



## **Grief and Petitionary or Intercessory Prayer**

Excerpted from

*GRIEF AND GOD: When Religion Does More Harm Than Healing*  
by Dr. Terri Daniel

The idea that God grants wishes can be just as disruptive to the grief healing process as the idea that God punishes us. How do we address the struggles of people like Corinne and David from the previous chapter, who relied so heavily on prayer?

In 2014 I attended a lecture by a man who had written a book about his experience with loss and grief. His infant daughter had died suddenly in 1990, and nine years later his wife died from a heart condition. Six years after that his 13 year-old son died of brain cancer.

He described his spiritual response as follows:

“Like most Americans, I was raised with a traditional Christian understanding of God, but I could not accept that a loving God would do this to me, so I sought the help of other gods. When my son was diagnosed, I asked every god I’d ever heard of to help me. I went to Catholic mass. I meditated with Buddhists. I participated in Native American ceremonies. I took my son to Chinese medicine practitioners and Shamanic healers. I uttered positive affirmations and visualized my son whole and healthy, calling on the laws of attraction along with the healing blood of Jesus. I prayed. I fasted. I cleaned my chakras and confessed my sins. But the kid died anyway.”

This man’s experience may be the ultimate example of religious pluralism, and while it did not produce miracles, it did show him alternative ways to find meaning in his losses. His quest not only led to expanded spiritual awareness, it also launched his career as an author and lecturer with a large following of bereaved parents. His prayers -- and the prayers of the other bereaved individuals mentioned here -- are a form of “petitionary prayer,” in which the petitioner makes a specific request of entities such as gods, angels, or human beings who have special status, such as saints. Petitionary prayer may help the person doing the praying feel like they’re taking action, but does it make a difference to God? In other words, can it influence the outcome of events?

It is generally believed that a prayer is considered “answered” if it produces the desired result, assuming that without the prayer, the outcome would have been different.<sup>88</sup> The same formula applies to “intercessory prayer,” in which someone prays on behalf of someone else, for example, when a community prays to help a neighbor, or a hospital chaplain prays for a patient.

From my personal experience with petitionary prayer, I will share a story that I refer to as “the tree lesson.” One weekend during my first year as a seminary student, my little house in the northern California redwoods was being battered by a fierce storm. The winds were so strong that the tall trees surrounding the house were swaying and bending, and the day before, the top half of a 30-foot cedar had fallen across my neighbor’s driveway. I remember looking out my kitchen window at the trees blowing in the wind, and saying out loud, “Please don’t let a tree fall on my house.”

Who was I talking to? I immediately recognized that I was asking an imaginary third party to intervene, and I had to stop and ponder what it actually means to make such a request. I realized that my “prayer” was really just a way to express my fear. My heart was simply saying, “I’m vulnerable and afraid.”

I recognized at that moment that giving our fears a voice produces a mild sense of comfort and relief, and also triggers a sense of personal responsibility that can empower us to seek concrete solutions to the problem. Conversely, directing the prayer outward -- to something “out there”-- can be a way of pushing the fear away so we don’t have to face it or feel it.

In another personal example, I once witnessed a very strong act of intercessory prayer at a community food bank, where before the food was handed out to the needy, one of the organizers led a group prayer. She called upon Jesus to help all the people in the room, and specifically, to heal Mr. Brown’s arthritis, help Mrs. Green find the money to get her roof fixed, to make sure Mrs. Jones has a healthy baby, and to bless Timmy Thompson on the occasion of his high school graduation.

Perhaps it was her meek, pleading tone of voice, or perhaps it was her assumption that impassioned entreaties can make things turn out the way we want them to, but I found her prayer to be very disempowering. It presented an image of humanity as confused,

helpless sheep who are lost without a shepherd to take care of them.

While the analogy of sheep and shepherd is a common Christian theme, Pastor Greg Laurie recognizes that being compared to a sheep is not a compliment, because, as he bluntly states it, sheep are “the dumbest of all creatures.” They have no survival skills and cannot fend for themselves, so they are completely dependent on the shepherd.

While the people at the food bank certainly depended on the food distributed there, a prayer that confirms their sense of powerlessness does little to lift them up. If it were up to me, I would have offered a prayer of gratitude for being part of a supportive community, and a meditation to connect them to their hearts, their innate divine nature, and their ability to tap in to inner strength.

Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong says “The intervening God who answers our intercessory prayers is a comfortable fiction that is no longer worthy of our worship... The Santa Claus view of God keeps us in a childlike state, but if we can allow ourselves to grow up, we can own the beauty and power of our humanity as we explore new definitions of faith for the 21st century.”