

Prayer

by Steve Hays

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Predestination and prayer

A stock objection to Calvinism is that it renders petitionary prayer pointless. My stock response is that in Calvinism, prayer and answered prayer are means by which the future is realized. To put it counterfactually, some events will happen in answer to prayer that wouldn't happen absent prayer. That's entirely consistent with predestination. However, I'd like to go beyond that to address the objection from a different angle.

i) The Bible contains a number of blanket prayer promises. There is, however, a class of unanswerable prayers, and that's contradictory prayers. That's true for Calvinism and freewill theism alike. So there's an implicit exception to the prayer promises in reference to contradictory prayers. That doesn't call into question God's sincerity since God can't perform contradictions, so it should be understood that contradictory prayers aren't included in the promises.

ii) Mind you, the Calvinist God might prearrange history to reduce the number of contradictory prayer promises. However, that has to be counterbalanced by other considerations. A world history with more unanswerable prayers might be better overall than a world history with fewer unanswerable prayers. Prioritizing circumstances to minimize contradictory prayers would marginalize other goods.

iii) That said, freewill theism adds another class of unanswerable prayers. According to freewill theism, God has made prayer promises that he cannot keep because God's ability to make good on his prayer promises is often conditional on the independent cooperation of human agents. This means that in many cases, God can't grant your petition even if it's a perfectly legitimate request. In Calvinism, God is able but unwilling to answer some prayers while in freewill theism, God is willing but unable to answer some prayers.

In that regard, freewill theism calls into question the sincerity of God's prayer promises. Unlike contradictory prayers, which are necessarily unanswerable, these prayers are contingently unanswerable. As a rule, God won't answer them because he must "violate" the freewill of human agents to grant the request.

If freewill theism is true, there must be a vast number of prayers that God cannot answer if granting the request hinges on the independent cooperation of all parties to the petitioned outcome. Consider prayers for salvation, prayers for persecuted

Christians, prayers to halt the wicked from harming the innocent. Since all concerned parties have libertarian freedom, God can't grant the request if they refuse to cooperate unless he overrides their freewill.

So that creates an enormous loophole in prayer promises. It's unclear how the prayer promises were made in good faith when so many situations we pray about aren't actually covered by the promises. The God of freewill theism was never in a position to deliver on prayers that fall under that incalculably huge, but unstated class of prayer requests.

It's like offering everyone who shows up at a certain time and place a free laptop, when only 30% of those who show up get the laptop. If the God of freewill theism knows that a vast number of prayer requests are automatically disqualified, should he not word the promise to make it more realistic?

N.B. Don't compare that to the relationship between special redemption ("limited atonement") and the well-meant offer of the Gospel. To continue the illustration, 100% of those who show up for the laptop receive a laptop. Everybody responding to the offer gets what was offered.

Predestination and prayer

A stock objection to Calvinism is that predestination makes prayer pointless. Ironically, there's a parallel objection based on the providential inutility of foreknowledge. So classical freewill theists are on the hook for an analogous objection.

But back to Calvinism. Let's take a comparison: a movie has plot. But the fact that it's scripted doesn't mean it makes no difference what the actors/characters do. Rather, the plot unfolds in a certain way because of what the actors/characters do, which in turn depends on the script. They follow the script. The plot doesn't play out in spite of what the actors/characters do, but rather, actors/characters have an instrumental role by enacting the script.

How often can God answer prayer?

Some freewill theists contend that Calvinism renders prayer otiose. I've discussed that before. It confuses predestination with que sera sera fatalism.

More interesting is whether the objection can be turned around. If freewill theism is true, how often can God answer prayer?

According to one plank of the freewill defense, in order to make rational, responsible choices, our choices must have predictable consequences. The foreseeable outcome of a given choice figures in our deliberations. And that in turn requires a world with a high degree of uniformity. If God were to intervene on a regular basis, it would destabilize the natural order. Because our choices would not have predictable consequences, that would rob us of significant freedom.

Given that framework, does it not pose a severe restriction on God vis-a-vis petitionary prayer? God is not at liberty to frequently answer our prayers, for that would destabilize the uniformity of nature, which is a necessary backdrop for exercising our libertarian freedom. Hence, God could only answer prayer on rare occasion.

That raises the question of how often Christians pray. According to one survey, 68% of Christians pray more than once a day while 16% pray once a day, and 12% pray a few times a week.

<http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/faith-tools/meditation/2004/12/u-s-news-beliefnet-prayer-survey-results.aspx>

Suppose we confine the issue to petitionary prayer. Suppose devout Christians pray 3 times a week. This could be for their own needs or the needs of others. That amounts to about 156 petitionary prayers a year. Suppose a Christian prays for 60 years. That totals 9360 petitionary prayers.

Obviously, the figure is variable from one Christian to the next. Some may pray more often. Some may live longer.

But given the constraints of freewill theism, it would seem that God can only answer an infinitesimal fraction of those prayers. Not only is there the direct effect of divine intervention in case of each answered prayer, but an answered prayer is an event, and most events have a ripple effect or even a snowball effect. A cause produces an effect. And the effect may, in turn, cause another effect. To take a comparison, if a couple has 4 kids, and each of their kids has 4 kids, and so on, the end-result is exponential. Like wave interference, the repercussions of answering one prayer must die down before answering another lest they cancel each other out.

(In Calvinism you don't have the same problem because God is in a position to control and coordinate the variables. God wrote the whole plot.)

And, of course, that's vastly multiplied by hundreds of millions of Christians each praying 3 times a week (or whatever). If God answered prayer on anything like a regular basis, the number of divine interventions—not to mention the domino effect—would be staggering.

If freewill theism is true, then it seems that petitionary prayer is almost always futile. God dare not intercede except on rare occasion. Most of the time we pray in vain—if freewill theism is true.

Election and prayer

I'm going to comment on this post:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/11/can-a-calvinist-pray-for-his-child-to-be-elect/>

Recently I heard of a well-known Calvinist pastor, author, speaker, who, on a podcast, testified that he often goes into his little son's bedroom after he's asleep and prays over him that he be among the elect. While I certainly understand the pastor's sentiment and desire, I wonder if this is consistent with Calvinist theology?

Is it logically consistent for a Calvinist to believe that prayer can play a role (even as a foreordained means to a foreordained end) in bringing it about that a person prayed for be included among the elect?

This seems very different to me from the common Calvinist claim that prayer for the unsaved can be a "foreordained means" to help bring it about that the person, if he or she is elect, comes to repent and believe. (Although I admit having qualms about the logic of that as well!)

According to Calvinism, God elects individuals unconditionally. Salvation itself is not unconditional, so Calvin argued, because it depends on repentance and faith. However, according to Calvin and most Calvinists, an elect person will come to salvation. God will assure it via irresistible grace. But God uses means which he has foreordained to bring it about that the elect repent and believe.

But is it consistent with Calvinism to believe that God uses human means to decide who will be elect? I don't think so. I do not remember any Calvinist theologian saying so.

If God used means to decide who is among the elect (e.g., prayer), then election would not be strictly unconditional.

i) To begin with , what makes Olson think praying to God to do something is equivalent to God using human means to decide what to do? Does Olson think God is undecided unless and until we pray for something? Does God think prayer helps God decide what to do or not to do?

ii) Since every event is predestined, and some events are causally or teleologically contingent on other events, some divine decrees presuppose other divine decrees. For instance, you can't have a fallen world without a world to fall. In that sense, the decree to create is logically prior to the fall. On the other hand, if the rationale for the fall is to reveal God's justice and mercy in redemption and judgment, then the fall is teleologically prior to creation—as an ends/means relation.

God decrees our prayers, God decrees our election. Assuming (ex hypothesi) that our prayers factor in divine election, election isn't directly conditioned on what we pray for, but on God's decreeing what we pray for. Put another way, our prayers are conditioned on God's decree that we pray. Predestination is still the cause, while prayer is the effect. God decided who and what we'd pray for in the first place. If we pray that God elect a loved one, that prayer is, itself, the result of God's decree.

I think there are Calvinists who simply cannot stomach the implication of Calvinism that a loved one, especially a child, might not be elect, so they revert to inconsistency.

Since Olson is not a universalist, his own statement is inconsistent.

Prayerless Arminians

Christians used to think God controls nature. To take a classic example, a farmer would pray for rain.

Likewise, if you were about to be overtaken by a tornado or hurricane, you would pray that God spare you and your family. If there were wildfires threatening your neighborhood, you would pray for divine protection. In the same vein is the pious belief that God can heal.

By the same token, if you were spared, you gave thanks to God for answering your prayer.

Recently, however, some high-profile Arminians have removed natural evils from God's jurisdiction.

So, at the end of the day, anyone who says a natural or man-made disaster, calamity, catastrophe is from God must be thinking either that it was an arbitrary act of God, done for no particular reason other than perhaps to create fear (which still doesn't explain why that particular place), or that it was in some sense God's judgment.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/03/further-thoughts-about-catastrophes-and-gods-judgment/>

That particular but pervasive understanding of God's sovereignty is what might be called "meticulous" (or "exhaustive") sovereignty. In regards to this subject, there are only two real options: either God determines everything (meticulous sovereignty) or God does not determine everything. A well-known example of meticulous sovereignty can be found in various statements made by notable evangelical leaders in the wake of natural disasters, such as hurricanes from Katrina to Sandy. If one affirms meticulous sovereignty, then one must also believe God decided, desired, and carried out the weather conditions, the speed and direction of the winds, the deluges of water, and precisely which homes would be destroyed and which homes would escape.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2013/05/20/a-long-faithfulness-preface/>

The first point immediately confirmed in my heart was theological: God did not do this to my child. God is not the author of evil. God does not terminate sweet lives with a pulmonary embolism. Pulmonary embolisms are a result of the bent nature of this world. As Ann kept repeating, "God is not the problem; he is the solution."

One primary reason I am not a Calvinist is that I do not believe in God's detailed control of all events. Why? First, because I find it impossible to believe that I am more merciful or compassionate than God. Second, because the biblical portrait shows that God is pure light and holy love. In him there is no darkness, nothing other than light and love. And third, the words, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away," from the lips of Job (1:21), are not good theology. According to Job 1, it was not God but the Devil who took away Job's children, health, and wealth. God allowed it to happen, but when Job said these words, as the rest of the story shows, he was not yet enlightened about the true nature of the source of his calamity and God's actual will for his life. God's will for him was for good and not for harm.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/april/when-a-daughter-dies.html?paging=off>

As you can also see, their position is cast in explicit contrast to Calvinism. The motivation is, of course, to exempt God from the problem of evil.

However, your doctrine of providence runs in tandem with your doctrine of prayer. If God isn't responsible for drought, then presumably a farmer shouldn't pray for rain. That's not God's department.

If God isn't responsible for tornadoes, hurricanes, or wildfires, then we shouldn't pray for divine protection. And if we do escape, we shouldn't be grateful to God. We just got lucky. God had nothing to do with it.

Likewise, if a friend or relative is deathly ill, we shouldn't pray for healing. That's none of God's business.

Hoping for the lost

Does Calvinism oblige you to withhold hope in your child's salvation?

Now imagine that the topic is salvation. Should you hope that Jones is of the elect or of the reprobate? That all depends on whether you have reason to believe Jones is of the elect or of the reprobate. If you have no evidence that Jones is of the elect or the reprobate then you ought to withhold hope that he is ultimately of the elect or reprobate.

The argument as applied to the salvation of Jones depends on the Calvinist view that God is the primary determining cause of human election to salvation or reprobation combined with the belief that human beings ought not will contrary to what God wills. Thus, if God wills to be the primary determining cause of Jones' reprobation then we ought not will other than what God willed.

This is not a problem for Arminianism because on the Arminian view God's will is that all be saved and it is the determining cause of the human being to reject God's salvific offer that is the primary determining cause of one's reprobation. Thus, on the Arminian view the wish that Jones would be saved is a wish that Jones would act in accord with God's universal salvific divine will. This is very different from the Calvinistic view according to which the wish that Jones would be saved is a wish that Jones would act in a way which may be contrary to God's particular salvific divine will.

Now let's replace the generic "Jones" with your daughter or son, your spouse or parent. It would follow that insofar as you do not have reason to believe your daughter or son, your spouse or parent is elect, that you ought not hope for their election. This, I would think, is a problem for Calvinism.

I'm impressed by how many bad arguments Rauser can squeeze into four paragraphs. That's quite an accomplishment, albeit a rather dubious accomplishment.

i) It is wrong to assume a God's-eye viewpoint unless we actually enjoy a God's-eye viewpoint. That's presumptuous. Since we don't know God's will in the case of any particular individual, we're in no position to will contrary to God's will for that individual. We don't know enough to oppose God's will.

If God wills his salvation, and we withhold "hope," then one could just as well argue that that's opposing God's will.

ii) Even from an Arminian standpoint, Christians often pray for things that God won't grant. They don't know ahead of time if it's God's will to grant their request. By Rauser's logic, Christians should never pray for something unless they know in advance that God wills it.

iii) Keep in mind, too, that from a decretal perspective, if we did will (wish, hope) contrary to God's will, that's only because God willed us to will contrary to his will. If I hope for someone's salvation, God predestined me to hope for someone's salvation. So at one level, that can never be inconsistent with God's (decretive) will.

iv) There's also an equivocation here. God "willing" something and my "willing" something don't mean the same thing. In the context of this discussion, God's will is synonymous with predestination, whereas our will is synonymous with wishing that something was the case. These can't be set in direct opposition, for they are not the same thing.

iv) Since God is God and man is man, there's no reason to think God requires us to feel the same way about the lost that he does. We are human. We have a viewpoint suited to our humanity. And God made us that way. He created us to have emotional attachments. And some people are naturally dearer to us than others.

v) Rauser artificially abstracts predestination from providence. But they are coordinated. Our prayers can factor into the outcome. Friendship evangelism can factor into the outcome. The predestined result doesn't necessarily or even normally occur apart from what we do, or neglect to do, for the lost.

vi) Apropos (v), we have more reason to “hope” for what we work for (e.g. friendship evangelism) and pray for, than if we’re talking about some random unbeliever in the phone book.

Likewise, we wouldn’t pray for somebody’s salvation in the first place, or practice friendship evangelism, unless we wish for their salvation. And prayer is a way of aligning our will with God’s will. We submit our desires to God, trusting in his superior wisdom to either grant our request or refuse our request.

vii) “Hope” is standardly defined as a wish, feeling, or desire, combined with confidence, anticipation, or expectation of its fulfillment.

But according to Arminianism, God’s universal saving desire doesn’t result in the salvation of anyone in particular. Therefore, it would be irrational to expect that God will save Jones.

Indeed, there are Arminians who think most human beings are hellbound, based on their understanding of Mt 7:13-14. How can you expect or confidently anticipate that Jones will be saved if only a fraction of humanity will be saved?

viii) Rauser oscillates between “wishing” and “hoping,” as if these are synonymous. But at best that’s equivocal, and at worst that’s a bait-n-switch. For “hoping” means more than “wishing.”

Why pray?

rogereolson says:

June 28, 2012 at 1:25 pm

We have run around this bush numerous times here and I tire of it (no offense intended). From an Arminian perspective, God knows because something happens; it doesn't happen because God knows it. God's foreknowledge corresponds to what happens; it does not cause it or even render it certain.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/06/more-about-prayer-for-unsaved-loved-ones-and-friends/comment-page-1/#comment-31491>

If God knows what will happen because the future creates his knowledge of the future, then what does prayer accomplish? Is God changing the future—in answer to prayer? Which future is he changing? The one he knows? But if he's dependent on the future for his knowledge of the future, how can he change it? For that matter, how does he know what to change? Can he knowingly change the future if that's the source of his knowing the future? And if he's not changing that future, then does the changed future have reference to a hypothetical future? If so, does a hypothetical future cause his knowledge of the future? But there's more than one hypothetical future.

Arminian conundra

According to Roger Olson:

God simply knows the future because it will happen; his knowing future free decisions and actions of creatures does not determine them. Rather that they will happen determines God's knowing them because God has decided to open himself up to being affected by the world...Simple foreknowledge is simply future vision.

Perspectives on the Doctrine of God, 156-157.

