

“If you hope to find easy answers to questions on prayer or information on prayer techniques in this book, you will be disappointed. But easy answers often do not help in areas such as prayer in which most of us struggle, either in understanding or practising it. This is a significant book that helps readers to think more deeply about prayer and to grow in their life of prayer. Using his considerable skills and experience as an accomplished scientist, able theologian, wise pastor and honest disciple of Christ, David Wilkinson tackles the question of prayer from various angles with wit and wisdom, unmasking popular myths, bringing out tensions, and offering assurances based on Scripture. Writing poignantly from his own personal experience, David Wilkinson addresses the reality of why God answers our prayers but also why our prayers often go unanswered. He is an astute guide who leads us to explore scientific ideas such as quantum physics and chaotic systems to shed some light to our quest. At the end, he brings us to the God of the Bible who cannot be put into a pigeonhole but who loves us and relates with us in his sovereign will as his story unfolds from creation to new creation. We are challenged to respond by trusting him and expressing that trust through deepening and authentic prayer.”

Bishop Robert Solomon, Bishop Emeritus of The Methodist Church in Singapore

“This is an exciting book because it comes from a writer who has engaged deeply and skilfully with science, the Bible and human experience, and refuses to short-change any of them. The style is accessible, intelligent and humane, and the result is a book which will be profoundly helpful and encouraging to anyone trying to pray with both heart and mind.”

Bishop John Pritchard, former Bishop of Oxford

“Imagine sitting down with a physicist and a theologian over coffee with the topic of prayer decided on in advance as the subject of the conversation. That’s exactly what you get in David Wilkinson’s fascinating new book on prayer, as he is both that scientist and that theologian and is having this conversation with himself and allowing us to listen in. I know of no other book on prayer even remotely like this one. It is at the same time fascinating, challenging, inspiring, humbling, humorous, profound, you can derive from it a lot of different things. Like what has been said about the Gospel of John you can plug into this conversation at whatever level that suits you. On the one hand the discussion is shallow enough for a baby to wade in. On the other it is deep enough for an elephant to drown! I highly recommend this book on prayer – it may change not merely your prayer life, but the whole way you look at life!”

**Ben Witherington, III, Amos Professor of New Testament for
Doctoral Studies, Asbury Theological Seminary**

“In this book, David wrestles with the themes of prayer, science and the nature of God with his characteristic humility, vulnerability, wisdom, and passion to remain dissatisfied with easy answers. This is the book I wish I’d read years ago, and to which I will return time and again into the future. If you have ever struggled with whether (and why) God answers some prayers and not others, this book is for you.”

**Rev’d Dr Joanne Cox-Darling, Regional coordinator,
London: Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network, The
Methodist Church**

“If you are terrified by books on prayer this isn’t one of those books! This combines humour, personal experience and informed intelligence. Rather than amplify human effort in praying, David walks us through

all the obstacles to prayer into a new awareness of the God who responds to people trying to find him. An excellent read."

– Joel Edwards, International Director, Micah Challenge and former General Director, Evangelical Alliance UK

"In our complex and often confusing world, the tendency is to look for easy answers, avoiding the tough and perplexing questions that confront us. We simplify, formularize, regularize and codify; an exercise in reductionism which at times can be a mask for arrogance, self-deception or downright laziness. No area is this more evident than in the subject of prayer.

"In this highly readable and positively provocative book, When I Pray, What Does God Do?, renowned scholar, astrophysicist, theologian and pastor, Professor David Wilkinson, a man who is eminently qualified to do so, addresses this age-old and still thorny question; namely, the problem of how God responds to prayer. Professor Wilkinson tackles the subject with the rigour of a scientist, the spirit of a theologian, the heart of a shepherd and the humility of a disciple who is on a personal pilgrimage with Jesus. Blending his insights from the world of science and religion, and experience forged in the crucible of his personal walk, he highlights the dangers of following received wisdom, clinging on to discredited models, formulas, as well as false and unhelpful dichotomies. He calls us to unlearn bad habits in prayer, and embrace fresh perspectives; with the assurance that God is still in the business of answering prayers.

