

God is not whimsical, God does not make us sick, and God does not punish us.

A woman begged her rebbe for advice on how to save her sick husband. "First," said the sage, "find the best doctor possible. Second, resort to prayer. Third, if these two fail, do not yet despair. Instead, hope for a miracle." The wonder of medicine is itself the hand of God. Prayer, too, is a uniquely marvelous gift. Still, both of these can fail, through no fault of our own or of God's. But people can also be cured miraculously, for reasons that we may never know. And who is to say whether prayer really fails? It may prove successful even at times when experience does not justify the belief that God is literally listening.

Someone praying for her mother complained that it was as if a cloud was reflecting her prayers backwards, so that they could not continue on their way to wherever God was hiding. Yet so many people were praying for her mother, it was as if the prayers being bounced back from the heavens were surrounding her in their own aura of love and hope. There is nothing arcane about this. It is as natural as a child feeling the embrace of a parent, or two lovers holding hands in the darkness. When we ache for loving contact, we discover that we actually do have friends who care so deeply for us that they make us the center of their thoughts; not just to let us in but also to cry out to heaven on our behalf. There is enormous comfort in knowing that just when we cannot go on by ourselves, others invoke support for us.

Reasons to Turn to Prayer

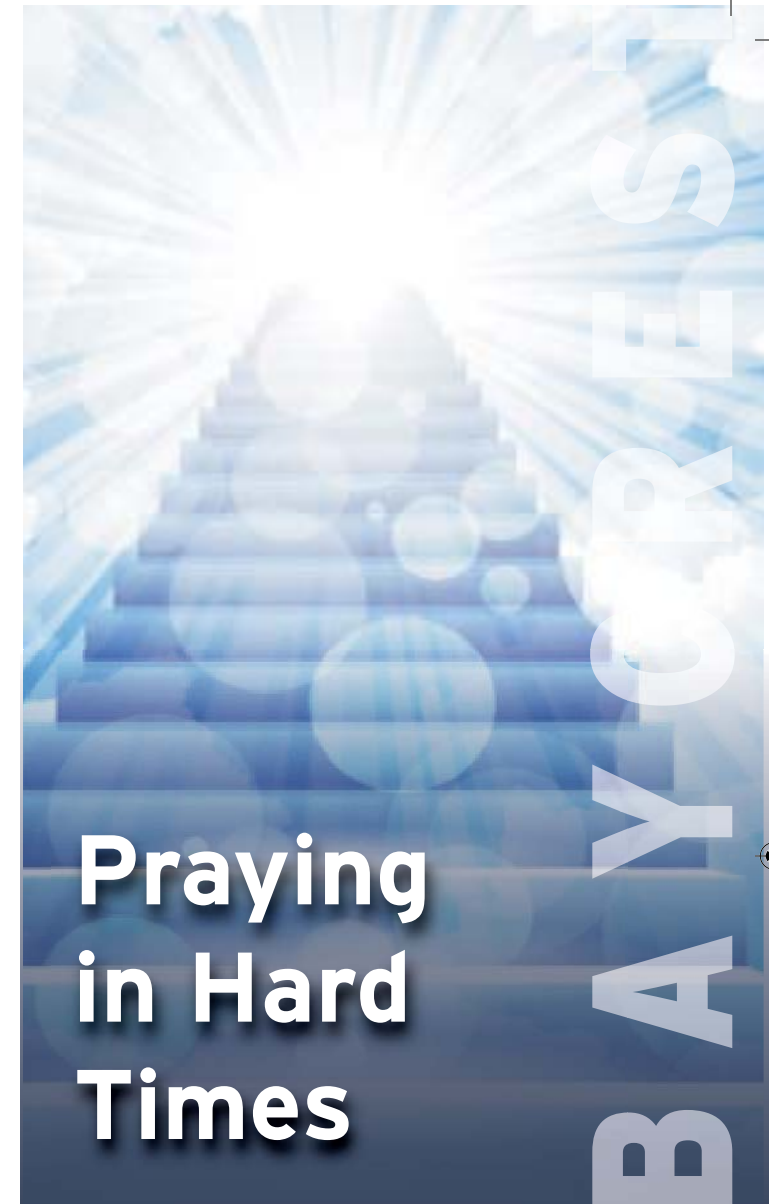
Many have discovered three basic reasons to turn to prayer in times of trouble.