On the face of it, this explanation generates four interrelated problems for the Arminian:

i) Olson is describing retrocausation. God knows the future because the future is the source of his future knowledge. In that case, God doesn't know the future because he causes it (or decrees it). Rather, his foreknowledge is a retroactive effect of the future itself.

But this places God in the role of a passive observer rather than an active creator. How can God be the cause of the world if the world is the cause of God's knowledge thereof? Doesn't that make the existence of the world oddly independent of God's creative fiat?

It won't do to say this confuses the order of knowledge with the order of being, for on Olson's scenario, the object of knowledge is also the source of knowledge.

ii) Apropos (i), this seems to make the eventuation of the future inevitable or unavoidable. God sees it coming down the pike. And not because of something he did. Rather, he's on the receiving end.

But isn't that necessitarian? Doesn't that make the world metaphysically necessary? Que sera, sera?

iii) This also means that if God enters into dialogue with Abraham or Moses, God knows what they will say, as well as knowing what he will say. So his foreknowledge of that dialogue already includes or contains all his questions or replies. But in that event, it's a rather stagey conversation. God is giving prepared answers. Reading from the indelible script of his foreseen answers.

But from an Arminian standpoint, isn't that just as artificial as a predestined dialogue between Yahweh and Abraham or Moses?

iv) If the future causes God's knowledge of the future, then what's the point of praying to God—from an Arminian standpoint? God can't change the outcome if his knowledge is predicated on the outcome. If his foreknowledge takes the outcome for granted, then the outcome is unalterable.

If he foresees what is going to happen because the future causes his prevision, then he can't prevent the foreseen future from happening. So what does prayer accomplish, from an Arminian perspective? What are we asking God to do?

On simple knowledge, what God knows is not a hypothetical future (i.e. alternate possible timelines), but the actual future.

Why is that acceptable, but predestination is not? At least in predestination, God causes the outcome. Hence, the outcome is open for God. God was free to decree otherwise. He has total control over the end-result.

On a wing and a prayer

BYRON SAID:

Here's my problem with prayer. From the human perspective, it either appears to work, or it doesn't. And there are religious explanations for both. And those religious explanations are subject to interpretation. So really, no matter what does or does not happen, there is a nice religious explanation for it, so you really need to have no expectation either way, because the religious system works well enough in its explanation that it can make prayer seem to work sufficiently well enough either way, in hindsight. Prayer just seems more like something religious people do, rather than something from which they actually expect results.

i) Well, that oversimplifies the issue. I expect prayer to affect the future (or even the past) some of the time. Due to prayer, some things will happen (or not happen), which would not obtain absent prayer.

ii) However, it's unpredictable because:

a) God doesn't answer every prayer

b) Not every answer will be evident to the supplicant.

iii) That doesn't mean the outcome makes no apparent difference one way or another. For some answers to prayer will be evident. But not necessarily for every supplicant.

And keep in mind that these aren't makeshift caveats. These caveats apply even if prayer is still efficacious on occasion.

Incidentally, I love this statement you make. "While answered prayer has evidential value, that's a fringe benefit of prayer. That's not what prayer is for." This makes the case against prayer better than I have done already, though implicitly. So, making prayer requests to a deity and receiving answers to those prayers are not the actual purposes of sending prayer requests? What then is the key purpose to prayer, if not to plead for the deity's response in some way? If that does not argue implicitly against the use of prayer as a means for divine action,

but rather as a religious activity (with supposed spiritual benefits), then I am misunderstanding you somewhere.

i) That's not what I said. I said the purpose of prayer is not to prove the existence of God. Prayer is not designed to be a theistic proof. While answered prayer has apologetic potential, that's not what prayer is for. Rather, that's a bonus point.

ii) One purpose of prayer is to make us acutely aware of our utter dependence on God. How helpless we are to control the things we most care about.

iii) Moreover, I wouldn't expect a one-to-one correlation between prayers and answers. Prayer is not a vending machine in which you make a mental selection, input the specified amount, input the code number, and out pops the goody.

Prayer is not a mechanical, cause-effect transaction. Rather, prayer is a transaction between two (or more) personal agents, involving personal discretion.

a) To take an obvious comparison, good parents don't give their kids everything they ask for. That's because kids often lack the foresight to ask wisely. For one thing, kids often lack a long-term perspective on the consequences of what they desire. They live for the moment, with a view to the near future.

b) It's not even possible for God to answer every prayer, for one outcome may not be compossible with another outcome. Farmer Joe prayers for rain to irrigate his parched crops.

Across the street, old Aunt Betsy prayers for dry sunny weather so that she can submit her prize-winning mincemeat pie at the country fair, hoping to beat out old Aunt Maude, who won last year.

(Just between you and me, Betsy doesn't think Maude won the prize fair and square. She darkly suspects it was Maude's new dress, with the pretty floral pattern, that beclouded old Judge Harlan's better judgment.)

Well, it can't rain and shine at the same place at the same time. So both prayers aren't answerable.

In addition, God may think Farmer Joe needs rain more than Aunt Betsy needs sunshine.

iv) And, of course, answered prayer is not the only evidence we have for Christianity. There's a larger context in which we evaluate unanswered prayer (or apparently unanswered prayer).

You state that there's "a strangely self-absorbed quality" to my objections "as if the only relevant evidence for Christianity is limited to the confines" of my personal experience. I feel that this is an unjustified criticism, and wonder why you make it.

I make it because that's exactly how you chose to frame the issue, and how you continue to frame the issue.

I cannot help but relate my own personal experiences as they relate to Christianity, as being those I am most intimate with and knowledgeable of, except when I am seeking to talk about general things which can be verified or debated objectively. It's not that the experience of other Christians do not matter, but they are not my experiences, and I can know no more about them than you do, which is to read or hear about them and try to understand and analyze them as a third party with limited knowledge of those experiences and few insights to the actual thoughts involved.

That's true of testimonial evidence generally, yet you rely on testimonial evidence every day of your life. Even if, in principle, you could verify testimonial evidence, you and I lack the resources to do that systematically. We can't personally investigate every ostensible eyewitness account which we depend on to make daily decisions. So why do you think prayer is an exception to the rule?

I could flip that around and ask, why do the experiences of skeptics matter so little?

Because, as I already explained, events and nonevents, experience and inexperience, are evidentially asymmetrical. A boy in Alaska is used to seeing snow every year. A boy

in Hawaii never sees snow where he lives. Does the snowless experience of the Hawaiian boy weigh against the snowy experience of the Alaskan boy? No.

If skeptics say they have no experience of answered prayer, or miracles, in what sense does their inexperience counter the experience of those who do (or say they do)? Inevidence is hardly equivalent to counterevidence.

Why should I be as concerned with the experiences of Christians as I am with my own which seem to witness against Christianity and with which I am more familiar?

Your experience is not the problem. Your interpretation of your experience is the problem. Your interpretation is predicated on false expectations. Unreasonable expectations.

It's not as if the Jews who wrote the Bible expected God to answer their every prayer. For he didn't. In their experience, he didn't.

And since you don't believe in God, you don't think God ever answered their prayers. So what the Bible says about prayer can hardly hinge on the standing presumption that God gives us everything we ask for.

Just because someone has a positive experience with prayer, or even that many people do, why should that convince me if it contradicts my own experiences and I cannot duplicate theirs?

Your experience doesn't "contradict" theirs. Your experience is merely contrary to theirs, just as the experience of the Hawaiian boy is contrary to the experience of the Alaskan boy.

And it is not that I am unwilling to be convinced by experiences that contradict my own, but that I need more than simply recounting experiences that could be explained just as well by circumstantial chance and convenient coincidence.

i) Whether or not they can be explained just as well by dumb luck or coincidence will depend on the specifics of each particular case.

ii) Moreover, whether or not any particular event can be explained on naturalistic grounds only pushes the question back a step, for Christianity doesn't deny that God ordinarily works through providential second causes. But is that self-sufficient?

In that light, not receiving answers to simple requests repeated faithfully over a length of time...

Well, what you've described seems to concern impediments to sanctification. But the struggle with sin is a means of sanctification, not an obstacle thereto. As a writer once said, what makes a saint saintly is not his virtues, but his vices. How he copes with his areas of weakness.

Really, a lot of what you go on to say about prayer and the general life of the believer on the surface seems to explain things very well. It could just as well be that Christian theology has developed to the extent that, along with the Scriptures themselves which apparently recount real and often terrible and trying experiences for believers, explain too much. There is simply an explanation and a form of theology for everything, which is exactly what you would expect from a religious system formed over 2000 years of time and developed theologically. The system of theology becomes equal parts explanation, comfort, and utility, all without requiring any visible activity on the part of its deity, such as visible answers to prayers, especially difficult ones.

Well, that's rather duplicitous. On the one hand you complain about unanswered prayer. On the other hand you have now devised an escape clause for every ostensible answer to prayer. So even if God appeared to answer all your prayers, you can always explain that away by appealing to dumb luck or coincidence.

Even the Scriptures seem to reflect this, such as in Joseph's life in Egypt fulfilling prophecy, where God prophesied something, then disappeared out of the picture, only to have it fulfilled exactly down to the letter as divinely predicted. That's not

quite so amazing when the whole thing was probably written after the fact, according to the circumstances required.

I didn't cite that example because I expect you to accept the account at face value. I cited that example to illustrate a principle: how an answer to prayer or prophecy or promise is realized may be rather convoluted, and deliberately so. Moreover, apparent setbacks are actually the very way in which the prayer or promise is realized, immediate appearances notwithstanding. That's the irony. And the irony is intentional.

It cultivates a habit of faith. Patient faith. And it serves to demonstrate the overruling providence of God. God creates obstacles to knock them down, so that we may appreciate his wisdom and power.

I'm not completely close-minded to possible refutations of skepticisms concerning bible inerrancy and miracles and such. The problem is, judging from one of your other blog posts, unless I'm misunderstanding you, it seems that you are trying to shift the burden from the one making an extraordinary claim to the one who is denying that an extraordinary claim should be believable or accepted without extraordinary proof.

There is no fixed burden of proof, for what counts as ordinary or extraordinary is a value-laden judgment which is contingent on your worldview.

Oh, that reminds me, why shouldn't I complain about animals being killed in a global flood. I called them sinless, and it's not merely sentimental bathos, because there's no real need for their suffering.

It's sentimental bathos when you presume to complain on behalf of animals although there's no reason to imagine they share your disapproving viewpoint. That's your anthropomorphic projection.

Here you have an omniscient, omnipotent deity, and the best way to take care of humanity's sin problem is to bring about a global flood that also wipes out all

land animals that had nothing to do with causing or supporting the original problem in the first place?

That misses the point. No doubt the God of Scripture could do many things far more efficiently, if economy of motion was the goal. He could fulfill Joseph's dream more efficiently. But he fulfills the dream in a very roundabout fashion because he has a different objective. The principle of least action is not his priority.

The entire lead-up to Jesus has many zigs and zags along the way. But there's a reason for that. (And given that precedent, it's not surprising if church history follows the same general pattern.)

If I'm right, then Christianity is delusional, and not being saddled with delusion or deriving false comforts and hopes from a religion without truth, is to be preferred over activity within and trust of that religion.

Actually, that's not preferable. If atheism is true, and Christianity is false, then you're left with two losing options rather than one. You "win" a losing prize.

That's not a reason to be a Christian. But that is a reason to ignore what you know to be a losing option (atheism), and focus on the other option which, if true, offers you something worthwhile in return.

That's not the same as saving faith. Rather, that's a prudent policy (or research program) which a doubter should pursue as he examines Christianity, and does what he can to cultivate faith.

...simply because I did not realize that life can still be lived and enjoyed personally...

The life of an atheist can still be lived and enjoyed as long as you live in the moment, suppressing the nihilistic implications of your position.

Prayer and psychic suggestion

Stephen Braude is a preeminent researcher on the paranormal. Both Jason Engwer and I refer to his work on occasion. The paranormal is antithetical to naturalistic physicalism, so it's a useful foil against mainstream atheism. I've done at least two posts on Braude's book *Crimes of Reason*:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/08/psychic-prayer.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/07/prayer-is-not-about-numbers.html>

In this post I'm going to revisit that topic. In chap. 7, he propose a psychic alternative to account for prayer hits and misses. Here's a representative statement:

The potential psychic strategies are obvious enough: (1) Relevant people could come to know our prayers through ESP and respond consciously or otherwise. (2) We might telepathically or psychokinetically influence others to carry out needed actions.

1. As I mentioned before, I don't know quite what he has in mind. Under psychic suggestion, does a person have an inexplicable and irrepressible urge to carry out the needed actions? They don't know why they are doing it, but they feel compelled to do so? Is it like sleepwalking? Although I think there's credible evidence for telepathy, I don't find Braude's explanation in this case to be credible.

2. But I'd also like to revisit the issue of retroactive prayer. Suppose for the sake of argument that some outcomes are consistent, either with answered prayer or psychic suggestion. They overlap insofar as either explanation could account for that outcome.

Yet are there other kinds of outcomes that can't be explained by psychic explanation, but only by answered prayer? Note, I'm not suggesting that some outcomes are in fact due to psychic suggestion. I'm just discussing what explanations are logically or evidentially consistent with the same outcome. A mistaken explanation could still be logically consistent with the outcome or consistent with the evidence.

I'm exploring the kinds of examples that filter out those cases, so that, by process of elimination, only answered prayer would explain the outcome. And that, in turn, creates a presumption for answered prayer as the correct explanation in the other cases.

Let's consider a hypothetical case. Suppose I wake up one morning, feeling just fine. But mid-afternoon, out of the blue, I suddenly experience a medical crisis. I don't know what's wrong with me, but I'm convinced something is terribly wrong. I dial 911. I'm rushed to the ER. Maybe I have a ruptured aorta, pulmonary embolism. Whatever. The physician informs me that I need emergency surgery.

But there's a catch: I have a very rare blood type, the hospital doesn't have enough units on hand, and it will take too long to have additional units flown in from out of town.

So there's a dilemma. If I don't have surgery right away, I will die. If I wait for the hospital to restock, I will die. It will be too late. If I have surgery right away, I will die from blood loss, because they don't have enough units of my esoteric blood type to transfuse me during surgery. At this point I pray that God will do what's necessary to save my life. I have a wife and kids to support. For their sake, I can't afford to die. Not now.

The physician walks into the waiting room and asks the people sitting there if anyone has that exotic blood type. As luck would have it, three do. They agree to donate, and that's enough to supplement the hospital's supply. So I survive!

Of course, that's a highly artificial hypothetical scenario. Indeed, it might seem outlandish. If, however, we believe in answered prayer, then there will be analogous situations, where wildly improbable things happen due to divine intercession.

Likewise, under Braude's alternative, otherwise outlandish things are possible if telepathy can steer people in the needed direction. So I'm not stacking the deck against Braude.

However, this example, and other examples in kind, poses a problem for Braude's theory. The examples has two crucial aspects:

i) A conjunction of events too lucky to be coincidental

ii) A retroactive component

Even if Braude's psychic mechanism can explain (i), it can't explain (ii). What I mean is this:

In the hypothetical, I had no warning. No advance knowledge of my medical crisis. Yet for people to be on hand at just the right time and place to donate just the right blood, they had to decide to go there or make arrangements to be there long before my prayer, and long before my crisis. It would be too late for me to telepathically influence them to be at the right time and place. For instance, they might be there because they brought a relative. The appointment was made weeks earlier.

Likewise, they had to leave home, drive or take the bus, to be there at the moment I needed them there. But they had to do it before I knew I needed them there. Opportune circumstances had to be set in motion before I had any idea that I'd be needing blood donors for emergency surgery. By the same token, even if they became aware of my prayer through ESP, they can't get there in time. Indeed, people with that rare blood

type would normally be scattered hither and yon. For them even to be within commuting distance of the hospital requires prearranged events. Ordinarily, three people with that blood type wouldn't be in the same vicinity of each other.

Of course, this isn't a real life example. So that doesn't actually disprove Braude's alternative. My immediate purpose is to describe a type of case that, if it ever occurs, could only be explained by divine agency rather than psychic suggestion. If there are, in fact, real-life cases comparable to that, then Braude's proposal is a failed alternative.

