Christian views positive answers to prayers for healing as a gift rather than an entitlement, the miraculous exception rather than the normal rule, ‘there are numerous documented (and actually quite extraordinary) cases of healings’^{xiii} that occur in apparent response to prayers offered by Christians in the name of Jesus.

Improved Hearing

Dr Candy Gunther Brown gives the following example from her personal experience:

in the course of my research, I met Daisy, who had worn hearing aids for thirty years. She had a progressively worsening, hereditary inner-ear problem. In 1999, tests showed moderate hearing loss; by 2004, Daisy’s hearing loss was moderately severe to severe. In 2008, Daisy received [prayer] and ‘felt my fingers on fire and the warmth of the Holy Spirit inside of me,’ after which she could hear without hearing aids. She had her hearing retested two weeks later, showing normal thresholds in lower frequencies with moderate loss in higher frequencies. A 2010 screening still showed normal hearing in speech frequencies.^{xiii}

Healed Knee & Laryngitis

James Porter Moreland (b. 1948) is the Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University in California. He has four earned degrees (a B.S. in chemistry from the University of Missouri, a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary, an M.A. in philosophy from the University of California-Riverside and a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Southern California). Moreland has co-planted three churches, served with Campus Crusade for Christ for 10 years and has spoken or debated on over 200 college campuses. For eight years, he served as a bioethicist for PersonaCare Nursing Homes, Inc. Moreland is clearly an intelligent, well-informed scholar whose experience of life isn’t limited to the ivory tower and who knows a thing or two about medical issues. Moreland offers this eyewitness testimony:

I was speaking at a conference in which a young lady who had a damaged knee received healing prayer. She had been on crutches for about a month and walked with a serious limp, and she had not exercised for two full months. After receiving prayer, she was completely healed. She shed her crutches, began walking normally to this very day, and returned the next morning to her daily routine of jogging, all with no pain at all.^{xiv}

Moreland has a personal testimony to offer as well:

The Sunday evening service on February 20, 2005, had just ended and I wanted to get home . . . The previous Thursday a virus landed in my chest and throat, and in a period of less than three hours I went from being normal to having the worst case of laryngitis in the 35 years since college. On Friday I went to our walk-in clinic and received the bad news. The doctor warned that

this virus was going around, she had seen several cases of it in the last few weeks, and there was nothing that could be done about it. I just had to wait it out. The laryngitis would last 7–10 days. This couldn't be, I whispered to her. My main day of teaching at the university was Monday, and I was looking at a full day of lecturing. I couldn't afford to cancel classes because I had already missed my limit of canceled classes for that semester. To make matters worse, I was scheduled to deliver a three-hour lecture at a nearby church that Tuesday evening, and I didn't want to let the church down. It made no difference. The doctor said I wasn't going to be able to speak either day, so I had to make other plans. My throat felt as if it had broken glass in it, and I was reduced to whispering. On Sunday evening I whispered a few greetings to various church friends; I tried to speak normally, but it hurt too much. After the service I had to get home, try to contact our department secretary . . . and cancel my classes for Monday. I could cancel with the church the next day. As I was walking out of the sanctuary, two lay elders intercepted me. 'Hey, J.P.,' one yelled, 'you can't leave yet. Hope (my wife) just told us you have laryngitis, and we can't let you get outta here without loving on you a bit and praying for your throat!' So one elder laid hands on my shoulders and the other placed his hand on my lower throat area and started praying. To be honest, I wasn't listening to a word they said. I had already left the church emotionally and wanted to get home to make my phone call. But something happened. As the two men prayed gently for me, I began to feel heat pour into my throat and chest from one elder's hand. After two or three minutes of prayer, I was completely and irreversibly healed! I started talking to the brothers normally with no pain, no effort, no trace that anything had been wrong. I never had to make that call to my secretary.^{xv}

Multiple Sclerosis

Michael Poole, lecturer in science education at King's College London, discusses the case of a multiple sclerosis sufferer whom he calls Helen Johnson: 'When I first visited her and her husband, she had her left leg in a calliper, used a wheelchair, walked with crutches and was often to be found slumped on a large cushion on the floor . . .'^{xvi} On 10th January 1981 Helen attended a talk about the Christian ministry of healing given by the chaplain of the London Healing Mission, who prayed with Helen after the meeting: 'following a private conversation with the speaker [Helen] put down her crutches and, to the horror of her husband . . . picked up a tray of bone china and carried it to the kitchen. The expected crash never occurred!'^{xvii} In Helen's own words:

After the main meeting had concluded Tom wanted to know if I would like him to pray for me. I was hesitant, because of my shyness, but I felt honoured that he should want to pray . . . After a brief prayer of confession and asking for forgiveness [the chaplain] asked the Lord to take away the . . . multiple sclerosis. Immediately I knew that the Lord had healed me, though I had felt nothing, and the realisation of being well began to dawn on me . . . I felt [God] tell me to stand up, unaided, and walk to the opposite side of the room, pick up a tray of bone china mugs and carry them out to the kitchen. This I did, and being faithless, was amazed at how easy this action was. My healing had

started that day and was to go on during the next week until my husband bought me a cycle so that, at last, we could go out together . . . It was very difficult to persuade the doctors to accept back my mobility allowance but easy to find a buyer for the two wheelchairs. Within two weeks I was riding a new bicycle and swimming lengths of the pool. Some ten years have now passed and I have never felt any MS symptoms return . . .^{xviii}

Poole reproduces a medical report written on 11th August 1981 by Helen's GP: 'Several months ago this patient attended by Surgery to report that she had been totally cured of her condition, and at that time I could see no residual evidence of disability. With regard to prognosis I am optimistic that the present situation will be maintained . . .'^{xix}

Brain Tumour

Dr Bill Lees reports the case of 'H.P':

Some while ago she was under the care of neuro-surgeons who removed the main bulk of a benign space-occupying lesion which was becoming life-threatening on account of its size. The surgery was highly successful, although the surgeon reported that some portions of lesion could not be removed without unacceptable risk to H.P.'s normal brain tissue. Her friends, who had prayed for the surgeon in his work, were delighted and proceeded to ask God to complete what the surgeon could not. There was, however, eventually a return of symptoms and H.P. returned to the surgeon. After a full reinvestigation, he was convinced that there was need for further surgery. The friends continued to pray urgently that the tumour might be 'shrunk'. In due course H.P. was allocated a bed and prepared for the reopening of her skull. The surgeon wisely insisted on updating the data that would be available to him in the theatre. After a careful examination of the X-ray scan, he came to her bedside and announced that there was no need for surgery. There was no longer any sign of the tumour.^{xx}

A Miscellany of Healings

Consider the following reports from *The Independent on Sunday*:

- After a visit to her local hospital in 2003, [Sharyn] Mackay was diagnosed with cancer of the kidney. The tumour was removed, but soon grew back and spread to her lungs. After being given a year to live, Mackay decided to visit a church that performed healing services. On entering the church, Mackay recalls feeling an 'enormous heat' and the cancer leaving her body. Amazingly, subsequent test results found no traces of the cancer.^{xxi}
- Like many of the 5 million catholic pilgrims who make the journey to Lourdes each year, wheelchair-bound MS sufferer Jean-Pierre Bely arrived hoping for some respite from his chronic condition. After ignoring voices telling him to 'get up and walk', he went home a few hours later and, to the astonishment of his wife and two children, started walking around the house. In 1999, after a

12-year medical investigation by the Catholic Church, it became the first formally recognised miracle for over 22 years.^{xxii}

Andrew Wilson reports ‘a number of healings this author has personally witnessed in the last month (September 2006)’^{xxiii}:

A physiotherapist friend of mine who had been wearing a wrist splint, unable to move her wrist without significant pain, was healed instantly in front of me and ten others three weeks ago, and has since been able to move it completely normally without any discomfort, much to the surprise of many of her (atheist physiotherapist) colleagues. A chef in our church, who had been unable to move his arm above shoulder level for two years, prayed for it two weeks ago during a church meeting, and was instantly able to do so (last time I looked, he had not stopped waving it for several days). A short-sighted student I know, who had never been able to walk around with no glasses without suffering migraines, was instantly healed on being prayed for, and has not worn glasses since (except when, ironically, she cautiously wore them at college, and ended up getting migraines because her eyesight had been corrected). I do not mention these examples because they are the most dramatic I know, nor are they third hand reports . . . I mention them because I have personally witnessed them in the last few weeks . . . they are neither internalised hallucinations nor empirically untrue, but public, physical events in the space-time world, verifiable by doctors and friends.^{xxiv}

In 2008 Professors J.P. Moreland and Klaus Issler jointly testified:

We have both seen and heard eyewitness testimony to miraculous healings . . . During the last two years, in our church alone, there have been at least six cases of cancer miraculously healed, some of them terminal and beyond medical intervention; one person who instantly had her complete eyesight restored from significant, partial blindness after receiving prayer; a Vietnam veteran blinded in one eye for twenty-five years by a grenade explosion who received full sight after being prayed for by a team of several people; and a young deaf boy who miraculously received full hearing after a friend of ours laid hands on him and prayed. These stories are real – in most cases we know the people involved in praying – and they could be multiplied many times over by other examples of miraculous healing.^{xxv}

Miracles of healing in answer to prayer may not happen as frequently as some Christians believe, but there is evidence that they do occur.

Recommended Resources

Brown, Candy Gunther. *Testing Prayer* (Harvard University Press, 2012).

