

## **CHAPTER VIII: CLAIM #4 – PRAYER WORKS**

But another way the history goes is into a renewed discussion about religion and particularly into a discussion about the possibility that religious faith in particular as opposed to just faith in your doctor or faith in the pill you're about to take, might produce really, really powerful healing effects, sort of act like a super potent kind of placebo effect. And this is a book that explores this. And once that argument gets made, it leads then to a further kind of proposal--maybe in a sense a kind of surprising one--a suggestion that just maybe the healing powers of strong religious faith helps explain why the human species is so incorrigibly religious in the first place, that just maybe human beings are religious because they're wired to be religious. They're wired for God as people began to say and the reason--the most important reason they're wired for God is because it's good for their health to be wired for God. Believing in God is good for your health because after all over millions of years we didn't have modern medicine, we didn't have antibiotics, all we had was, you know, to protect us against the ravages of disease really was whatever we were able to sort of do with roots and herbs and our belief in God or whatever kind of higher power.

Now, this wired for God argument is certainly some kind of a claim for a link between spirituality and health. You can't deny that we're backing the realm. But the exact significance of this claim isn't completely clear. At least it's ambiguous. What are we saying here? Are we basically reducing religious faith to an evolutionary adaptation? And therefore at the same time reducing God to a kind of a useful illusion that we believe in because we have to, because we're wired to believe in it, but not because there's any rational reason to believe in it, or are we not saying that? Are we saying, well, actually being wired for God doesn't imply anything about whether or not God exists, and in fact as some people have said, it's even more likely now that we think we're wired for God that God really exists because why would we have all this wiring unless he wanted us to be able to sense his presence? So, for the time being, this piece of the research enterprise is just living with the ambiguities. And again the history continues.

But there's nothing ambiguous about the larger implications of the final claim that I want to review with you today because this is what it says, "prayer works." It doesn't work because it just gives you a sense of connection to other people or because it might reduce your stress or because it might evoke indigenous healing capacity to produce some sort of placebo effect. Prayer itself changes people's health in ways that are independent of all these other factors--indeed are independent of all known psychological and physiological mechanisms that we might otherwise want to evoke. Prayer works. So, where does this idea come from? Well, the best place to locate it historically is in the rise of statistics. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century--and specifically to an idea that Charles Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton, came up with to use these newly emerging mathematical tools to address some big social questions. One of the big questions that he thought would be kind of fun to address was whether or not God still maintains an active presence in the modern world. For example, he said, does God still answer prayers and is there any way you could use statistics to actually find out? And he thought you could. And this is what he did. In the *Anglican Book of Common Prayer*--in the services that are laid out in the *Anglican Book of Common Prayer*--there are instructions that the congregation must pray for the health of the Royal Family. So, every time a service is held in an Anglican church the people pray for the health of the Royal Family. And Galton, thinking about that, said, well, this family must be the most prayed-for people in the entire nation and therefore if God is listening to all these people they should be healthier, shouldn't they, they should be living longer. So, do they? And this is what he found. And I won't go into this as there's more you can say about all these data, but let's just focus on the number that I put up in red and compare it with the people against whom he compared--these are mortality rates. This is age of death on average. He eliminated, because he wanted to be fair about it, death by accident or some sort of untoward--he was looking at death by natural causes. And what he found is that the Royal Family actually lived a shorter period, lived less long than anyone else on the list. So, you laugh a little and a lot of people were kind of laughing. Back then it all seemed pretty fun. And it was intended in the sense, obviously, to be a bit of a poke in a time when the scientific naturalists were increasingly sort of getting more muscle behind their cause. And as you might expect the clergy were all aflutter about this and said, you can't do this, you can't try to put God to the test like this, you

can't quantify prayer. And the debate kind of went in the ways you could imagine. But it didn't end. In our own time we're still tempted by the idea of numbers, of statistics and of the idea that you can use numbers to investigate the power of whether or not God is actually answering people's prayers. But the way that people are doing it now is within the framework of the gold standard methodology of evidence-based medicine, the clinical trial.