I'd add that if answered prayer happens, odds are that there will be a subset of cases like that. There will be crisis situations where Christians pray, the outcome is too lucky to be coincidental, yet the outcome depends on an opportune trajectory or convergence of events that precedes the prayer, precedes the crisis, precedes any intimation of the crisis.

Braude's theory won't work in that scenario, because the people needed to carry out the action can't know about it before I do. Preparations must be in place or underway in advance of the crisis, but without advance knowledge, that can't be in progress ahead of time.

Prayer is not about numbers

Stephen Braude is a leading researcher and analyst of the paranormal. I believe he's an atheist. Not surprisingly, therefore, he regards the paranormal as an alternative explanation for efficacious prayer. I've discussed this before, but now I'd like to take a different tack. I'll begin with some general observations:

i) I think some paranormal phenomena are well-documented. I don't reject that. But there are different ways to interpret paranormal phenomena:

ii) Suppose we think humans, or at least some humans, naturally have paranormal abilities. That is Braude's position.

However, even if that were the case, it doesn't constitute an ipso facto secular alternative to theism. For instance, in Judeo-Christian theism, God designed and created a world in which personal agents and physical agencies have genuine causal properties. That could extend to the paranormal. Their natural paranormal abilities would be a divine endowment, just like their natural normal abilities.

iii) Conversely, humans who exhibit paranormal abilities might be conduits of paranormal agency. Their ability isn't innate, but on loan (as it were). Spirits (e.g. God, demons) might make instrumental use of humans to mediate paranormal effects. They are merely vehicles.

According to both (ii) & (iii), the ultimate source of the paranormal ability is still supernatural. So Braude would need to eliminate these explanations.

iv) Now let's turn to the main point of the post. Braude says:

For any attempt at psychic influence to succeed (whether or not it's prayer), it must presumably navigate through an unimaginably complex causal nexus—a web of underlying and possibility countervailing psychic interactions and barriers. Crimes of Reason (Rowan & Littlefield, 2014), 192.

He continues in this vein for several paragraphs. The gist of his argument is that we'd expect psychic influence to miss the target more often than it hits the target due to interference from all the other psychic disturbances. And that's why prayer fails more often than it succeeds, on his secular interpretation of prayer.

In two previous posts I raised some objections to his theory. Now I'd like to raise an additional objection.

Prayer isn't just a case of one person praying for one thing. It varies. Sometimes many people pray for the very same thing.

For instance, when it became known that Pope John XXIII had stomach cancer, I think it's safe to say that tens of millions of Catholics prayed for miraculous healing. (If anything, that's probably a conservative estimate.) Yet he died in spite of all those prayers.

On Braude's interpretation, this would mean a psychic Blitzkrieg directed at the pope's cancer. It's not reducible to the odds of one person's psychokinetic influence piercing the static to reach the target. Rather, it's like carpet bombing the pope's cancer with psychokinetic explosives. Even if most bombs miss the target, when you have saturation bombing, that greatly raises the odds that one or more will hit the target. Yet in spite of that, John XXIII succumbed to cancer.

Conversely, Peter Bride prayed over Joy Davidman, and she went right into remission. How did his solitary petition successfully run the gauntlet while tens of millions of petitions on behalf of John XXIII were ineffectual?

Braude's theory can't offer a straightforward explanation for the difference. By contrast, if the efficacy of prayer does, in fact, derive God's will rather than our psychokinetic abilities, then that's easy to explain. For on that view, the number of people who pray for the same thing is essentially irrelevant to the efficacy of the prayer. It's not their combined power that makes it happen. Rather, it's up to God whether the prayer is consistent with his aims. For that reason, one person's prayer may be availing while the prayer of millions may be futile. The efficacy of prayer has nothing to do with the aggregate psychic energy of the supplicants. Rather, it has everything to do with God's power and God's will.

Perhaps Braude would suggest that while tens of millions prayed for the pope's miraculous healing, that was offset by the psychic counter-influence of people hostile to the papacy. There are, however, problems with that explanation:

i) There were undoubtedly tens of millions of Catholics who prayed for the pope. By contrast, we can only speculate on how many people wished him dead. But I imagine the number is much smaller.

ii) There's no particular reason Protestants would wish him dead. After all, the death of a pope is not the death of the papacy. Popes come and go. There's always a replacement in the pipeline. So nothing is accomplished by hoping that any particular pope will die sooner rather than later.

iii) Moreover, John XXIII was a very destabilizing figure in Catholicism. If you are hostile to Catholicism, you should wish him well, since he did so much to crack the foundations.

iv) In any event, I don't rest my entire case on comparing and contrasting the situation of John XXII with Peter Bride. I simply use those two examples as convenient illustrations. But surely you have many situations in which just one person's prayer is successful while huge numbers of people may pray for the same thing to no effect.

In the nick of time

This is a sequel to an earlier post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/08/psychic-prayer.html>

Among other things, Braude says:

The potential psychic strategies are obvious enough: (1) Relevant people could come to know our prayers through ESP and respond consciously or otherwise.

i) One problem with this statement is what he means by "respond consciously or otherwise."

Does he mean they consciously know our need, but unconsciously respond? If so, that's less than self-explanatory. If they become aware of our need, then either they'd consciously respond, or they wouldn't bother to respond at all—if they don't care what happens to us, or don't wish to assume a personal risk.

Or does he mean we plant a subliminal idea in their minds, which they carry out. Their action happens to meet our exigent need, although they were oblivious the relevance of their action to our exigent need. They didn't know our situation. They didn't know what we needed. But we did. So what they do has the unintended consequence of benefiting us.

ii) One problem with that interpretation is that it seems to be one of those flexible explanations you resort to to cover your bets. An explanation that makes your theory consistent with any scenario. It can't be falsified, but by the same token, it's hard to see how it can be verified. If nothing counts as evidence against it, what counts as evidence for it? It seems to be independent of the evidence one way or the other.

iii) Another problem is that this isn't a naturalistic alternative to theism. If there is a God, then he can alert others to our need or influence others to carry out the needed action.

iv) But there's another problem with Braude's secular explanation. Take the case of retroactive prayer. Suppose I go jet-skiing late afternoon. In the middle of the lake, my jet-ski conks out. Let's say it's too far for me to swim to shore. Moreover, I don't wish to abandon my jet-ski.

Or let's say it's dusk. If I try to swim back in the dark, I could end up swimming in circles. I can't see the shore at night. I will become disoriented. I will drown from fatigue or die from hypothermia.

So I pray. Just in the nick of time, somebody in a motorboat comes to my rescue, heaves me into the boat, and tows the jet-ski.

But to answer my prayer in time, he had to be on the way before I prayed. How could Braude's alternative account for that?

Braude might appeal to precognition, but there are problems with that appeal in this situation:

- i)** I didn't know in advance that I was going to find myself in this predicament.
- ii)** And if I did have a premonition, I wouldn't put myself in this dire predicament in the first place. I'd have my jet-ski serviced before I went jet-skiing.
- iii)** Perhaps Braude might say I had a subconscious premonition. But even assuming that's meaningful, how would I be able to plant an S.O.S. in the mind of my rescuer based on a subconscious premonition? If I'm unaware of my future predicament, how can I telepathically communicate that to a second party?
- iv)** For that matter, my rescuer is a perfect stranger to me. How does my mind know ahead of time to reach out to that person?

Now, admittedly, this is a hypothetical example. For now I'm just considering the kinds of answered prayer that Braude's theory lacks the resources to replace.

"Psychic prayer"

In this post I'm going to discuss Stephen Braude's secular alternative explanation for answered prayer, in chap. 7 of his new book, *Crimes of Reason* (Rowman & Littlefield 2014).

The typical secular dismissal of answered prayer requires the atheist to discount every single answered prayer as sheer coincidence. One putative advantage of Braude's approach (advantageous from a secular standpoint) is that, if successful, he can concede a genuine causal correlation, but account for that naturalistically—by appealing to paranormal resources. Of course, I disagree with his explanation, but that's the set-up.

If telepathic leakage, telepathic influence, and PK [psychokinesis] can occur, then we can see how to explain the apparent (if only occasional) efficacy of prayer causally but without reference to a deity.

This suffers from an obvious oversight. Assuming the existence of psi, that's not an ipso facto naturalistic. Just as God can endow people with normal abilities, he could endow people with paranormal abilities. God could still be the ultimate source of the answered prayer, even if psi mediates the outcome. That would be analogous to ordinary providence.

The potential psychic strategies are obvious enough: (1) Relevant people could come to know our prayers through ESP and respond consciously or otherwise.

i) It's unclear to me why Braude appeals to ESP to account for how second parties could know what we pray for. I daresay that in many or most instances, friends and family become aware of our prayer requests because we tell them our needs and solicit their prayers, in conjunction with our own.

ii) Which is not to deny instances where a Christian feels led to pray for someone else, without having direct knowledge of his situation. There are cases where a Christian will say they were burdened to pray for someone, or the Lord laid it on their heart to pray for

someone. They feel a prompting to drop everything and pray for that person. And it turns out the person they prayed for was undergoing a crisis at the time.

Perhaps that's the scenario which Braude has in mind.

iii) Even if we grant telepathy, is that the same thing as mind-reading? The contents of our minds and memories aren't organized like a library. There's no subject index at the back of the book which a second-party can consult to find the right page. Our memories are catalogued by associations. Many of our memories are visual. The significance of the memory is private. What it means to me. I don't see how an outsider rummaging through my mind could interpret what he finds.

Even if a second party had access to our minds, I don't see how he could find what he was looking for. Fact is, it's hard for us to retrieve some of our own buried memories.

Seems to me that telepathic awareness is more plausible in reference to coarse-grained experience, like sensing that another person is in a state of emotional distress.

By contrast, Calvinism charts a straightforward path. God knows what we think because he planned what we think.

(2) We might telepathically or psychokinetically influence others to carry out needed actions.

i) What does that mean, exactly? Subliminal messaging? Planting an idea in someone else's mind? How would we psychokinetically influence others to carry out needed actions? Surely he doesn't mean taking control of someone else's body. That would be akin to demonic possession, which is not a naturalistic alternative!

ii) Even if we grant PK, aren't there are limits to PK? Presumably, Braude doesn't think humans have the psychokinetic ability to change the moon's orbit (to take one example).

Or (3) we could psychokinetically bring about relevant states of affairs (e.g. a change in someone's health).

One problem with that suggestion is that it takes more than mere ability to cure someone. It takes knowledge as well as power. How can you psychokinetically heal somebody unless you know what exactly is wrong with them? An automechanic may have the ability to fix your car, but if he can't look under the hood, he hasn't a clue what needs to be repaired. Braude's alternative amounts to a facile placeholder rather than a genuine explanation.

I imagine most readers would argue that prayers are frequently (and perhaps usually) not answered. For example, when both teams or contestants in a sporting event pray for victory, at least 50 percent of them will not have their prayers answered (I suppose a tie game could be viewed as divine mischief).

i) That's an odd example to illustrate his contention. If only two outcomes are mathematically possible (one winner, one loser), then, by definition, 50% of the supplicants will not have their prayer answered. Given the framework, God can only answer one team's prayers. So unanswered prayer in that situation doesn't require a special explanation. It's not "sporadic." Rather, that scenario places severe constraints on whose prayer can be answered.

ii) In addition, there's no reason to assume God answered the prayer of the winning team or contestant. Some prayers are inappropriate. The prayers of both sides go unanswered because, as a rule, that's a frivolous prayer.

iii) That said, there are occasions when God might answer such a prayer. A player may be counting on a sports scholarship. If he loses, he won't go to college. His career is on the line. Whether he wins or loses will impact the rest of his life. Who he marries. Where he lives. Which children he has.

Depending on God's intentions for someone's life, there are situations where he will grant or decline a prayer for a successful performance at a sporting event. But there's no general correlation between answered prayer and which team won or lost.

So if an apparently efficacious prayer isn't simply a coincidence, what needs to be explained is not simply why prayer occasionally succeeds but also why it sometimes (or usually) fails.

i) A problem with chalking up answered prayer to coincidence is that Braude is a proponent of precognition. But those who discount "apparently efficacious prayer" as sheer coincidence typically discount apparent precognition as sheer coincidence.

ii) In principle, it isn't hard to see why prayer sometimes succeeds and sometimes (or oftentimes) fails. Answered prayer has a ripple effect. God will decline to grant a prayer request if the consequences are detrimental. If it will do more harm than good. What's the long-term, overall impact of an answered prayer? Who will benefit? Who will suffer? Do the good consequences outweigh the bad consequences?

I'd also say, speaking as a Calvinist, that God answers prayers consistent with his plan for the world. He won't grant a prayer request if the answer would derail his plan for the world.

Psychic functioning wouldn't be the sort of thing we call forth just to meet the demands of psi research or other overt solicitations, such as police investigations, seances, or for the purpose of entertainment...

i) Braude has to interject this disclaimer to explain away the hit-and-miss character of his paranormal alternative. He thinks the supernatural interpretation of prayer is problematic because answered prayer is so "sporadic." Yet his paranormal alternative is equally sporadic.

On the face of it, he's solving one alleged problem by recourse to a parallel problem. Prayer has a hit-and-miss record. But psi has a hit-and-miss record. So his naturalistic alternative seems to be just as "random" in a different way—even though he appeals to personal agency.

ii) There is, moreover, another explanation for the haphazard character of psi. What if psi is something we can't summon at will because that's not a human ability? The exercise of psi is sporadic because it isn't ours to command. Rather, our role is instrumental. We are conduits of superhuman agents. The reason we can't make it work consistently is that we are being used by another agent to further his aims rather than our own.

If so, then the secular interpretation of prayer as a ritual for invoking our psi capacities actually makes some sense of prayer's mixed and rather underwhelming record of success. By contrast, if we try to explain the efficacy of

prayer in terms of divine intervention, then many might feel that we need to tell a variety of ad hoc, convoluted, and antecedently implausible stories about why a presumably loving God withheld his grace from us all those times our prayers were not answered—not to mention why the prayers of apparently conspicuously wretched persons seem to have been answered instead.

i) One problem with that objection is that he doesn't even state, much less defend, what makes these "ad hoc, convoluted, and antecedently implausible stories." We don't even know what he has in mind.

ii) I don't think it's hard to explain, at a general level, why God answers some prayers, but not others. Answered prayer is not a closed system of discrete, self-contained effects—where the effect of answered prayer terminates on the immediate objective. Rather, answered prayer is both an effect of prayer, and a cause of subsequent events. Answered prayer generates a chain-reaction. A cause produces an effect. The effect, in turn, becomes a cause producing another effect.

An obvious reason why God might decline to answer many prayers is because they would have deleterious results down the line. Collateral damage. Even little changes in the present can snowball into immense cumulative changes over time.

It's the law of unintended consequences. Because I'm shortsighted, when I pray I can't foresee all the repercussions of God answering my prayer. But God can.

iii) Another basic problem with Braude's alternative is that he speaks in such vague generalities. It's too abstract. He doesn't test his claims against specific candidates for answered prayer. Let's take some examples from Scripture. Clearly, Braude doesn't believe these examples. But for the purpose of this discussion, I'm using them to illustrate certain kinds of answered prayer. Can Braude's model account for examples like that? If not, is he forced to deny that those kinds of cases ever happen?

12 And he said, "O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. 13 Behold, I am standing by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. 14 Let the young woman to whom I shall say, 'Please let down your jar that I may drink,' and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels'—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master." 15 Before he had finished speaking, behold, Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, came out with her water jar on her shoulder (Gen 24:12-15).

i) This is an example of **retroactive prayer**. By that I mean a prayer in which God initiates the answer prior to the time of the prayer. Minimally, Rebekah has to leave the house before Abraham's servant prayed to God. But it tracks back further in time. Rebekah had to live there in the first place.

Take another example:

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, 2 a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. 3 About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius." 4 And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. 5 And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. 6 He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea." 7 When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, 8 and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa. 9 The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. 17 Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate 18 and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there (Acts 10:1-9,17-18).

ii) Assuming this was in answer to the centurion's last prayer, Peter had to begin his trip to Joppa before Cornelius prayed. Notice how the events are coordinated. Peter has his vision at the very same time the centurion's servants are coming to fetch him. The action is synchronized, even though Cornelius dispatched them a day before. In terms of the human participants, these are causally independent events. Their convergence depends on God prearranging the outcome.