- *If we think we are victimized, we are - but only by our own unreal and unhealthy imaginings.* Prayer exchanges those imaginings for the view that the universe is not antagonistic to us: despite our pain, there is help and love beyond ourselves.
- *We are never without our own inner resources.* Prayer awakens us to the interior regions of our soul, to our real humanity that nothing can destroy, and to the certainty that we matter, eternally, no matter how much we suffer in the present.
- *Finally, praying for ourselves and for others helps us see that we are not alone.* Rather, we are linked to a network of love from which divine miracles really flow.

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The Soul's Imaginings

"But what's really out there, Professor? Are there really quasars and black holes?" The professor paused, and then said, "I cannot say what is out there. All I know for sure is that the math works out right." We used to think scientists could give us all the answers. We know better now. Scientists can measure only what is measurable, and in the end, they cannot even put accurate imagery to what they are measuring.

When we are in crisis, we wonder what is out there. This is a profound question because it is not only about what the universe looks like, but about how each of us fits into it.

Physicist Niels Bohr described the atom as a nucleus around which electrons spin, but he didn't really think that atoms look like that. It was just a convenient fiction, an image that worked. When it comes to the ultimate concerns in life - the tiniest subatomic particles, the most massive solar systems, the human condition - all we have are images that we use because they work. We choose the imaginings we want to live by, but they are never more than imaginings.

Prayer Helps Explore Intuitions of Who We Are

Do we have souls? Can we really dig deep inside ourselves, and if so, what would we find there? Here is the inner landscape that only prayer can plumb. "The soul that you put within me is pure," says the morning liturgy. Prayer affirms our deepest suspicions of what really matters in ways that are undeniable. As prayer reaches in, not out, it transports us to our bravest imaginings of what we are—our yearning to be something more; to matter in the long run; to pass on to posterity something beyond the genes that were passed on to us. Prayer can convince us, for instance, that we are more than the sum of our bodily cells, that disease and torment cannot touch the essence of who we are, and that existence somehow goes on beyond the day of bodily death. On ordinary days, we may not think much about such things. But in moments of sickness and grief, questions like these inevitably flood the mind.

Meeting Challenges through Prayer Imaginings

Among the oldest Jewish prayers are the psalms, where poets imagined a world with pain but also with comfort, where—even in our worst moments—we are not alone (Psalm 23:4): "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Its author stares death in the face but looks the future fearlessly. Psalm 121 may get us through our daily trials: "I lift up my eyes to the mountains... My help comes from God, the maker of heaven and earth." Here is an entire world of biblical imaginings: valleys and mountains that are more than the physical topography of the earth's surface. They are the model of the human condition.

Prayer connects us to wisdom that mitigates pain when medicines fail, and generates calm when all seems lost. The world closes in around us after weeks or more in a hospital bed, on habitual daily visits to those we love but cannot help, in the dark despair of mental illness, or following death. In such straits, prayer invites us to knowing we are connected to all of existence and our deepest aspirations are not for naught



Embracing Prayer in an Aura of Hope

Most people misunderstand prayer as only a petition to an almighty God, who may change the course of nature, if need be, and grant our request. They may bargain with God, promising better behavior in return, if only God will cure an illness or work a miracle. The truth is we have no idea how God works, but if granting petitions is the only sign of a prayer's success, we are apt to be disappointed when so many prayers seem to disappear silently into the void. Ancient Jewish sources do frequently tell of requests being met, but Judaism holds a broader view of prayer and of God than these tales suggest. Whatever God is, God is not just a heavenly parent with power to grant or refuse the pleas of earthly children.