"He reaffirms the biblical truth that God is God. He does as He chooses. He is the God of continuity as well as discontinuity. Therefore, science, which is descriptive rather than prescriptive, does not rule out miracles that God performs in response to prayer. It cannot define, restrict, prescribe or determine for God.

“We are invited to walk the walk of faith through the corridor of uncertainty, the pathway of vulnerability and the foggy lane of confusion, grappling with the challenges of answered prayer. The reader is called upon to constantly seek to have a bigger picture of the true and living God who is great and awesome, and ditch the personalised designer gods that we have created for ourselves. We are to think big about God, pray big, and expect big. The one who prays should not seek to box God in as to how He should answer. Because He is God it is His prerogative to respond in a multiplicity of ways to our prayers.

“Last but by no means least; we are challenged to get into partnership with God. He should be the primary focus of our prayer. As He draws us into closer intimacy, His overriding purpose is to change us, make us look like Jesus. Radical transformation is God’s chief aim for us when we pray. His desire is to change the world around us, as well as the one who prays, recalibrating our perspective and realigning our will in line with His; leading us to echo these words, ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is heaven’.

“This book has encouraged, challenged and informed my thinking and practice on various aspects of my personal prayer life. I wholeheartedly commend it to the humble seeker after truth who desires to grow in their prayer walk with God.”

Rev Emmanuel Mbakwe, National Leader, The Apostolic Church UK

Also by David Wilkinson:

God, Time and Stephen Hawking (Monarch, 2001)

Creation: The Bible Speaks Today Bible Themes Series (IVP, 2002)

Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe (T&T Clark, 2010)

Science, Religion and the Search for Extraterrestrial Life (OUP, 2013)

WHEN I PRAY
WHAT DOES
GOD DO?

David Wilkinson

MONARCH
BOOKS

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**For students and staff, past and present, of
Cranmer Hall and the Wesley Study Centre, whose
commitment to and faithfulness in prayer has
inspired me**

Contents

Foreword	11
Acknowledgments	13
<i>Chapter</i>	
1 My Problems with Prayer	15
2 Everyday Myths of Prayer	38
3 What Does God Actually Do in the Bible?	80
4 Out of Date Science and the Problems with Miracles	111
5 New Science and New Possibilities	146
6 Lord, Teach Us to Pray	183
7 Praying in the Light of What God Does	207

Foreword

Thank heavens for David Wilkinson! It isn't often that theologians who are scientists by training have the courage to ask basic and challenging questions about what we think happens when we pray.

David Wilkinson has no such qualms. In this deeply illuminating and highly accessible book, he tackles directly the fundamental question, "When I pray, what does God do?"

Bringing together his experience as a scientist, theologian, minister and college Principal, he explains that much of our current understanding of God's response to our prayers is diminished. This is because it is based on over-simplistic interpretations of the Bible, reliance on popular myths, and use of outdated scientific models. And most of us, without realising it, have behaved "atheistically" when it comes to the question "When I pray, what does God do?"

David Wilkinson challenges us instead both to be more critical but also more humble in our approach to prayer. He does this first by showing what God actually does do in the Bible. Then in two masterly chapters he explores how current

developments in science, especially quantum physics, provide us with new ways of understanding how God can and does respond to our prayers today.

At the same time, David Wilkinson deepens our sense of humility and awe that God is able to act in ways far greater than we can imagine.

This book is a rich resource which will be of great help to both Christians and also to those who feel called to pray but have asked the question, "When I pray, what does God do?". David Wilkinson has helped to provide the answer and I highly commend his book to you.

And Jesus said, "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one."

Matthew 6: 9–13

Dr John Sentamu, Archbishop of York

Acknowledgments

There are so many people who have influenced my prayer life and thinking about prayer. In addition, there are many folk who pray for me, my work, and our family regularly and sometimes without our knowing. To write anything on prayer, I have a sense of gratitude to all these people who know more about prayer than I will ever know.