But even if Cornelius had been praying this same prayer for years, the answer to his prayer begins long before his prayer. Peter has to exist in the first place. Peter has to survive to adulthood, in an age of high infant mortality. Peter has to be a disciple of Christ. Simon the Tanner must exist. Simon's house must be within commuting distance of the centurion's house. And so on and so forth.

In order for the prayer to be answered, many antecedent conditions must be in place long before the prayer. Peter coming to Cornelius in answer to prayer requires a causal change of events stretch back into the indefinite past.

iii) What is the paranormal alternative mechanism? In theory, Braude might postulate retrocausation. However, Braude is a critic of retrocausation.

Retrocausation suffers from familiar and formidable objections. Consistency and bootstrap paradoxes.

iv) In theory, Braude might appeal to precognition. Perhaps a human agent in the past foreknew the centurion's prayer, or the prayer of Abraham's servant, then, using PK, set in motion a series of preliminaries eventuating in the "answered prayer." Mind you, I float this hypothetical for the sake of argument.

a) There are at least two basic problems with that alternative, one of which I'll address now, and save the other for later (see below). One problem is whether secularism has the metaphysical machinery to drive precognition. Take our knowledge of the past. Our knowledge of the past is caused by past events. There's a chain of intervening events linking a past occurrence to our knowledge of a past occurrence.

But that's precisely where knowledge of the future breaks down. Secular precognition inverts the order of cause and effect. How can my knowledge of a future event be the effect of something that hasn't happened as of yet? How can that be contingent on nonevent?

b) In principle, Braude might say might say PK and precognition work in tandem. The human agent knows the future by influencing circumstances to produce that end-result. He knows the future by knowing the foreseeable consequences of his own actions. And I think there's a grain of truth to that. But it demands more than human agency to pull it off, as I'll discuss momentarily.

c) Apropos (a-b), Reformed theism can account for precognition. God knows the future because God predestined the future, and everything happens according to plan. God providentially causes his plan to eventuate. God can share his foreknowledge with humans. There's a sense in which knowing the future can affect the future, so God's plan for the future includes the affect of disclosing the future to humans.

I'm not appealing to precognition to explain retroactive prayer. Rather, I'm making the point that even if someone like Braude were to invoke precognition to explain answered prayer, that would not be a naturalistic alternative, for precognition only makes sense given robust theism.

Let's take another example:

15 And he blessed Joseph and said, "The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day,¹⁶ the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth" (Gen 48:15-16).

That's a case of **long-range prayer**. Num 26 records the progressive answer to that prayer. At that point Joseph's posterity numbered about 85,000 males—not counting women.

i) What's the paranormal alternative? Braude might appeal to PK. One problem with that appeal is that Jacob died shortly after his prayer. How can Jacob be using PK to orchestrate events long after he expired? Is that an appeal to postmortem PK? If so, one problem is that Braude seems to have a this-worldly view of psi. He appeals to "living-agent psi" to account for mediumship. That's his alternative explanation to the survival thesis. The medium didn't actually contact the dead.

ii) There's also the question of whether a human agent, assuming he has psi, can manipulate, or even keep track of, the immense number of interconnected variables which must line up in a particular direction to yield the desired outcome. Surely it's easier to see how God is able to choreograph the needed contingencies.

15 And Hezekiah prayed before the Lord and said...19 "So now, O Lord our God, save us, please, from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone."35 And that night the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. 36 Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went home and lived at Nineveh. 37 And as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch his god, Adrammelech and Sharezer, his sons, struck him down with the sword and escaped into the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son reigned in his place (2 Kgs 19:15,19,35-36; cf. 2 Chron 32:20-21; Isa 37:36-38).

i) Does Braude think that psi can do that? It would no doubt be militarily advantageous to recruit psychics who had some awesome destructive power. But does military history bear that out? Why are we still using tanks and bombers if some humans can annihilate armies with PK? Where's the evidence?

ii) In addition, Hezekiah's prayer had a delayed effect. Years later, Sennacherib's ambitious sons assassinate their father. In context, that, too, is viewed as a divine answer to Hezekiah's prayer.

What's the paranormal explanation? That Hezekiah used psi to seize their minds and bodies to commit regicide and patricide?

When you get down to the nitty-gritty details, it is Braude who must resort to "ad hoc, convoluted, and antecedently implausible stories."

Is prayer redundant?

Over at the Secular Outpost, Jeff Lowder reposed an alleged dilemma involving the futility or the redundancy of prayer:

<http://secularoutpost.infidels.org/2012/08/flowchart-on-futility-of-prayer.html>

Why does Jeff imagine that that's a trenchant critique of prayer? If the "something" we pray for is in God's plan, how does that render prayer "redundant"?

If what we pray for is in God's plan, then his plan didn't begin and end with what we pray for. Rather, his plan includes our prayer as well as his answer. The whole package is part of God's plan. Jeff is artificially isolating what we pray for from the rest of God's plan. But being planned, all of the interrelated elements of the plan are carefully coordinated. Jeff is confusing a planned outcome with fatalism. But that's fallacious.

To take a comparison: suppose I plan to give my son a present. Indeed, I know ahead of time what he intends to ask for. Still, I'll wait for him to ask me before I give him the present. It's important that the request comes from him. I don't give him the present apart from his request. It's important to involve him in the process to some degree. If I do everything for him, if he's passive from start to finish, then the gift will mean less to him. He needs to think through what he needs and wants. Express himself. Exercise a bit of initiative.

Jeff has been an atheist for at least 20 years. And he's had more ongoing interaction with Christians than many atheists. So it's striking that he has such a philosophically and theologically simplistic, superficial grasp of prayer.

The problem of unanswered prayer

The problems of unanswered prayer

A topic in Christian apologetics and atheism is "the problem of unanswered prayer". I put that in quotes because there are at least two (alleged) problems of unanswered prayer, and it's useful to distinguish them for clarity of analysis.

I) THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

An atheist will say the reason God doesn't seem to answer prayer more often is because God never answers prayer, and that's because there is no God to answer prayer. God only seems to answer prayer sometimes is because believers confound coincidence with answered prayer. They remember the hits but forget all the misses. Answered prayer is an artifact of sample selection bias. What's left over when you ignore all the misses.

A basic problem with that explanation is that an atheist must shoulder an astronomical burden of proof to make good on his claim. The onus is on him to show that every purported answer to prayer is sheer coincidence.

As a practical matter, it's simply impossible for an atheist to directly discharge his burden of proof in this regard. He could barely scratch the surface. In the nature of the case, most purported answers to prayer go unreported. These are private incidents that happen to unknown believers. In the vast majority of cases, there is no public record to assess. An atheist must dismiss it out of hand without ever examining the evidence.

The best an atheist could attempt is to discount answered prayer indirectly by disproving God's existence. However, that's viciously circular inasmuch as instances of answered prayer would count as evidence for God's existence.

II) THE FIDELITY OF GOD

The issue here is whether certain prayer promises in Scripture are true. Does God keep his promise? Can God be trusted to do what he says he will do in answer to prayer, or is there a glaring discrepancy between the scope of promise and the scope of performance?

That's something I've discussed on different occasions from different angles, so I won't repeat myself here. I'm just disambiguating the issue.

Of course, calling this the "problem" of unanswered prayer is, itself, somewhat prejudicial or question-begging. It's a conventional designation, like the "problem of evil". Whether it's truly problematic is the very issue in dispute.

Prayer in the multiverse

The problem of unanswered prayer is an issue in pastoral theology as well as theodicy and apologetics. By "unanswered prayer" I simply mean you didn't get what you ask for.

On the face of it, it's often the case that God doesn't grant the prayers of Christians (or OT Jews). However, when we talk about unanswered prayer, that's shorthand for prayers that go unanswered in this world.

Suppose you have a suicidal son or brother. You pray for mental healing but he ends up taking his own life despite your heartfelt prayers on his behalf.

Did God decline to answer your prayer? Perhaps. In a sense.

But there's a hidden assumption to the problem of unanswered prayer. Suppose God created a multiverse. If that's the case, then prayers that go unanswered in our world are answered in a parallel universe or alternate timeline.

There's a parallel universe in which my counterpart prays for his suicidal brother, and God grants the prayer request. The brother doesn't commit suicide. If that's true, then God answers nearly every prayer. On this view, prayers that go unanswered in one timeline are answered in another timeline. On this view, the unqualified prayer promises in Scripture might be absolutely true.

Of course, that's a bit philosophical. However, every human being of average intelligence takes hypothetical and counterfactual scenarios in stride. That's part of human deliberation and decision-making. We contemplate different courses of action. We think of ourselves as the same agent in different hypothetical scenarios.

The main question is whether those remain unexemplified possibilities, or whether they actually happen. Obviously, forking paths don't happen in the same timeline. But if God made a multiverse, then they actually play out.

Even in a multiverse, wicked or foolish prayers will still go unanswered. There is that exception.

I'm not saying for a fact that God created a multiverse. I'm in no position to verify or falsify that conjecture, although I think it's theologically reasonable and even likely, for reasons I've given before.

But my argument in this post doesn't require anything that ambitious. The point is that for all we know, the problem of unanswered prayer is a misnomer if, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, God did, in fact, answer our prayers. But because our only

fame of reference is the timeline in which we find ourselves, we can't tell. Even if we're multiply instantiated in alternate timelines, we're not conscious of every timeline.

It's analogous to my future counterpart. My present self isn't conscious of what my future self is aware of, or vice versa. Like a moving spotlight.

We often seem to pray in vain. We prayed our heart out for something that never transpires. Or maybe it does. Just not in this particular timeline.

If so, why would God set things up that way? Because every plot its share of unique goods. So there's value in having alternate world histories.

Gridlock

Why doesn't God stop evil more often? Why doesn't God answer prayer more often? There's a principle common to the problem of evil and the problem of unanswered prayer.

When I'm driving in town, it would sure be convenient for me if all the traffic lights were green in my direction. That would expedite my trip. But what's convenient for me would be inconvenient for all the drivers waiting at red lights so that I have unimpeded egress.

It would be convenient for me if, instead of waiting for a bus, the bus waited for me. Suppose I could leave the house at any time, and a bus just happened to be at the bus stop. But while that would be convenient for me, that would inconvenience all the other bus riders. It would make the bus schedule totally unpredictable. What's best for me may not be best for somebody else. What's good for me may be bad for somebody else.

Here's the principle: the more agents there are, the more complicated it is to coordinate everybody's interests. Adding agents reduces the number of consistent outcomes. What every agent does must be consistent with every other agent's actions. Only so many outcomes can be crammed into one time and place.

We can see this in the difference between the past, present, and future. 19C New York City can't coexist with 21C New York City. WWI can't coexist with the Napoleonic wars. There's only so much room for different simultaneous events. Everyday may use up all the space for what can happen that day. Agents form a network of interactions. Adding or subtracting agents triggers a chain-reaction.

One reason God doesn't answer more prayers is because all answers to prayer must be compossible. There's potential conflict between acting in the interest of one agent and acting in the interest of another agent, because each agent's life has a longitudinal impact that may counteract what's best for another agent.

That seems to limit what even an omnipotent God can do. Even in the case of Calvinism, where God isn't hindered by the independent freedom of human agents, the feasible options are not unlimited because it's a question of what's mathematically possible in terms of spatiotemporal coherence. Some chains of events are incompatible with other chains of events.

Prayer promises

I'd like to expand on something Gary Habermas touched on in a recent speech ("The Worst Suffering We Will Ever Face"). Many professing Christians have lost their faith or become disaffected because they think God broke his prayer promises. Take this promise:

13 Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it (Jn 14:13-14).

i) On the face of it, that's an unqualified promise. Of course, it doesn't take long for a Christian to find out that you don't get whatever you ask for.

ii) One distinction is that we shouldn't automatically reassign every promise made to the disciples to Christians in general.

iii) In addition, God's prayer promises have to be consistent with his other commitments. Jesus said this on the eve of his crucifixion. But the promise didn't mean that if one of the disciples prayed to God to prevent the crucifixion, God would grant that request.

Likewise, God won't answer a prayer to end the world right this minute and take me to heaven if God has other plans. Prayer isn't designed to put us in the driver's seat. We don't take God's place as rulers of the cosmos.

By the same token, it doesn't mean that if we ask God to destroy himself, he will comply. There are common sense restrictions that are just assumed.

iv) But here's another issue: in the very same monologue (the upper room discourse), Jesus also makes "promises" like this:

18 "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours (Jn 15:18-20).

16 "I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. 2 They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. 3

And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. 4 But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you (Jn 16:1-4).

But if the prayer promise in Jn 14:13-14 is absolute, then Christians could always avoid persecution by praying that God spare them. Yet that's at odds with what Jesus said about the prospect of impending persecution. So Jn 14:13-14 wasn't meant to be unconditional.

In addition, we have this statement:

11 And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. 12 While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled...15 I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one (Jn 17:11-12,15).

Here divine protection is defined, not in terms of sparing Christians from harm in general, but from damnation. As a rule, God won't rescue them by removing them from the situation, but by spiritually preserving them in the situation.

What's the problem of unanswered prayer?

The "problem of unanswered prayer" is often discussed in apologetics. There's really more than one problem:

1. At the most abstract level is the issue of whether unanswered prayer throws doubt on the existence of a prayer-answering God. That's a philosophical and theological issue. I've discussed that objection on multiple occasions.

2. At a more personal level, some professing Christians suffer cognitive dissonance, a crisis of faith, or loss of faith because the NT contains some unqualified prayer promises which don't seem to live up to experience. That's a hermeneutical issue. I've discussed that objection on multiple occasions.

3. But at the most existential level is the ordeal of professing Christians who pray in vain for something they desperately need. They pray their heart out but nothing changes.

i) I do think there are reasons why two Christians can offer equally needy, equally legitimate prayers, yet God answers the prayer of one rather than the other. This intersects with theodicy. For instance:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/05/skin-for-skin.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/09/when-tomorrow-never-comes.html>

ii) Unanswered prayer can be spiritually damaging if you ask for the same thing day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. Every day your request is rebuffed. Every day you leave yourself open to disappointment. That has a cumulative effect.

If you pray for something that never happens, the outcome is the same as if you never prayed at all. You'd get the exact same outcome by not praying. In that situation it doesn't make a dime's worth of difference whether or not you prayed. So that can erode confidence.

In that respect, giving it a rest may be a way to protect yourself from cynicism. You might revisit the prayer request at a later time, but it's not necessarily a bad thing to take a break. Otherwise, the exercise becomes too punishing.

That said, there are different kinds of prayer, viz. confession, thanksgiving, intercession, petition (for yourself). If petitionary prayer for yourself becomes too disillusioning, you might take a break from that but not from, say, intercessory prayer.

iii) If you pray for something and it happens in a timely fashion, it's easier to identify that outcome as an answer to prayer. If, however, you eventually get what you pray for years later, that fosters the suspicion that it happened naturally. It was going to happen anyway. Given enough time, odds are what you ask for will happen every now and then.

That may be another reason to give it a break. In the interim you might forget about the prayer request. If what you prayed for then comes to pass, it's a pleasant surprise. Indeed, an unexpected answer to prayer may be more encouraging than praying daily for the same thing.

When tomorrow never comes

Although I don't think unanswered prayer casts doubt on God's existence (too much evidence for that), it does cast prima facie doubt on God's benevolence. Ironically, Deists think the problem isn't with unanswered prayer but answered prayer! They think a God who intervenes is a God who lacks foresight to get it right the first time around. They view divine intervention as God rewriting the script. Editing his rough draft. That's actually a good objection to open theism.

In theory, this ranges along a continuum from a God who never answers prayer to a God who always answers prayer. What would a world be like where God answers every prayer?

To begin with, are we confining that to Christian prayers and pre-Christian Jewish prayers? Or does that extend to, say, Hindu prayers? Even if we confine it to Christian and Jewish prayers, do we distinguish between nominal believers and true believers?

One problem with God answering every prayer is that some prayers cancel out other prayers. Some prayers are mutually impossible.

We might compare efficacious prayer to time-travel scenarios. In the sci-fi lore, time travel has a disruptive impact on the future by replacing the original future with an alternate timeline. The more often that happens, the more disruptive the effect. Cumulative temporal dislocation.