Here's the study that got everybody all agitated because it seemed after a series of less successful studies in the '60s and '50s, it seemed to have actually found something-- Randolph Byrd's *Positive Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer in a Coronary Care Unit Population*. Over 10 months, 393 patients admitted to the CCU of a San Francisco general hospital were randomly assigned to two groups. One of the groups would be prayed for. Another group would not be prayed for, although they didn't forbid family members from praying and others and this led to all sorts of strange conversations about prayer dosage and background prayer because--but they had these intercessors, these prayors, all born-again Christians, all who claimed to pray daily and these intercessors were now asked to pray daily for the speedy recovery of these patients with no complications, that was the instruction. And what Byrd finds is there's no difference in the speed of recovery, but he does find a difference, a statistically significant difference on six of the measures that he was using to investigate differences and complications, post-surgical recovery. The prayed-for patients did better on six of his measures. And this seemed like persuasive stuff to Byrd. It obviously seemed like persuasive stuff to the--what was the magazine--the journal that published it--*The Southern Medical Journal* that published it. The metaphysical import of what he was doing seemed clear to Byrd. If you read the article, you'll see there's a footnote on which he acknowledges those who have contributed to the study and he includes God as one of the--I won't call colleagues--but one of the individuals or factors who he acknowledges for the study, for his role in the study.

Now, since Byrd--this is 1988--there have been a number of attempts to replicate or to build on and they've been quite mixed. There was a study in 1999 that was carried out

by William Harris in Kansas. He claims to have essentially replicated, but on the other hand all the factors that he replicates--there were no overlapping factors in terms of the kinds of factors that patients improved on. But still patients broadly seemed to get a bit better or have fewer complications post-surgery in his group also than in Byrd's. And he had a larger population sample, so some people were kind of excited by this. But then Harris's study was subjected to some quite severe methodological criticism and so it took a somewhat--a certain cloud got cast over it. Herbert Benson funded by the Templeton Foundation which we might want to talk about more in this whole--as a part of this whole picture during the discussion--was given the go-ahead to attempt a definitive multi-site study but he's never published his data. So, it remains kind of unresolved. And some people want to get it resolved. And some of the reasons that they say they want to get it resolved--it would just be nice to know whether prayer works because it would give people another useful way to help patients. Matthews--I think his name was Donald Matthews--gives back in the late '80s, gave a talk in front of a group of graduating medical students and he says, the future of medicine, he says, is going to be prayer and Prozac so get ready. But it isn't. Let's be honest. It's more than that, all this. More is going on here than just efficacy issues. Because if prayer works, if prayer works in ways that can't be reduced to other things that we think we know something about, then all we're left with is the argument that God or some kind of divine energy must exist and must be active in the world. And this is why you find the prayer studies being discussed not just in medical circles, but also in circles that are concerned with all sorts of other ways in which science is allegedly finding evidence for the existence of God. It sits alongside discussions about intelligent design, about the entropic principle, about ways in which evolution has been shown to not be--to be built on a house--on sand, presentations or evidence about near-death experiences and out-of-body experiences. And that's not all that is sort of at stake here. The fact that all of the allegedly successful studies investigating the efficacy of prayer tested the efficacy of Christian prayer has also not been lost on some quite attentive people. There is a Fundamentalist Christian website I found that's interested in the whole range of ways in which science might be finding evidence for the existence of God. It's--you go to this website and it crows out--no other religion has succeeded in scientifically demonstrating that prayer to their God has any

efficacy in healing. And then he goes on to say, well, you see here, “Obviously, science has demonstrated the efficacy of Christian prayer in medical studies. There is no ‘scientific’ explanation... The only logical explanation is that God exists...” And then the key sentence which I’ve italicized--“No other religion has succeeded in scientifically demonstrating that prayer to their God has any efficacy in healing.” We’ll quote it again.