However, there are a few people who have shaped in particular the thinking of this book. Bishop John Pritchard, Bishop Robert Solomon, Dr Ben Witherington, and Revd Professor John Polkinghorne have all written excellent pieces on prayer from which I have learnt and no doubt stolen much! I also owe a great debt to my distinguished predecessor as Principal of St John's College, Dr Ruth Etchells, whose books on prayer and her own life of prayer have been such an inspiration not only to me but to generations of Christians.

Some of the material was developed from an earlier book, *Thinking Clearly About God and Science*, written with my mentor and friend, Rob Frost. Sir Arnold Wolfendale FRS, in a long friendship and then series of discussions and

debates, has always asked the difficult questions which so many other people are afraid to ask. Likewise my daughter Hannah's zeal for truth and justice is both inspiring and challenging. Students in the Department of Theology and Religion, Cranmer Hall, and the Wesley Study Centre in Durham encountered some of this material in lectures and refined it by their questions. Other young people, especially at seminars at Soul Survivor and Momentum, likewise pushed some of my own questions further.

I was especially struck by hearing of the approach of my son Adam Wilkinson and his colleague Aaron Routledge on the subject of prayer at The Junction Church Aberdeen, not least on the way they reflected on suffering and unanswered prayer.

I am thankful that the manuscript has been shaped for the better by Tony Collins, Julie Frederick and Jenny Ward at Monarch.

And finally my wife, Alison, whose spirituality and ministry in the midst of illness has given me one of the most holy examples of Christian life and prayer.

CHAPTER 1

My Problems with Prayer

The great twentieth-century preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones once commented, “Everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer.” I remember when I first heard this quote and wondering whether I really agreed with it. Is prayer harder than delivering Christian Aid envelopes to a house which has a notice above the letterbox saying “no religious people welcome”, accompanied by the sound of a dog whose bark can only come from a hound from hell? Or is prayer harder than a church council meeting where half an hour has been wasted on an argument on the colour of the new mugs for the church hall? Or is prayer harder than trying to understand – and then preach – a sermon on the Trinitarian nature of God?

Surely prayer is one of the easiest parts of the Christian life. It can be done alone, at my own time, in my own space, and after all it is simply a quiet chat with God. Sharing my faith with other people makes me vulnerable to being mocked as a member of the “God-squad”. Living as part of a Christian

community has its struggles as well as its joys, meaning that I need to love the person whose musical tastes are very different to mine and whose politics will never be even close to mine. Surely, compared to these things, prayer is the simple part of the Christian life.

I used to believe that prayer was easy, although it did strike me that if it was that easy, then why did I not pray more? The problem with prayer, I concluded, was that I simply had not found the right form that suited me. And the history of my prayer life has therefore resembled a Google-like super-spiritual search of different ways of praying. I have tried praying kneeling, standing, sitting, walking, lying down, and crouched in that nonconformist way that everyone in a nonconformist church conforms to. I have prayed with my arms in the air, but with some uncertainty – due to what seems to me to be a change between charismatic generations – about whether I should have my palms up or down! Otherwise, I have prayed with my hands clasped together, with prayer beads and crosses in my hands, and with my arms relaxed and open because someone told me that this welcomes the Holy Spirit. I have prayed for other people with my hands hovering over them just as the charismatic leader John Wimber used to do – until I discovered that there was nothing mystical in this, but simply that Wimber used to pray for folk in a building that was stiflingly hot and had no air conditioning. The hovering laying on of hands was simply to stop it becoming a very sweaty form of ministry. I have prayed with a loud voice and prayed

in silence. I have used prayers and liturgies from Christian tradition, prayed in tongues, and used hymns and songs as a form of prayer. I have prayed in prayer meetings, cathedrals, in a small hole in the side of a mountain, on high streets and in convents, and prayed aloud at the same time as 10,000 other people. I have used a prayer journal, prayer cards, prayer letters, and web resources. I have tried praying in the morning, lunchtime, dinnertime, and last thing at night.

All of these forms have been useful – apart from, that is, praying early in the morning! I am the type of person who simply doesn't understand why the Lord created mornings. I am sure that in the Garden of Eden the day started with mid-morning coffee and early mornings are surely the result of the fall!