Imagine a world in which there was no time-travel from January until the first Thursday in July. Up to that point there's continuity as people cycle through the week, a day at a time. But on the first Thursday in July (of that year), time travel became ubiquitous.

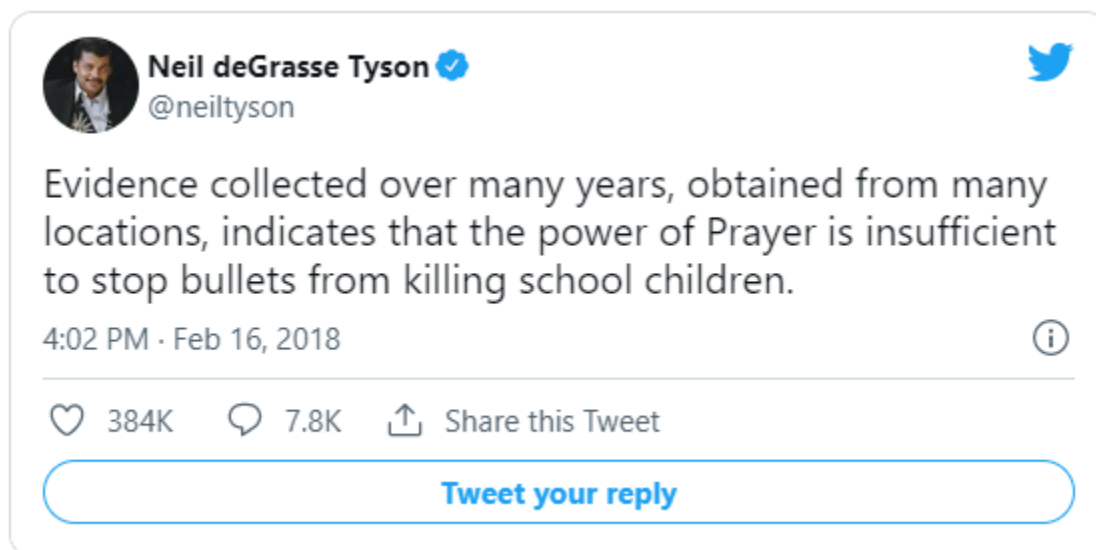
That means you never get beyond Thursday. Friday never comes because Friday is constantly replaced by alternate futures. Every morning, when you wake up, it's Thursday. Each time it's a different Thursday. Not a different calendar date Thursday. The same calendar date Thursday, but a Thursday in a different timeline. You go through Thursday, go to bed, fall asleep, and it's Thursday all over again when you wake up because the disruptive effect of ubiquitous time travel resets the starting-date.

Efficacious prayer would have a similar effect. Two alternate timelines sharing their histories up to the moment where they fork off. If God answers a prayer, that stands in contrast to what might have been had he not, and vice versa. If God answered every prayer, that's like constantly resetting the starting-date—so that we keep repeating the same calendar day. Different things happen each time because it represents a road not taken, but there's no continuity and no progression. You're forever stuck in Thursday. It's not the same as a time loop, because things change every time that happens, but

it's always on that particular day. The next day never comes. Hence, the paradox of efficacious prayer.

If efficacious prayer generates a conundrum like that, then that may be one reason why God selectively answers prayer, even though some prayers seem to be just as "deserving" as others. God strikes a balance between stability, intercession, and chaos.

Does prayer stop bullets?



Tyson is a "public intellectual". Like Carl Sagan, Jerry Coyne, and Richard Dawkins, he's become a vocal spokesman for "scientific" atheism.

There's a problem when people try to act cleverer than they are. His tweet is meant to be witty, but it's really stupid.

i) To begin with, we can't pray for things we can't anticipate. We can't pray to God to stop things we didn't see coming. School shootings at any particular location are very rare and highly unpredictable. It's too late to pray to God to stop something after the fact, when the outcome is known. To pray is not an act of prophecy. It doesn't see the future.

ii) The theology of prayer was never predicated on God answering every prayer.

iii) How does Tyson know that prayer is insufficient to stop bullets from killing students? To take a comparison, suppose Tyson said time-travel is insufficient to stop bullets from killing students? But if a time-traveler succeeded in changing the timeline to avert a catastrophe, then that erases the original timeline. The very success of his temporal incursion covers his tracks.

By the same token, if there are occasions when prayer prevents a massacre, there will be no record of what didn't happen. A nonevent leaves no trace evidence. If prayer changes the future, in a counterfactual sense, then that's consistent with the future that actually eventuates. Efficacious prayer and naturalism are empirically equivalent at that level.

There are, however, situations in which there's evidence for the efficacy of prayer. But atheists don't move in circles where that happens, since their social circle generally consists of people who don't pray, so they've excluded themselves from the evidence.

Let me introduce you to my invisible friend

Richard Dawkins **Verified account**

@RichardDawkins

Theists: you get comfort in the imaginary embrace of an imaginary friend? Try real warm embrace of a real warm friend. That's real comfort.

Unfortunately, there's an epidemic of men and women who embrace their invisible friend. I constantly see joggers and pedestrians with earbuds talking to their invisible friend. I see people on park benches using the keypad of their cellphone to type messengers to their invisible friend.

Sometimes, in blind faith or desperation, these people leave messages for their invisible friend, hoping their invisible friend will respond. They get very agitated when they leave multiple messages with no reply. They actually believe that their invisible friend occasionally responds, even though that's a classic example of sample selection bias. They only remember the hits and conveniently forget all the misses. So what they take to be replies are sheer coincidence.

God's sleeper cells

I discussed the problem of unanswered prayer on several occasions. Now I'd like to consider from a different angle.

Of course, from the standpoint of an atheist, Christian explanations for unanswered prayer are special pleading. The real reason prayers go unanswered because there's no God to answer prayer, and apparent answered prayers are just coincidence.

I understand how it looks that way to an outsider, yet the evidence for a prayer-answering God is uncontroversial.

But here's one reason God doesn't answer every Christian prayer: many prayers request direct divine intervention. Ask God to cut through the red tape.

Problem is there's a balancing act between the theology of the church and the theology of prayer. I don't mean "the church" in a high churchy Roman Catholic, Anglo-Catholic, Eastern Orthodox sense, but garden-variety Christians.

Oftentimes, God chooses to minister indirectly through the efforts of Christians. Christians can function as mediators in the sense that their charitable efforts bear witness to God's love and grace.

Consider Ernest Gordon, who was an inmate in a Japanese POW camp. At first, the law of the jungle took over. The survival of the fittest among the inmates. But then a Christian revival broke out.

A related example is Eric Liddell, a missionary to China. He had a chance to leave China when the Japanese invaded, but he stayed behind to be with his students. He and they were captured. Imprisoned in a POW camp. And he never left the camp. He died there of brain cancer, after faithfully ministering to his students and other inmates.

Or the experience of Corrie ten Boom. Those are specular examples, but there are more mundane examples, like a Christian family in which grown children care for elderly, enfeebled parents. Or an elderly Christian couple where one provides for the other, even though both are very diminished.

If God were to parachute in, in answer to prayer, that would eliminate the opportunity for Christians to minister to other Christians. Although our best efforts are often pitifully inadequate, there is, for that very reason, something beautiful about vessels of clay aiding other vessels of clay. The weak caring for the weaker. When Christians who may have very limited resources summon what little they have to offer, making the most of little.

Catholics mock the "invisible" church, but there's something wonderful about the invisible church. Oftentimes, the church is like a desert that has a barren, lifeless landscape. But appearances are deceptive. It only takes a flash flood and the next day the desert is bursting into a flower garden.

Just beneath the desolate surface the ground was teeming with seeds waiting for water. All it takes is a flash flood to explode into life.

God has seeded parts of the world with Christians who lay dormant until they spring into action when a challenge arises. Like sleeper cells behind enemy lines. They go largely unnoticed by unbelievers, yet God has delegated to them a ministry, to be his lips and ears and hands and feet.

Nabeel Qureshi never got what he asked for—in this life. Those who prayed for his healing never got what they asked for. Yet they themselves were agents of mercy. A whole network waiting to spontaneously assemble at a moment's notice to shower him, his wife, his parents and sister with encouragement and Christian witness. In a sense, the medium was the answer.

Is prayer pointless?

I recently responded to an atheist on Facebook:

"I don't understand why prayer is important, especially prayers that are requesting something from God. Isn't God going to do whatever he wants to do anyway?"

No. God acts according to his plan for the world. His plan includes many outcomes which are the consequence of answered prayer.

"Why, when someone loses a friend or family member to death, do people tell others to pray for them? Does more people praying result in God relieving that person's grief more quickly?"

Merely adding people to the prayer chain doesn't ipso facto up the odds of answered prayer, although it ups the odds that a saintly Christian will pray for the survivors.

"Why doesn't God comfort the person at the maximum amount anyway without the prayers?"

For one reason, God has made humans social creatures. Prayer cultivates the virtue of compassion. God often acts through human intermediaries. That's not confined to prayer.

"Same question with sickness. Why are we encouraged to pray for those who are sick? Doesn't God already know they are sick and that they desire healing?"

i) Another reason is that if we automatically got whatever we need, we'd value it less.

ii) In addition, prayer accentuates our helplessness and dependence on God's mercy. Answered prayer fosters humility and gratitude.

iii) Furthermore, answered prayer is evidence of God's existence, providence, and benevolence.

"It's like a checklist."

Some people are guilty of mechanical, perfunctory prayers. Jesus warned about that.

"Do these prayers change things?"

i) Some prayers are answered while some prayers go unanswered.

ii) They don't change God's plan, but God's plan includes answered prayer. They change things in the counterfactual sense that certain outcomes wouldn't occur absent prayer.

"Are there tangible results?"

Yes.

"Does God wait for a prayer before he will act?"

In some cases, answered prayer is retroactive inasmuch as a chain of events is already underway, prior to the prayer, which will eventuate in the answer.

Petitionary prayer is the:

i) Perception of a need

ii) Recognition that the need is beyond human ability to secure or ensure

iii) Verbally or mentally articulating that need (spoken or silent prayer)

iv) Directing a request to God to supply the need

Intercessory prayer is petitionary prayer on behalf of another.

Do you imagine that if God exists, believers (or unbelievers?) should never find themselves in a situation where they have need of something, which is even temporarily unmet? Do you think all needs ought to be automatically supplied so that we should never even be in a needy situation in the first place? Do you think we should never have to ask anyone for anything, or just God in particular? If so, why so? Do you think we should never do favors for other people? Do you think we should never be made aware of our dependence on God, assuming God exists?

Michael Brown on healing

What was my conclusion after these years of intensive study and prayer? I concluded that healing was God's ideal will for His obedient children, and that rather than praying, "Lord, if it be Your will to heal," we should pray with the expectation that it was His will, sometimes even rebuking the sickness at its root.

Since then, have I seen other precious believers die of cancer? Yes, tragically, including some people very close to me, after years of prayer and fasting for their healing.

Have I prayed for blind eyes that were not opened and deaf ears that were not unstopped? Quite a few times, I'm sorry to say.

Yet I still believe the testimony of Scripture, since my theology is based on the Word rather than on personal experience. And when I have experienced miraculous healing in my own life – including from Hepatitis C, apparently contracted when I was a drug user from 1969-1971 but not manifest until the mid-1990's, after which I was healed – I have been thankful for divine confirmation of the Word.

<https://askdrbrown.org/library/why-wasn%E2%80%99t-nabeel-gureshi-healed>

It sounds pious and faithful to say that when push comes to shove, his theology is based on Scripture rather than experience, but the obvious problem with his dichotomy is that, as he interprets Scripture, Scripture predicts for a particular kind of experience. He thinks Scripture obligates us to expect miraculous answers to prayer. So he can't neatly dichotomize Scripture from experience if, by his own lights, Scripture itself fosters the expectation that we should experience a particular kind of answer when we pray.

Brown has created a situation in which his interpretation of Scripture is unfalsifiable. If you exercise expectant faith, and the prayer is answered, that confirms your charismatic interpretation—but if you exercise expectant faith and the prayer goes unanswered, somehow that's still consistent with your charismatic interpretation.

Fact is, even mundane prayer is risky in the sense that when you pray you leave yourself wide open for disappointment. Prayer puts you in a vulnerable position. And if you exercise expectant faith, that aggravates the opportunities for disappointment. How many times can you exercise expectant faith before you lose faith in prayer, because

your expectations are so often disappointed? How many times can you get burned before you need a skin graft? To be frank, miraculous intervention is unpredictable and unreliable. That's something you can pray for and hope for, and it's something you ought to pray for, but it's not something you can bank on. More often than not, God does not intercede in tangible, miraculous ways. You queue yourself up for disillusionment and make apostasy more likely if you constantly psyche yourself up for something that rarely if ever happens to you. There's nothing impious about striking a balance. Some professing Christians need to lower their expectations before they crash and burn. In reality, it often seems like you're on your own in life. Ordinary providence is the norm. Better get used to it.

Horse-racing

I've discussed this before, but I'd like to provide a couple of examples to illustrate the principle. Unbelievers allege that Christians succumb to sample-selection bias. When we appeal to miracles or answered prayer or fulfilled prophecy or archeological corroboration, we only count the hits and discount the misses. We conveniently forget the latter.

Now, in fairness, some Christians can be guilty of this. Take Christians who are straining to find God's will. Straining to detect divine signs. Likewise, many answered prayers are ambiguous in the sense that they could be naturally explicable.

However, hits and misses are evidentially asymmetrical. For instance, consistently losing at the race track requires no special explanation, whereas consistently winning at the race track does require a special explanation. Consistently losing at the casino requires no special explanation whereas consistently winning does.

So hits can be evidentially significant in a way that misses are not. It's to be expected that gamblers normally lose. There's an element of uncontrollable chance, and the odds are against you. If you consistently beat the odds, if you consistently outperform, that's suspicious. That implies cheating.

By the same token, lack of evidence isn't equivalent to counterevidence unless there's a reasonable expectation that if something's the case, there should be corroborative evidence. Consider how many things you and I do in the course of an ordinary day for which there were never any records.

Surely God is good to Israel

13 All in vain have I kept my heart clean

and washed my hands in innocence.

14 For all the day long I have been stricken

and rebuked every morning.

Although Ps 73 was written three thousand some years ago, the temptation is perennial. When the wicked prosper, and the faithful suffer, it's tempting to join the winning team. If there were no afterlife, the temptation would be overwhelming.

11 And they say, "How can God know?"

Is there knowledge in the Most High?"

Their impudence is boundless and blasphemous. Yet it seems to be borne out by experience. No thunderbolts strike them down.

15 If I had said, "I will speak thus,"

I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

Unlike apostates, Asaph had the tact and discretion not to share his misgivings in public unless and until he found an answer.

17 until I went into the sanctuary of God;

then I discerned their end.

This is enigmatic. What happened in the sanctuary to prompt his epiphany?

Although we might view the Solomonic temple as artistically inspiring, it functioned as a holy abattoir. The blood-spattered floor. Redolent with the stench of burning flesh. Blood and guts all day long. The spectacle of a gilded slaughterhouse isn't all that edifying.

Perhaps, though, it was the time of evening prayer. Worshippers chanting the Psalter.

Or maybe he received a revelation of the afterlife, suddenly putting this life in perspective. Asaph was a prophet.

18 Truly you set them in slippery places;

you make them fall to ruin.

19 How they are destroyed in a moment,

swept away utterly by terrors!

20 Like a dream when one awakes,

O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.

Some commentators think this refers to divine judgment overtaking the wicked in this life. But surely an attentive observer like Asaph was cognizant of the fact that the wicked don't necessarily or even routinely receive their comeuppance in this life. Indeed, that aggravating observation was what triggered his crisis of faith in the first place:

4 For they have no pangs until death;

their bodies are fat and sleek.

5 They are not in trouble as others are;

they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.

They luxuriate in long, healthy, carefree lives. So it must look ahead to something beyond the grave.

23 Nevertheless, I am continually with you;

you hold my right hand.

24 You guide me with your counsel,

and afterward you will receive me to glory.

25 Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

26 My flesh and my heart may fail,

but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Once again, some commentators offer a this-worldly rather than other-worldly interpretation of the affirmation. But that doesn't solve the problem Asaph posed at the outset. This life is the problem. If there is to be a resolution, then that demands a reversal of fortunes in the world to come—where the first shall be last and the last shall be first. A parallel afterlife for the faithful and the faithless. Their paths crisscross in this life, but diverge in the afterlife.