- *et al*, 'Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Proximal Intercessory Prayer (STEPP) on Auditory and Visual Impairments in Rural Mozambique', *Southern Medical Journal: September 2010 - Volume 103 - Issue 9 - pp 864-869*

http://journals.lww.com/smajournalonline/Fulltext/2010/09000/Study_of_the_Therapeutic_Effects_of_Proximal.5.aspx

- 'Testing Prayer' www.psychologytoday.com/blog/testing-prayer

Oliver, IN & Detney, A., 'A randomized, blinded study of the impact of intercessory prayer on spiritual well-being in patients with cancer', *Alternative Therapeutic Health Medicine* 2012 Sep-Oct;18(5):18-27 www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22894887

Video

Prayer & Healing YouTube Video List,

www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qewVEWi2KT0RszsmqH8xHDQWdCKN

Brown, Candy Gunther. 'Science and Miraculous Healing'

<http://youtu.be/rRfLooH3Zok>

Deem, Rich. 'Scientific Evidence for Answered Prayer'

www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjE__3bsOq0

'Does God Answer Prayer? ASU Research Says "Yes"'

www.physorg.com/news93105311.html

Keener, Craig. 'Miracles: Medical Proof' http://youtu.be/sZ1IiXI0N_4

- 'Healing Blindness' <http://youtu.be/KLVYCAIBzh8>

Moreland, J.P. 'On the Promises and Problems of Petitionary Prayer'

www.jpmoreland.com/media/on-the-promises-and-problems-of-petitionary-prayer/

- 'When God Is Silent' <http://youtu.be/Hx6fOnMKkJk>

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- ⁱ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), p. 65.
- ⁱⁱ *ibid*, p. 65-66.
- ⁱⁱⁱ cf. BBC News, 'Heart Patients "Benefit from Prayer"' <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/1627662.stm>
- ^{iv} Phyllis McIntosh, 'Faith is Powerful Medicine', *Reader's Digest*, May, 2000. cf. R.C. Byrd, 'Positive Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer in a Coronary Care Unit Population', *Southern Medical Journal* 81: 826-829.
- ^v Charles Colson & Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* (London: Marshall Pickering, 2000), p. 313.
- ^{vi} Candy Gunther Brown *et al*, 'Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Proximal Intercessory Prayer (STEPP) on Auditory and Visual Impairments in Rural Mozambique', *Southern Medical Journal*: September 2010 - Volume 103 - Issue 9 - pp 864-869
http://journals.lww.com/smajournalonline/Fulltext/2010/09000/Study_of_the_Therapeutic_Effects_of_Proximal.5.aspx
- ^{vii} Candy Gunther Brown, 'Testing Prayer: Empirical Perspectives on Prayer for Healing' www.psychologytoday.com/blog/testing-prayer/201204/empirical-perspectives-prayer-healing
- ^{viii} Oliver, IN & Detney, A., 'A randomized, blinded study of the impact of intercessory prayer on spiritual well-being in patients with cancer', *Alternative Therapeutic Health Medicine* 2012 Sep-Oct;18(5):18-27 www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22894887
- ^{ix} J.A. Astin, E. Harkness & E Ernst MD, 'The efficacy of "distant healing": a systematic review of randomized trials', *Ann Intern Med* 2000; 132:903-10.
- ^x 'Does God Answer Prayer? ASU Research Says "Yes"' www.physorg.com/news93105311.html
- ^{xi} David R. Hodge quoted by 'Does God Answer Prayer? ASU Research Says "Yes"' www.physorg.com/news93105311.html cf. <http://rsw.sagepub.com/content/17/2/174.abstract>
- ^{xii} Gary R. Habermas, 'Our Personal God: God Interacts With Us' www.garyhabermas.com/books/why_believe/whybelieve.htm#ch29
- ^{xiii} Candy Gunther Brown, 'Testing Prayer' www.psychologytoday.com/blog/testing-prayer/201204/empirical-perspectives-prayer-healing
- ^{xiv} J.P. Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), p. 198.
- ^{xv} J.P. Moreland http://preachingtoday.com/illustrations/article_print.html?id=51862
- ^{xvi} Michael Poole, *Miracles: Science, the Bible & Experience* (London: Scripture Union, 1992), p 7.
- ^{xvii} *ibid*, p 8.
- ^{xviii} *ibid*, p. 9-10.
- ^{xix} *ibid*, p. 10.
- ^{xx} Bill Lees, 'Are People Healed Today?' in *Christian Healing: What Can We Believe?* (ed. Ernest Lucas; Lynx, 1997), p. 11-12.
- ^{xxi} *The Independent on Sunday*, 7th January 2007, p. 15.
- ^{xxii} *ibid*.
- ^{xxiii} Andrew Wilson, *Deluded by Dawkins? A Christian Response to The God Delusion* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 2007), p. 47.
- ^{xxiv} *ibid*, p. 47-48.
- ^{xxv} J.P. Moreland & Klaus Issler, *In Search of a Confident Faith: Overcoming Barriers to Trusting in God* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008), p. 149.