Nevertheless, for all the diverse exploration of the forms of prayer, I am left with the reality that Lloyd-Jones was right and I actually do find prayer the hardest thing in the Christian life. Why should that be? Perhaps it is to do not with *how I pray* but why I pray and, further, the way that I think about *how God answers prayers*.

Lightning bolts and bishops

Over thirty years ago, in 1984, I was a student at Durham University. I had become a Christian three years previously and, having just completed a physics degree, was about to embark on research in theoretical astrophysics. It was also the time of press interest in the then Bishop of Durham David Jenkins.

Controversy had surrounded his questioning of the traditional interpretations of the virgin birth and the resurrection, with the often misquoted remark linking Bishop David to saying that the resurrection is “a conjuring trick with bones”. In fact, the actual quote is a little more difficult to track down, and it is clear that he was trying to say that the resurrection was not *just* a conjuring trick with bones.

The media were further interested in that three days after the bishop’s consecration at York Minster, the building was hit by lightning. The subsequent fire in the thirteenth-century south transept left its roof destroyed. Papers picked this up and likened it to the bolt of fire in the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal. It raised the question of whether this was an act of God’s judgment on a bishop with unorthodox views, and indeed whether in a world of modern science we could believe in a God who could work in this kind of way. Bishop David followed all of this up by speaking of how he could not believe in a “laser beam” God who responded to particular prayers by specific acts in the world, picking out one situation to change but leaving so many others.

While having very different views on the virgin birth and resurrection of Jesus, I nevertheless had a great deal of sympathy for the bishop. First of all, I do not think that the fire in York was a sign of God’s judgment. I can think of more telling ways if judgment did have to be exercised! Second, Bishop David was attempting to communicate Christian faith in a world often dominated by science. He was an evangelist

and a pastor as well as a theologian, and he felt by talking about how traditional belief could be reinterpreted, it would be more accessible to the vast majority of the British public who had rejected faith. He was courageous in publicly stating some of the issues that we all encounter if we want to believe in the existence and power of a God who invites us to pray and then is prepared to answer that prayer.

However, as a young research student it seemed to me that there was a problem in Bishop David's view of science and his view of the Bible. It seemed to me that they were both outdated and somewhat simplistic, and yet I understood completely where they came from.

The predictable world of science

While Bishop David was attempting to find a way to hold together science and Christian belief as a bishop in the public sphere, I was doing exactly the same but privately and as a young research student in astrophysics. This had its own struggles and joys. Science is a messy activity, a long way from school physics where if you do not know the shape of the graph that comes from your experimental data, you simply borrow the book of a person in the year above you who did the same experiment twelve months ago. The struggle for me was trying to make sense of a seemingly mysterious universe, with a limited amount of experimental data, while collaborating with students and staff and also competing against other groups that wanted to get there first. Yet, the joy of science was that it

disclosed a universe with beautiful, elegant, and universal laws which applied equally to me dropping a glass and to matter falling into a black hole.

The question was whether in such a universe God had any room at all to answer prayer? It was a question that people often posed to me when they knew I was a scientist. Did I believe that God could intervene in a universe that was governed by the laws of science?

This is not a new question. It goes right back to the scientific revolution, which was in some significant way based on Christian theology and proved both fruitful and challenging for Christian belief. A faithful God, who created the universe freely and yet with a constant commitment to sustaining it, provided the seedbed for the growth of what we know as science. Of course, science stemmed from the Greeks, with notable contributions from Chinese and Muslim thinkers, but the belief in universal and reliable laws which could be discovered by observation was provided by the Christian doctrine of creation. Christians believed that if God was free to create as he wanted, not constrained by human logic, then the only way to see what he had done was to look at the universe. And if God was faithful, our observations would have regularities or patterns to them – that is, the laws of physics. This scientific revolution led to such triumphs as Newton's law of gravitation, which, when coupled with Kepler's elliptical orbits, explains beautifully the movement of the planets around the sun. Such regular

and predictable laws of nature could be visualized not only through simple mathematical equations but also in models which represented these motions as a clockwork mechanism. Thus, from the eighteenth century onwards, you could obtain an orrery, a clockwork mechanical model of the solar system that shows the relative positions and motions of the planets (and moons), in their orbits around the sun.