Why doesn't God do more?

An issue in theodicy is how often God should intervene. In principle, that ranges along a continuum from absolute nonintervention to constant intervention to prevent evil or make the situation better.

Here's the basic argument: if it's not good for God to intervene all the time, then the degree of divine intervention is bound to be arbitrary. Like the sorites paradox. Unless God ought to intervene constantly, he could step in one more time or one less time, and the cut off is arbitrary. Anything short of constant intervention will be arbitrary. Yes, he could have done it one more time, but where does that stop. If he could step in one more time, he could step in two more times, or one less time, or two less times. There is no logical tipping point where a little less is too little and a little more is just enough.

Now, I think that's somewhat simplistic. Just about every intervention or nonintervention will cause a chain reaction. It makes a difference in terms of what future eventuates. It's not arbitrary in that respect. But it is arbitrary in the other respect.

Pointless Prayer

As a Calvinist, I've lost track of the number of times someone has said to me, "If God is sovereign, there's no point in praying." Of course, the immediate rejoinder is obvious: "Only if God is not sovereign is there no point in praying." Still, the typical meaning behind the statement seems to be, "If God has determined everything that will happen, then it's pointless to pray because God has already made up His mind about what will happen."

I think it's time to turn the tables though. Especially regarding Arminians who pray for the salvation of other people. Indeed, not only do I think these prayers are utterly pointless, but if God really is the God that Arminians imagine, then such prayers demonstrate an utter lack of faith in Him.

I make that claim due to the following claims that Arminians—at least those I've interacted with—have asserted. First, Arminians claim that God loves every person everywhere with a universal and benevolent love. Second, Arminians claim that God wants every single individual person ever created to be saved. Third, only those who freely choose can believe in Him; God does not want robots.

So given these claims, it becomes fairly straightforward to demonstrate that it is futile for an Arminian to pray for the salvation of anyone. The most obvious way is by looking at the third claim. Since God wants us to be free and He does not want robots, what exactly is the prayer supposed to accomplish? Is the Arminian praying that God violate someone's freewill? Obviously not. But what, precisely, is the prayer for salvation supposed to do?

Perhaps it is designed to ask God to bring about more opportunities for someone to be saved. Let's examine that for a moment. Suppose an Arminian has a friend we'll call Jim Bob, and the Arminian prays "Lord, I ask you to bring about more opportunities for Jim Bob to be saved." But doesn't God already want everyone saved? And if He does, why does He need you to prompt Him to try extra hard in Jim Bob's case? Is He not already doing all that He can for Jim Bob?

Or look at it this way. Jim Bob and Billie Sue are both unsaved individuals. If you pray for Jim Bob to be saved, but not Billie Sue (because you've never met her and don't know she exists), does this make it more likely for Jim Bob to be saved than Billie Sue? Does God give more attention to Jim Bob than Billie Sue? Certainly God doesn't love Jim Bob more than Billie Sue, because of the first claim of Arminianism that God loves all universally.

So what, precisely, does the Arminian's prayer accomplish when he prays for Jim Bob? God was acting toward Jim Bob in a specific manner before the prayer, and according

to Arminian precepts, He acts in the exact same manner after the prayer too. Not only that, but God was acting the same way toward Billie Sue too. Thus, such a prayer is completely ineffectual. It accomplishes absolutely nothing whatsoever.

Except it's worse than that for the Arminian. It's not so much that such a prayer accomplishes nothing, but rather that it accomplishes the proclamation that the Arminian does not actually believe in Arminianism! After all, what would prompt an Arminian to pray for Jim Bob except that he doubts God really loves everyone with the same universal and benevolent love? In short, by praying for Jim Bob, the Arminian is ultimately saying, "God, I don't really think you love everyone the same, so please save Jim Bob."

Of course, I would anticipate an Arminian to say, "No, we believe God wants all saved, but we are just lifting up that request for Jim Bob in particular for...reasons." Well, in that case, the Arminian is not mimicking the God he claims is real, for the Arminian is being very particular in asking salvation for one person and not for another. But that aside, the Arminian would be asking God to do...what God is already doing. This seems to me to fly in the face of Matthew 6:8, which in the ESV states: "Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." The "them" in the first clause is the Gentiles who "heap up empty phrases" in their prayers: "Lord, I ask you to please keep doing what you're doing that I know you're going to be doing whether I ask or not but I'm going to ask it anyway because this is in no way a heaped-up empty phrase."

After all, it's not like Arminians can use the Calvinist concept of God ordaining the means as well as the ends. See, a Calvinist can argue that God uses the means of prayer in order to enact His will, choosing to not do something until He has moved His people to pray for it. Hence, the means to the end are established. But that doesn't work for the Arminian here, because God is going to love everyone universally and He is going to want all saved and He is going to do all He can without violating their free will, irrespective of what anyone prays.

Or do Arminians really think that God would have saved Jim Bob if only we had prayed for him, but since we didn't pray for Jim Bob then Jim Bob never got the chance to believe? Really? God's going to withhold salvation for a person because someone else failed?

No, any way you look at it, the conclusion resounds: Every time an Arminian prays for anyone to be saved, he has torn down the foundation of his own worldview and proclaims that he knows in his heart that Calvinism is true.

How often does God intervene?

Back to the stable nature theodicy:

i) To take a comparison, it's like healing and prayer. If God always healed in answer to prayer, then medical science would be pointless—and if God never healed in answer to prayer, then prayer (for healing) would be superfluous.

Occasional miraculous healing in answer to prayer doesn't make medical science useless. You don't know in advance which will do the trick, or whether either one will do the trick. Sometimes we pray for healing because medical science failed.

The dilemma for the stable environment theodicy is that it can't explain why God intervenes in some cases rather than others. So that must be supplemented by skeptical theism.

ii) I doubt it's possible to even guess at how often God prevents some natural evils. Physical events leave physical evidence in their wake, but nonevents leave no trace evidence of their nonoccurrence. So what's the evidence that something didn't happen because God preempted it?

To take a comparison, consider those time-travel scenarios in which a Jewish scientist goes back in time to kill Hitler's granddad, thereby erasing Adolf from the space-time continuum. If successful, there will be no evidence that Adolf ever existed, because changing that one variable changes a host of affected variables. To be consistent, there must be corresponding adjustments.

Of course we know that's unrealistic: hence time-travel antinomies. But I'm just using that as an analogy to illustrate a point.

In the case of divine intervention to preempt a natural evil, that doesn't change the past, but prevent that past from happening in the first place—in which case, there's no empirical evidence that God intervened. We have no basis of comparison. We just have what actually happened.

It's not as if there's a gap or hole in the historical record or natural record when God prevents a natural evil. So in that sense, there's no direct evidence for divine preemption. Not like a missing folder in the filing cabinet between the As and the Cs where the Bs ought to be. All the "space" is filled.

So, from what I can see, there's no estimating the frequency of divine interventions in that respect. For all we know, divine intervention to prevent natural evils might be commonplace. It's imponderable.

I'm not saying it's never possible to identify divine preemption. In some cases you have plausible answers to prayer. But in other cases, no testimonial evidence will be available.

When the cat's away, the mice will play

43 But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. 45 "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? 46 Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. 47 Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. 48 But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' 49 and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, 50 the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know 51 and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 24:43-51).

i) Unanswered prayer is one reason some professing Christians lose their faith. On the face of it, some NT statements about prayer overpromise and underperform. How do we address the prima facie discrepancy?

ii) Keep in mind that the NT writers who wrote or recorded the promises surely experienced unanswered prayer. I doubt they got everything they prayed for, any more than we do. So even if the language is unqualified, they themselves would have understood there to be implicit qualifications.

iii) Unbelievers claim that examples of answered prayer are the artifact of sample selection bias. We forget all the unanswered prayers and only remember the answered prayers. Given how often we pray, it's statistically inevitable that sometimes we will experience an outcome that dovetails with our prayer. But that's random. What's left over after we discount all the misses.

iv) Now there's sometimes a grain of truth to that. Some Christians are guilty of wishful thinking.

However, the primary function of prayer is not to prove God's existence. Rather, its primary purpose is either to ask for something that only God can provide, or to make the outcome contingent on something more than natural probabilities or our own abilities.

That is to say, although there are situations where the desired outcome might be naturally obtainable, that depends on factors over which we have limited control. We pray, in part, to raise the odds (as it were) that it will turn out the way we hope. Not to mention cases where only God can make the difference.

But prayer isn't designed to furnish direct evidence for God's existence. Rather, that's a side-effect.

v) In addition, the question of whether answered prayer is just luck isn't different in kind from how we generally distinguish coincidental events from intentional events. For instance, although it's astronomically improbable that I will see any particular license plate, it's inevitable that I will see some license plates. If, however, I see the same license plate several times a day when I glance in my rearview mirror, I have good reason to suspect I'm being shadowed.

Even though some examples which we take to be answered prayer may be ambiguous, that doesn't mean every case is ambiguous. Some examples of answered prayer may resist a coincidental interpretation for the same reason that some other events resist a coincidental interpretation. Indeed, there are obviously situations in which a coincidental interpretation would be willfully irrational. If I keep seeing the same license plate in my rearview mirror, I ought to be suspicious. If it happens once, that's random. If it happens twice (in the same day), that's coincidental. But if it repeatedly shows up, then something funny is going on.

And, of course, some one-time events are clearly by design. You don't necessarily have to multiple instances to up the odds that it's not a random event. A one-of-a-kind event can still be orchestrated. If I return to my home to find the furniture rearranged, I know that didn't happen by accident, even if that's a unique experience for me.

vi) One reason NT writers don't use qualified language in reference to prayer promises is because the reader is expected to make reasonable allowance for obvious exceptions.

Some answers to prayer are precluded in advance by God's standing policy. For instance, I can pray that I will stop aging at 25, but God won't answer that prayer because the aging process is part of the curse. That will continue until the Parousia.

Likewise, I can pray that I will never be a victim of crime, but if God has determined that crime will exist in a fallen world, then I can't count on God answering that prayer. Maybe he will protect me, but if he doesn't, that's not surprising. Prayers like that reflect an overrealized eschatology. They conflict with God's plan at this stage of world history.

In the nature of the case, God will not answer prayers which conflict with what he has determined to be the case. And there are certain kinds of situations where that's predictable.

vii) On a related note, two or more answered prayers have the potential, in principle, to generate conflicting consequences. Many prayers may go unanswered for the simple reason that the answers must be coordinated to avoid a train wreck down the line.

To take a humorous example, Alec Guinness made a comedy (*The Captain's Paradise*) in which he played a bigamist. Because his job required him to ferry back and forth between Morocco and Gibraltar, he took advantage of the situation by having two different wives at respective ends on his round trip. That only worked so long as he could keep that separate, keep each secret from the other. But eventually they began to bleed into each other.

In many cases, answered prayer can't be compartmentalized. Hence, only prayers are answerable that are mutually consistent with God's plan for the future.

viii) Finally, there's the studied absence of God. Take the Bible text I quoted at the top of the post. Passages like that are classified as "the delay of the Parousia." But there's another way of viewing them.

To some extent, God acts like an absentee landlord. Why? It's a test of faith. How will you behave when you think there's no God who's monitoring your actions? It's easy to be faithful when you think God is watching you. A truer test of fidelity is how you act when the supervisor is out of sight.

How do people act when they begin to doubt God's existence? When they doubt the supervisor will return?

If, however, God routinely answered prayer, then there'd be no real correlation between faith and fidelity. If you have continuous evidence that the security camera is rolling, you will behave yourself. But how you behave during a power outage, when the security camera is dead, is what truly reveals your character and commitment.

Where is God?

Here's an interesting question (at least I find it interesting!): In an unfallen world, would God intervene more often or less often?

On the one hand, it might seem that God would intervene less frequently—if at all. It's often said that sin creates a barrier between God and man. Sin separates us from God. Sin disrupts our fellowship with God. Sinners can't approach a holy God directly. We need buffers (the Mosaic cultus) or a mediator (Jesus). On this view, God keeps his distance in a fallen world. God "hides" himself—a recurring theme in the Psalms.

An unfallen world might still be a hazardous world. There might be major predators outside Eden. There might be natural disasters (e.g. floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, wildfires, meteors), but God would providentially or miraculously protect us from natural evils. In principle, God could protect us without our awareness of divine protection.

In theory, an unfallen world might resemble a "godless" world in the sense that there might be no occasion for God to manifest himself more overtly (e.g. theophanies, angelophanies, dreams, miracles, answered prayer, an audible voice). God would remain in the background, protecting and providing for us behind-the-scenes. An unfallen world might operate like a clockwork universe. In a world like that, there's not much to pray for.

On the other hand, redeeming a fallen world requires conspicuous divine intervention. A fallen world is a theater for divine intervention. In a way, that's why it exists. It's designed to cultivate a sense of utter dependence on God. God intervenes in a variety of ways that are often conspicuously "unnatural". In striking events or communications (e.g. theophanies, angelophanies, dreams, miracles, answered prayer, an audible voice) culminating in the Incarnation and Resurrection—with the Parousia to come. It may be that in a fallen world, God necessarily takes a more hands-on approach.

Jews and Christians often have a sense of divine absence or abandonment. Much of the time, maybe most of the time, it feels like a "godless" world, as if things just happen automatically. Everything happens just like clockwork. Trapped in the cycles of nature. Forced to live as if atheism is true.

Yet, ironically, it's arguable that however intermittent, a fallen world is characterized by conspicuous divine intervention—whereas God's existence would be far more oblique in an unfallen world.

How problematic is the problem of unanswered prayer?

The so-called problem of unanswered prayer is a familiar issue in Christian apologetics. It's not just a philosophical or theological issue, but a practical issue—inasmuch as many believers find unanswered prayer aggravating. In some cases that leads to loss of faith.

I'd simply point out that the "problem of unanswered prayer" isn't distinctive to prayer. It's not a special problem that's confined to prayer. Rather, it's a subdivision of a general issue regarding the mystery of divine providence. Why is it so often the case that the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper? Why does the distribution of weal and woe so often seem to be random?

Insofar as Christian theodicy has a general explanation for the mystery of providence, that's applicable to the "problem of unanswered prayer" in particular. Put another way, the experience of unanswered prayer isn't surprising. Rather, that's to be expected given the mystery of providence. However frustrating unanswered prayer may be, that's not unique to prayer. If you think about it, there's no specific "problem of unanswered prayer". Unanswered prayer doesn't raise any new issues. Unanswered prayer doesn't create a problem that's not already on the table in reference to the broader question of divine providence. Same pattern on a lower scale.

Godless prayer

A friend shared this link with me:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SICB7ol2iwg>

It's nice to hear a sympathetic analysis of prayer from a leading philosopher. Very erudite. Very intelligent. Very discriminating. Scruton's parents were atheists, yet he himself took an interest in Anglicanism as a teenager, although he drifted. But he's been backing into Christianity.

The problem with his view of prayer is that it has no place for petitionary or intercessory prayer. He operates with a closed-system view. So there's a fatalistic quality to his position. Prayer is about resigning ourselves to the inevitable. Scruton seems to take a therapeutic view of prayer.

I'm not sure why he takes a Deistic position. Maybe he thinks there's no evidence that prayer makes an appreciable difference to the course of events. From what I've read, he subscribes to a Kantian epistemology. He seems to be someone who's strongly attracted to Christianity, but can't bring himself to believe that God-talk is meaningful.

Perhaps he misconstrues the language of divine "intervention". That doesn't mean God is rewriting the plot. Prayer doesn't change what will be. Rather, prayer changes what would be, absent prayer. The efficacy of prayer is counterfactual. Some things happen as a result of prayer that wouldn't happen apart from prayer. Prayer makes a difference in that sense.

In fairness to Scruton, there's a sense in which petitionary/intercessory prayer is hazardous. It's possible to hedge a prayer with so many caveats that any outcome is consistent with the terms of prayer. That way you can never say your prayer went unanswered. The petition was cast in open-ended terms, so that whatever happens or doesn't happen is consistent with the petition.

But I don't think that's a real prayer. If you pray for something specific, you risk disappointment. You can avoid disappointment by avoiding specificity, but then, you're not praying for what you really wish to happen. It's understandable, therefore, that some people stop praying altogether when, in their experience, it makes no discernible difference.

There's an element of truth to what Scruton is saying, an important truth, perhaps a neglected truth, but a half-truth. There are certainly times when the purpose of prayer isn't to change our situation, but to change us. Times when we should rise to the

challenge. Cultivate a different attitude. Trying circumstances are a theater for soul-building virtues. That's a perspective on prayer that some people lose sight of.

But his position is very one-sided. That can't be the whole of prayer. The Bible is chockfull of prayers petitioning God to deliver the supplicant, or his people, from their ordeal. Petitionary/intercessory prayer is fundamental to the Biblical theology of prayer. Indeed, that distinguishes the true God from know-nothing, do-nothing idol-gods.

Scruton's position is more Buddhist than Christian. In Buddhism, we suffer because we have an emotional investment in people and things, and due to the transient nature of human experience, we are bound to lose all that we love.

In Buddhist metaphysics, flux is bedrock reality. That's unredeemable. There is no God. No eschatological compensations.

Given our intractable circumstances, the best we can do is to develop a coping mechanism. Emotionally divest ourselves of everything we care about. That way, we won't suffer when we lose something or someone. We must make a psychological adjustment to our intractable situation. If the situation is unalterable, then we need to alter our disposition towards the situation. That's logical given the premise, but it reflects a very despairing outlook on life and death.

Prayer and prevention

Hemant Mehta@hemantmehta Why would anyone #PrayforAmerica when it hasn't prevented any of the previous tragedies? America needs people who can take action, not God.11:56 PM - 7 Jul 2016

<https://mobile.twitter.com/hemantmehta/status/751309080803745792?p=v>

Mehta seems to have quite a following in secular circles, yet this is such a dumb objection. Consider those science fiction scenarios in which a time-traveler goes back in time to change the past to avert a future tragedy. A side-effect of his success is that when he instantly returns to his own time, he has no recollection of what he did. By producing a new timeline, his action erases all evidence of the old timeline. No one remembers that past because that past never happened in the new timeline in which they now exist. There's nothing for them to remember.

God preempting a tragedy is similar to that except it doesn't suffer from time-travel antinomies, inasmuch as the tragedy never happened in the first place. So how would Mehta be in any position to know that God hasn't prevented any previous tragedies, in answer to prayer.

Prayer, prophecy, and time travel

This post isn't really about time travel. It simply uses time travel as a theological illustration. An analogy for prophecy and prayer.

i) Time travel is a popular scifi convention. Indeed, time travel accounts for some of scifi's popularity.

ii) There are variations on time travel. Traveling into the future or into the past.

There's also the question of changing the past. The familiar scenario of a time-traveler who goes back in time, and either intentionally or inadvertently changes the past—which, in turn—changes the future.

That can generate antinomies, like the grandfather paradox.

One question is whether it's possible to make discrete, self-contained changes to the future. If so, retrocausation might not be incoherent in those cases. If, however, even one change has a ripple effect, then his action destroys the future he came from—which is incoherent.

iii) However, the principle can operate in reverse. Suppose a man travels into the future. He may do so out of sheer curiosity. Or he may do so to escape the present.

Suppose he's appalled by what he discovers. In-between, there was a global catastrophe. He therefore returns to the present, forearmed with his knowledge of the future, and attempts to avert the dire outcome.

This isn't *prima facie* incoherent in the same way that retrocausation is. He didn't originate in the future he changes. And present events cause the future. So his action doesn't necessarily disrupt the linear direction of cause and effect.

Of course, on this scenario, we're dealing with two different futures. The future which will eventuate if he doesn't act on his foreknowledge, and an alternate future which will eventuate if he does. The alternate timeline that replaces the future he initially visited is subsequent to the former. So that's still consistent with the linearity of time and causality.

It's possible that this is subtly incoherent, but, if so, that has to be teased out.

iv) There is, however, another possibility. A more fatalistic scenario (on one definition of fatalism). Perhaps he doesn't change the future he visited the first time around. Perhaps his efforts to change the future unwittingly contribute to the very outcome he was endeavoring to avoid.

He knows something about the present, and something about the future (that he encountered). But he didn't witness the intervening events. He doesn't know the chain of events linking the present to the future. Hence, his efforts to change the catastrophic future might be a necessary condition for that to happen. Due to his ignorance of the intervening events, he ends up precipitating the very disaster he was laboring to preempt or prevent.

v) Apropos (iv), some freewill theists consider predestined prayer to be otiose. If the future is etched in stone, then nothing we say or do in the present can change the future.

However, prayer could be like the time traveler in (iv). What he does in the present has results. He contributes to the future he prays for, not by changing the future, but by acting at present in ways that, unforeseen to him, fascinate the outcome he prayed for. Prayer needn't change the future to be instrumental in realizing the future object of prayer.

vi) Some time travel scenarios focus on a different dilemma. The traveler has seen the future. He's aghast. He returns to the present to warn his contemporaries. He desperately exhorts them to take necessary countermeasures, before it's too late, to avert disaster.

But he confronts a conundrum: how does he convince anyone that he knows what he's talking about? Although he has seen the future, they have not, and they have no reason to believe him. Indeed, they think he's a raving mad man.

Out of frustration, he takes matters into his own hands. He attempts to sabotage the source of the impending catastrophe.

As a result, the authorities view him as a crazed domestic terrorist, and lock him up in a secure facility. Indeed, he might have been involuntarily committed just for crazy talk, but his subversive activities seal the deal.

In theory, this, too, could precipitate the catastrophe. Due to his actions, they tighten security measures, thereby ensuring the disastrous outcome.

Confined to his padded cell, his prevision becomes a curse. He can't make anyone take him seriously. The harder he tries, the worse it gets.

Depending on the story, the character may know enough about the near future to make a few short-term predictions that indicate he really does have advance knowledge. That may persuade a key person.

However, that may confirm the suspicion of authorities that he's a domestic terrorist who's privy to terrorist plots. He only succeed in persuading them that he's dangerous!

This is much like the situation of OT prophets. Having previewed the future, they warn their contemporaries to repent before it's too late avoid judgment. But like the hapless time traveler, his contemporaries dismiss him as a crackpot. A cranky lunatic. They find out the hard way that he was right all along.

Pray at your own risk

1) Open theists contend that petitionary prayer is otiose if Calvinism is true. If our prayers are predestined, then our prayers have no effect.

I've discussed that objection on more than one occasion, so I won't repeat myself in detail. I'd simply point out that this objection is confused. Predestined prayers are efficacious in the counterfactual sense that, absent prayer, the outcome would be different.

2) But to shift to the main point of the post. What about the open theist alternative? Let's start by listing presuppositions of prayer:

i) We should pray for the best

ii) We don't necessarily know what is for the best

iii) It would be bad for God to grant our request unless it's for the best

iii) God knows best

iv) In case we pray for the wrong thing, we hope that God will grant the request we would have made had we known better

3) Now compare that to open theism. In open theism, God doesn't know what is for the best. Because God doesn't know the future, he cannot know ahead of time what is for the best.

He doesn't know what we are thinking before we think it. I may do something risky. I may do something that endangers somebody else. Since God can't foresee the consequences of our indeterminate choices, he can't act in advance with our best interests in view. He can only react. But that's often too late.

In open theism, God is the first responder. He's the fireman who shows up after your home is already engulfed in flames. He's the paramedic who arrives on scene as the gunshot victim is bleeding out on the street.

4) If open theism is true, then it's dangerous to pray to God. It's hazardous to ask God to intervene when God might unwittingly make the situation that much worse. There's only so much damage a human can do. But a shortsighted God can do far more damage, with the best of intentions.

Prayer in open theism is like the law of unintended consequences. You're safer not to ask God for help.

The problem of answered prayer

Is unanswered prayer a problem?

i) To begin with, it isn't even possible for God to answer all our prayers. And that's because two people (or even the same individual at different times) can pray contradictory prayers. Two grandsons may pray for their ailing grandmother. One grandson prays that God will heal her while another grandson prays that God will take her. The first grandson prays that God will heal her because he will miss his grandmother if she dies. But the other grandson prays that God will take her because he thinks she will be better off to put this life behind her and be with God.

These are mutually exclusive prayers. Answering one cancels out another.

ii) In addition, who lives and who dies generates different future timelines. Say two teenage boys (let's call them Jim and Tim) suffer life-threatening injuries in a traffic accident.

Both boys have a crush on Jessica. If Tim survives but Jim dies, Jessica will marry Tim. If Jim survives but Tim dies, Jessica will marry Jim. If both die, Jessica will marry John.

If both survive, Jessica will marry Tim while Jim will marry Jane. Each scenario will have a ripple effect down the line. Who lives and who dies will impact other lives down the line. The law of unintended consequences.

iii) Likewise, stopping to have a conversation with someone has a ripple effect. For that slows something down. If you didn't stop to have that conversation, you and she would get to wherever you two were going a little sooner. And slowing things down has a ripple effect. It affects the timing of other events. One thing can only happen if something else happens at the right time. Like a tightly coordinated subway schedule. If a train is running late, that triggers a chain-reaction.

So God may not answer someone's prayer because each answered or unanswered prayer generates an alternate future. And God prefers one future over another. (Indeed, God decrees one future rather than another.)

iv) But let's bracket the issue of impossible prayers. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that God answered every prayer. Suppose he was both able and willing to do that. Would infidels credit universally answered prayer as evidence for God's?

According to infidels, God doesn't answer any prayer unless he answers every prayer. They accuse Christians of sampling bias. We only count the hits, and discount the misses.

So suppose we always got what we asked for? Would infidels admit that was evidence for God's existence?

I think not. If prayer operated with law-like uniformity, if it mimicked a cause/effect relationship, like a chemical reaction, wouldn't infidels take that as evidence, not that God was answering our prayers, but that we had the mysterious natural ability to cause the outcome?

They'd say this only goes to show that humans have natural psychokinetic powers. It's now a question of discovering the hidden mechanism.

To say "Goddidit" is a cop-out or science-stopper. There must be some natural explanation.

Hyperbole and prayer

A couple of infidels over at Hallquist's blog have commented on my rejoinder. They fail to grasp the nature of hyperbole. I, of course, don't expect them to be reasonable. But for the benefit of others, I'll say a bit more.

1) Communication involves shared assumptions and expectations. A writer or speaker leaves many things unsaid. He counts on the cultural preunderstanding of his audience to make allowance for what he didn't say. As Robert Alter explains:

A coherent reading of any artwork, whatever the medium, requires some detailed awareness of the grid of conventions upon which, and against which, the individual work operates.

Let us suppose that some centuries hence only a dozen films survive from the whole corpus of Hollywood westerns. As students of twentieth-century cinema screening the films on an ingeniously reconstructed archaic projector, we notice a recurrent peculiarity: in eleven of the films the sheriff-hero has the same anomalous neurological trait of hyperreflexivity—no matter what the situation in which his adversaries confront him, he is always able to pull his gun out of its holster and fire before they, with their weapons poised, can pull the trigger...Now, eleven hyperreflexive sheriffs are utterly improbable by any realistic standards.

Much of our pleasure in watching westerns derives from our awareness that the hero, however sinister the dangers looming over him, leads a charmed life, that he will always in the end prove himself to be more of a man than the bad guys who stalk him, and the familiar token of his indomitable manhood is his invariable, often uncanny, quickness on the draw. For us, the recurrence of the hyperreflexive sheriff is not an enigma to be explained but, on the contrary, a necessary condition for telling a western story in the film medium, as it should be told.

The Art of Biblical Narrative (Basic Books, rev. ed, 2011), 55-57.

BTW, when I was a kid I used to watch The Rifleman, with Chuck Connors.

Now, Alter doesn't say this because he's trying to protect the reputation of Scripture. Alter's a liberal. But he's also a consummate literary critic.

2) When Jesus says God will give us whatever we ask for, that's hyperbolic. That's a sociolinguistic convention. Any rationale Jew would understand that. Consider the alternative:

i) "If God will give me whatever I ask for, then can I ask God to give me nothing that I ask for."

But, of course, that's a contradiction in terms. So that interpretation is self-refuting.

ii) "If God will give me whatever I ask for, then I can ask God to annihilate himself."

Two problems:

a) That's a blasphemous prayer. So God wouldn't answer a blasphemous prayer.

b) It would contradict the promise. For if God committed self-annihilation, then he wouldn't exist to answer any more requests, pace the promise that he will give us whatever we ask. So that's another self-refuting interpretation.

iii) "If God will give me whatever I ask for, then I can ask him to make a yoyo go up and down at the same time."

Since up and down are opposite motions, even omnipotence can't make a yoyo go up and down at the same time. That's a pseudotask.

iv) "If God will give me whatever I ask for, then I can ask God to renege on the Abrahamic covenant."

Although that's something which God could do, in the sense that God has the ability to do so—that's not something God would do, given his character.

v) "If God will give me whatever I ask for, then I can ask God to strike my parents dead by a lightning bolt."

Although that's something God could do, that's not something God would do. For I have a divine obligation to honor my parents. Therefore, God will not comply with a prayer that defies his own command.

They that wait upon the Lord

Byron Smith responded to me. I'll going to focus on his key contentions:

The answers for why prayer is "answered" or "unanswered" cover every conceivable possibility without actually requiring any unambiguous or visible activity on the part of the deity. Isn't that a trifle bit convenient?

i) Answered prayer and unanswered prayer are evidentially asymmetrical. Evidence that something never happened doesn't cancel out evidence that something else did happen. If it rains today, but not tomorrow, the nonoccurrence of rain tomorrow in no way counts against the occurrence of rain today, as if we have to balance one against the other.

Likewise, undetectable answers to prayer don't count against detectable answers to prayer.

ii) While answered prayer has evidential value, that's a fringe benefit of prayer. That's not what prayer is for.

iii) There's a strangely self-absorbed quality to your objections, as if the only relevant evidence for Christianity is limited to the confines of your personal experience.

But what about the experience of other Christians? Why does that count for nothing? Most of what you and I believe about most things in life is dependent on the testimony of others.

So if, say, you have no tangible experience of answered prayer, yet many other Christians bear witness to answered prayer, or other instances of special providence in their lives, how does your inexperience cancel out their experience?

Sure, you can say this is merely their claim to encounter God in one way or another. Still, how are you in any position to treat their testimony as untrustworthy in each and every case?

I am not familiar with the law of unintended consequences, so I do not know why it would be unreasonable to expect the possibility of God answering all prayers, or, given the belief He actually exists and is capable of revealing Himself and His wishes, of at least expecting some kind of response to the prayers offered up to Him, beyond mere coincidence or random, impersonal “acts of God.”

According to the law of unintended consequences, changing a variable in the present can have unforeseen and unintended results further down the line. A cause generates an effect. The generated effect then becomes a cause which generates further effects, and so on. A ripple effect.

The unintended outcome can be neutral, beneficial, maleficial, or mixed. That’s a common plot device in SF stories involving time travel, viz. a brilliant young man loses his fiancé in a traffic accident. So he saves her life by going back into the past to avert the accident. However, that sets in motion a chain reaction resulting in other tragedies.

What we pray for would affect the future in many subtle and intricate ways which we can’t begin to fathom. So these aren’t ad hoc considerations.

If the answer is simply that I gave up too soon, then my question is how long is long enough, since we are not guaranteed tomorrow?

Learning how to wait is essential to the walk of faith. Take Heb 11, where the heroes of faith had to wait a lifetime to see the object of their hope come into view. Indeed, the promise wasn’t even fulfilled in their lifetime. Or take the “How long, O Lord?” refrain we often encounter in Scripture.

The Christian race is a marathon, not a 100-year dash. Sprinters lose. He who endures to the end shall be saved.

Likewise, a sense of divine abandonment is a common motif in the Psalter. Ps 88 is especially stark. So, from a Christian standpoint, why would you expect to be exempt from that? Remember, you’re using your experience as a reason to reject Christianity. Yet, on Christian terms, your experience is quite consistent with the Bible. Therefore, your disappointed expectation was a false expectation.

So, once again, you're laboring under a false expectation. This is not inconsistent with Biblical Christianity. You may object on other grounds, but it's not as if your experience falsifies Christianity.