Thus, with a knowledge of the laws of physics and the present position of things, you could tell what had gone on in the past and what was to happen in the future. Edmond Halley's prediction of the arrival of the comet which now bears his name was evidence of how powerful this method was.

The beauty, regularity, and simplicity of the scientific laws were seen as reflections of the order and faithfulness of the creator God. Christian thinkers built on this to try to use the laws to demonstrate the existence of a divine creator. But this in itself led to problems. If everything could be explained by scientific laws, where was there space for God to do anything unusual? If God was a perfect creator then surely he would have built a universe where there is no need for constant intervention in response to prayer. If, after all, I buy an expensive Rolex (in my dreams!) I do not want to be going back to the shop every day asking for it to be fixed. Prayer in this kind of picture either becomes God as the repairman constantly coming to look after faulty equipment, or God as a patronizing adult listening to a child's endless prattling, knowing that everything has been decided already.

The predictable world of charismatic renewal

Yet while I saw the difficulty that science was presenting, I was at the same time growing as a Christian within a culture that accepted that God really did answer prayer. I had become a Christian just before going to university. While brought up in the church, faith only became real to me in the early 1980s.

I had missed the early days of charismatic renewal in the 1960s and 1970s which had sometimes split churches on questions of healing, prophecy, or speaking in tongues. In fact, I remember my interview as a prospective student at Durham, where the college senior tutor, seeing that I was a Christian, warned me against joining the Christian Union. He recounted the story of a group from the Christian Union just a few years before who had felt God had told them not to revise for final exams but to go into the exams and simply pray for the answers. The result was in no way miraculous but very predictable. While their answers were somewhat entertaining in a toe-curling embarrassing way, God apparently refused to be the ultimate exam cheat.

Nevertheless, I did join the Christian Union, feeling that I was far more mature than this previous generation of students. Indeed, most Christians of this evangelical generation found the thought that God might work in miraculous ways quite natural and normal. I did meet a few fellow students who believed that the way God worked in unusual ways in the Old Testament and New Testament was a special dispensation – that is, an unusual time for the beginnings of preaching the

gospel – but was not normative for today. Yet I could never see that in the teaching of the Bible, or my experience of student groups, or the churches I attended both during and out of university term.

If a fellow Christian was ill I was very happy to pray for healing and saw some modest apparent answers to such prayer. For example, one friend with diagnosed conjunctivitis seemed to be healed during a five-minute prayer time. I remained sceptical of what I saw as excessive claims of healing but nevertheless felt that the God I read about in the pages of the Bible was ready to respond to prayer in miraculous ways today. At times, in student groups we would be encouraged to write down what requests had been made of God, and to tick them off when such prayers were answered. It is a practice that I do informally in my own prayer life right up to the present, although a friend who did this for his church prayer meeting found an increasing reluctance of people to pray aloud in the meeting!

This was also the belief far from the Christian “hothouse” of my student days. The Methodist church that I grew up in had a weekly prayer meeting, and during the vacations I was one of the six or seven people who were the regular attenders. This prayer meeting had been going a long time and was somewhat predictable in the order of who prayed and how we prayed. Most prayers were prefaced with “Lord, if it be your will”. In fact, a story was often told of a prayer meeting during the Second World War at this church where someone had prayed,

“Lord, we pray for complete victory for Britain over Hitler and his armies, but Lord, if it is not your will, then please let it be a draw!” The range of subjects for prayer included those in the church who were ill, but it also regularly included prayer for peace in Northern Ireland and the ending of apartheid in South Africa. Here was always the expectation that God would answer prayer in the big issues of life and death, in our community and on the world stage.

This was the normal Christian life as far as I was concerned. I noted some of the scientific problems with this expectation that God would answer such prayers, but did not really engage with questions of how God did it. I suppose at times it was enough to hold to a view that I would later learn was called “NOMA” by Stephen Jay Gould (1941–2002) – that is, the non-overlapping magisteriums of science and religion. Gould, attempting to head off the battles of science and religion in US education, argued that science had its own territory and so did religion, but the two would never meet. The scientist was a scientist Monday to Saturday in the laboratory and a person of faith on a Sunday.