And there's no alternative to waiting. It's not as if there's another train that will take you to the same destination. There's no point at which it's too late to wait.

And if the answer is that I failed to detect the answer, then my question becomes why would not an omniscient God respond in a manner I could sense and with which I could then interact in further prayer, perhaps?

That depends on what you pray for. And how you expect the prayer to be fulfilled. Expectation shapes perception. People frequently fail to discern something because it wasn't what they expected.

Also, a temporal pattern emerges over time. It can only be seen in retrospect, sometimes at a considerable distance from the inception.

Look at the Joseph cycle. He receives a prophetic dream. But then he suffers some major setbacks which appear to falsify the dream. But eventually the prophetic dream is fulfilled. All in due time.

But not receiving any detectable response to this (and more earnest and desperate prayers over other spiritual matters) was certainly not faith-building, to say the least.

Waiting, yearning, and suffering are, themselves, a means of sanctification.

It just seemed like a dry spiritual season of the soul, so to speak.

Dry seasons are consistent with Biblical Christianity. Consider Jeremiah's experience.

Moreover, Christianity, unlike atheism, offers hope that the dry season will someday end, sooner or later—whereas atheism is a permanent drought. In atheism, there is no oasis over the next dune. It's desert all the way.

By "God" I take it that you are assuming Christianity and its God specifically. If I grant that assumption in my reply, then how could I escape agreement? This is the sort of statement only a fellow believer would likely understand the way you intend. If you are correct in your assertion of the truth of Christianity, then your statement is unquestionably true, but if I doubt the truth of Christianity, such a statement offers me no comfort at least until my doubts are resolved favorably towards Christianity.

It's a forced option. Atheism offers nothing. Christianity offers everything. No, that's not a reason, it itself, to believe the offer. It is, however, a reason to invest in something rather than nothing.

Rather it is more like a question of how could a loving, sovereign God who controls all things, possibly have a reason for allowing this to happen to me?

You operate with this abstract preconception of God that doesn't fit Scripture. The God of Scripture is, indeed, sovereign and loving—he loves his people.

At the same time, many calamities befall his people. This is one reason the Bible contains so many stories about individual believers and their hardships. These are examples for posterity.

You keep measuring your experience by a false expectation. The Bible did nothing to foster your unrealistic expectations. To the contrary, this is all predictable given Biblical biographies.

Again, you may object on other grounds, but you keep acting as if God betrayed you. Broke his promise to you. Went back on his word. But if you read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, it's clear that God's people aren't exempt from frustrations, regrets, disappointments. So none of this ought to be surprising or confounding. Really, it's par for the course.

Moreover, you and I are leading a pretty charmed existence compared to most folks, including most Christians and Jews, throughout history. God has greatly blessed you and me simply by when and where we were born. Instead of complaining, it's incumbent on us to share the blessings.

It reminds me of a resentful son who only judges his dad by what his dad did for him on his birthday, while taking for granted what his dad did for him the other 364 days of the years.

Incidentally, in my Calvinism, I held to New Covenant theology of a sort, and probably did not understand it fully, but I was taught that 'backsliding' was reserved to the Old Testament saints who did not have the indwelling Holy Spirit to guide them.

I disagree. Christians can backslide, as well as OT Jews.

I also believed that the Holy Spirit inspires genuine prayer so that prayer in effect becomes simply praying God's will back to Him for our own spiritual enrichment.

God "inspires" a desire to prayer. But he doesn't inspire the prayer itself, the way he inspired a prophet.

But she could reasonably expect some answers to prayer in her lifetime...

Is that a reasonable expectation? I don't deny that she did experience answers to prayer, but I'm just dealing with your stipulative expectation.

But to me this is another one of those convenient explanations for how prayer works (or doesn't), and seems contrary to the idea of receiving real and unambiguous answers to prayer in the New Testament.

Well, I don't know what you're referring to. If you're referring to some unqualified promises in Scripture, that's hermeneutically naïve. Scripture often speaks in generalities. But qualifications are given elsewhere. So that's understood, going into the transaction.

I can only say that I personally reached my personal limit, and that an omniscient, omnipotent God should not be defeated by such.

The fact that some prayers go unanswered, or the answers are deferred, or the answers are surprising, doesn't mean God was "defeated."

One of my favorite questions goes along the lines of this: why do we not pray for amputees? Why do certain medical miracles occur in Scripture (the restoring of an ear, the healing of the blind, healing a withered hand, straightening a spine or fixing some skeletal problem that caused a crippling condition) and not others (restoring amputations of limbs, healing heart conditions, reverting brain injuries, undoing severe burns, or even removing scar tissue)? And why is it that we have such a difficult time using supposedly "answered prayers" in modern times as apologetic evidence?

i) That's not a distinction between now and then. On the one hand, most sick people in Bible times, including most Jews, even pious Jews, were not miraculously healed. Some are healed, some are not.

Conversely, many modern Christians claim to be miraculously healed, or to witness a miraculous healing.

You can, of course, discount all that out of hand, if you wish. But my immediate point is that there's no prima facie change between modernity and antiquity in this regard.

ii) You're simply raising the problem of evil, as if Christianity or Calvinism has no theodicy.

But consider, once again, the law of unintended consequences. If God healed everyone, he'd also be healing all of the violent criminals in the process.

iii) In addition, you keep acting as if this amounts to evidence again Biblical theism. But the Bible doesn't promise the end of death and illness during the church age.

If so, I very much appreciate references to such material, but I highly doubt that such answers actually exist that could accomplish much more than theological reasoning based on religious belief.

i) So, by your own admission, any explanation would be an exercise in futility.

ii) I'd add, however, that if a religious explanation has more explanatory power than an irreligious explanation, then why should we dismiss the religious explanation simply because it's religious?

Then that evidence of election is insufficient, and there is no satisfactory way to ultimately know the status of one's election. At best one can only have an educated guess. Sincerity and fervency of belief is then no guarantee of God's election.

I'd turn that around. Is it better to play the reprobate? Indeed, isn't that a self-fulfilling prophecy? Better to be doubtfully elect than undoubtedly reprobate.

This is not simply about questioning my own capacity or likelihood of falling into deception, or even the worthy reminder that serious deception can erode confidence in my capacity to detect and respond to such. Rather this is about acquiring and interacting with information dangerous for the belief system I held. It is possible that I am making an error of judgment now, or acting upon false information and departing from the correct system of belief, and I have to confess that possibility. If I am wrong, I want to know.

You say you want to know, but then you also toss in these disclaimers which indicate that you will greet any explanation with utmost suspicion. That's a preemptive defense mechanism to insulate your disbelief.

I have gained a lasting appreciation for the difficulty of explaining the post-Resurrection appearances, the conflict between the implied family geographical histories of the birth narratives, apparent lack of textual preservation, generally ignored verses that seem to contradict general eschatology concerning the return of Christ, the unexplained use of an omniscient narrator's perspective of events which are not credited to divine revelation and could not have been personally observed by the author (who are often anonymous besides), the apparent creative hermeneutics of the inspired apostles (when dealing with Old Testament quotations, for example), and others.

i) We should run through these, one-by-one. If, however, you're going to dismiss every explanation ahead of time on the grounds that "Christianity must be defended at all costs by apologists," then I'd be wasting my time, right? Are you really receptive to explanations? Or will you automatically discount every explanation as special pleading?

ii) I'd also note, however, that the charge of rationalization is a double-bladed sword. Both Christians and apostates go to great lengths to justify their respective positions, to "save the phenomena."

Well, I connected Calvinism to inerrancy, and inerrancy to a global flood. I suppose that Calvinism and inerrancy do not necessarily depend on each other, however.

That's not my point. Calvinism isn't the only theological tradition that historically espouses a global flood, or, for that matter, the inerrancy of Scripture. Yet you frame your objection as though this is a distinctive problem for Calvinism.

And, in principle, a Calvinist can subscribe to a local flood interpretation. Right now I'm not discussing the merits of the issue one way or the other.

After reading an article on Talk.Origins about the impossibility of a global flood (not a local one), I realized that the Scriptural account of the global flood, if true, would require more miracles of an even more extravagant nature than what the text itself provides. I can't say that my problem is with the idea of a miracle itself in this case. Miracles are like magic. Throw enough of them into a situation and you can explain anything. The problem here is, there simply are not enough to explain what the passage seems to assert. Oddly enough, only as many miracles as would satisfy an ancient knowledge concerning nature and its elements is provided in the text. So, in modern times, we have some very fanciful explanations from organizations like Answers in Genesis for how this could have occurred.

i) That cuts both ways. Critics of the flood account typically interpolate many modern, extratextual assumptions into their evaluation of the flood account.

ii) We could discuss this in detail, but is that worthwhile? You've created a narrative in which you ask questions, but you disqualify the answers in advance. In your narrative, since a Christian apologist will say anything to save face, to salvage a lost cause, his answers are unconvincing, for his motives are impure.

As long as that's your attitude, and you've said things to that effect, what's the point of chasing rabbit trails?

Why then is it not morally monstrous for God to drown untold multitudes of infants, children, and sinless animals?

i) I don't see that dying young poses a special problem. Everybody dies sooner or later. Everybody sins sooner or later. What difference does it make if God waits for them to grow up?

If I knew a suicide bomber was going to blow up a passenger plane, should I wait until he pulls the string on his vest before I shoot him? Wouldn't that be a tad too late? Shouldn't I shoot him before he pulls the string?

ii) In addition, death can be merciful as well as just.

iii) The reference to “sinless animals” is sentimental bathos. Animals die in the wild everyday. So that’s another superficial criticism. This is projecting onto animals a viewpoint which they themselves never entertain.

Why would an omniscient, omnipotent God ever have allowed it to get so bad in the first place as to require such a drastic action, when even we lowly mortals can envision better ways of fixing whatever the “corrupt...and...filled with violence” problem was involved here, without divine inspiration.

Because God is saving a remnant throughout human history. That’s part of the grand plan. Not an afterthought. The remnant motif is one of those unfolding themes in Scripture.

And if God creates the souls of men and women He afterwards destroyed, why create them in the first place?

Consider the parable of the wheat and the tares. The lives of the elect and reprobate are intertwined. A reprobate dad may father an elect son. Eliminate the father and you eliminate the son. Back to the law of unintended consequences.

No, what I meant was that God had the power to create a billion galaxies each with a billion worlds and each of those with billions of souls, but somehow His creative power in creating intelligent creatures was self-restricted to one lonely world in the lesser part of one particular galaxy among an unknown number of galaxies in an unimaginably vast universe. Then He limited Himself further in predestining an elect remnant to salvation of all of those souls He purposed to create. Since then He has restricted Himself to that divine plan of election, forever excluding without hope those He has purposed to create but never redeem. I cannot argue with the freedom in God's sovereignty of creation and salvation, but I feel I can certainly argue with its morality in creating those He purposed for an eternal hell. It is just something I can no longer accept, and it makes God appear to be a monster beyond comparison even to Hitler. This is Calvinism's God. And

according to Calvinism, this is part of God's glory. And according to Christianity, this is part of God's purpose for man.

i) If you think that's a problem, then Molinism and Arminianism have comparable problems, viz. God freely creates people whom he intends to damn. He foresees the dire results, but forges full steam ahead.

Conversely, open theism is cosmic Russian roulette. So, if that's a problem, it's hardly confined to Calvinism.

ii) You haven't explained how God wrongs the damned. Hitler wronged the Jews. But you've given us an argument from analogy minus the argument.

iii) To say he left them without hope sounds bad from the perspective of a Christian, for, by definition, a Christian values the hope of glory.

But, by the same token, I don't see that reprobates consider that a terrible deprivation. They don't share the Christian outlook. Take the Rat Pack (e.g. Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin). They were utterly worldly, and they reveled in their worldliness.

Ironically, you have to be a Christian to appreciate the stakes. To appreciate how much the lost have to lose. The lost don't know what they're missing. They don't feel that way.

So your objection is actually a dilemma for your own position.

Perhaps my Scriptural interpretation is faulty, but such terms as the narrow gate, the narrow way, and et cetera are where I derive this interpretation.

Trying reading Hagner's commentary on Matthew (1:179-80), or Joel Green (528-29; 532) and C. F. Evans (555) on Luke.

Why does God create the elect for salvation? For His glory. Why does He create the non-elect for perdition? For His glory. Why does God purpose to do anything? For His glory. What is the highest purpose of God? To glorify Himself. It is all beautifully coherent in theology and logical precision.

He made the elect as an act of sheer generosity. To make creatures who can share his bliss. That's for their benefit, not his own.

Are you suggesting that because your religion suggests this is divine justice for the immoral by an all-powerful God, that somehow it is not torture?

I have no reason to think hell is the same for all the damned. You can be miserable without being tortured. Indeed, it's possible to have every outward pleasure, but still be miserable. Consider the lives of the idle rich.

Why then use an eternal hell? Why not simply annihilate these evil souls if they cannot or should not be redeemed?

Annihilation lets them off the hook. That's why some criminals commit suicide when they are cornered. To avoid punishment.

Why should finite sins by finite beings be punished with a sentence of infinite length, and therefore of infinite pain (according to the Scriptures in the words of Jesus who described torment and so forth). Even if these sins are against an infinite being, does that justify an infinite punishment?

i) Actually, that's not how Scripture describes it. That's a philosophical paraphrase.

ii) Guilt doesn't automatically diminish over time. Once you do something, you can't take it back. You can't live it down. That's permanent. Indelible. The past is unalterable.

That's why Scripture has a doctrine of penal substitution.

Would you derive moral satisfaction from watching an unbeliever or an immoral person being in "torments" in Hell (Luke 16:23 KJV) for an 24 hours a day for an entire month, let's say, in the afterlife? How about nonstop after a whole year? A

whole decade? A century perhaps? A millennium? A billion years? Ten billion? A million billion? And eternity would just start getting warmed up, if you'll excuse the pun.

i) I simply responded to you on your own terms. There's nothing wrong with taking moral satisfaction when the wicked are caught and punished. They spent their entire life evading justice. Now justice catches up with them.

ii) There's no exegetically sound reason to think the saints spend eternity gloating over the fate of all the damned. That's just a popular caricature.

I would if part of that sentence somehow included being burned in agony perpetually around the clock for even, let's say, a mere billion years or so, which is less than a drop in the bucket compared to eternity.

You're getting carried away with figures of speech. That's picture language.

Wouldn't you? Again, your best bet is to concentrate on the idea that some moral evil has occurred and requires justice, not try to defend the absurdity of an eternal hell and consequent infinite punishment for finite sins of limited number.

i) You confuse the duration of crime and punishment with just desserts. But that's deeply confused.

Suppose a suitcase bomber takes out a stadium full of fans in a split second. Should he only be punished for a split second?

ii) Also, distinguish between potential and actual infinitude. They damned suffer a day at a time. Their punitive experience is finite.

This is a good and worthwhile question, but not alone by itself. If someone belonged to the wrong religion, such as Islam or Mormonism or the like, then the

basis of morality upon that religion is no less faulty than me basing morality on something else equally untrue, except for the parts in which their false religion shares truth with the correct, true religion.

So we should eliminate the imposters.

But, if agnosticism or atheism is indeed true, then basing morality on any religion would be placing that morality on a faulty foundation. So the real question is a deeper one, and that is, what is the truth upon which to base morality?

No, the deeper question is whether secularism can lay a solid foundation for morality.

If the truth is not religion but agnosticism or atheism, then morality can be based upon the social structures we have developed due to the capacity of our minds thanks to evolution, and that is sufficient, at least for practical matters if not to answer ultimate philosophical questions.

i) That fails to yield objective moral norms. Rather, a mindless, amoral process (natural selection) has programmed the illusion of right and wrong because altruism confers a survival advantage on reproductive populations.

ii) Moreover, human beings are reduced to inherently expendable, replaceable organisms, like Mayflies, which exist for no reason. Life happens. Life ends.

If atheism is true, I do indeed gain from a correct understanding of the world and the origin and true nature of the human race, and I lose all of the false hopes and empty threats of religion.

You gain a correct understanding of your absurd existence. You correctly understand that it's irrelevant whether or not you correctly understand the world, for it makes no

ultimate difference to you. You replace "false hopes" with no hope, "empty threats" with nihilism.