This was an easy option to fall into, but deep down I was not satisfied with it. It seemed to me that if I proclaimed Jesus as Lord he needed to be Lord not only of my heart but also my mind, of my Bible reading and my work as a scientist, of Sunday and of Monday morning. To live in two worlds, as a charismatic Christian believing God would answer prayer and a practising scientist believing that God was the source

of the wonderful scientific laws, was not sufficient for Jesus as Lord. I needed to at least keep asking the question of how God answered prayer, even if I might never get a full and satisfying answer.

Yet there was another problem for prayer that was and is more serious than the scientific one.

The seemingly unpredictable and trivial will of God

I have heard many Christian friends speak of how God has answered prayers on issues that seem to me to be a trivial waste of God's time: "I prayed for a parking space in the supermarket and immediately a car pulled out and I could pull straight in." I had a friend once who crashed his car while he was praying. Fortunately no one was injured, but he still has to endure the jokes about whether he had his hands in the air or whether he had his eyes closed!

Far more serious is the question of why God chooses to answer such trivial questions rather than answer some of the more important questions. Why produce a parking space for a Christian who could probably benefit from a little walk by parking further away rather than heal the person who is going through excruciating pain?

I have prayed for the healing of others throughout my Christian life, sometimes in my own prayer life, sometimes sitting beside them, and sometimes from the front of churches. I have seen some remarkable things. Elsie was a member of a church where I was a pastor, and a colleague

and I were called to her hospital bedside after a stroke and told she would not make it through the night. We prayed for God to be with her and to heal her, although fully expecting that her time in this life was now at an end. After sitting with her for some considerable time during the night we eventually left to get some rest, again expecting that we would receive a phone call the next day from the hospital and the undertakers. Next morning, when there had been no phone call, we returned to the hospital to find her sitting up in bed having lunch. Within a few weeks she was back up on her feet serving other elderly people at our weekly luncheon club. To say that the doctors and nurses were surprised was an understatement, but not as surprised as we were! Now of course it is difficult to say that this was solely an answer to prayer. The mind/brain connection as we will see in a later chapter is mysterious, and the ability for the brain to find new pathways around damaged areas is remarkable. It may have been that well-meaning hospital staff had erred on the side of caution in warning of her imminent death. Maybe she would have recovered anyway without our prayer.

If such instances of healing are puzzling, far more difficult are the occasions when I have prayed earnestly and felt full of faith, but the person has not been healed. This is especially the case when the person concerned seems so deserving or is very close to you.

When unanswered prayer is personal

My wife Alison is a brilliant Methodist minister. For twelve years she served a church just outside Durham and transformed it from an elderly and rather traditional church into a church of all ages with lots of new initiatives – prayer meetings, Christmas and Easter journeys for local schools, Messy Church, Café Church, a group for 20s–30s, a group for teenagers, the sponsoring of a large number of children in developing countries, and new ways of engaging with the Bible. As a church we were blessed by her ministry of preaching and leading. Yet, over the past eight years she has been literally struck down with two major illnesses.

The first occurred immediately after preaching at a youth celebration. She returned to the house on the Sunday evening feeling unwell and by the Monday morning had become very ill. It was a form of ME or chronic fatigue which was so severe that initially she lost the ability to talk and to move. In fact, the doctors were so worried that she was sent for a brain scan in case it was a tumour. Thankfully, it was not a tumour, but the condition had its own challenges. While it seems to be caused by the body's immune system malfunctioning, there is widespread disagreement in the medical community about its specific cause and its treatment. It is a difficult condition to understand, both for the person going through it and for those around. Well-intentioned people give advice from “cut this out of your diet” to “pull yourself together” to “God will heal you”. For a period Alison could not preach or indeed

work as a church leader. The church, growing so quickly, had to manage without its minister. Alison prayed, our children and I prayed, and the church prayed. Many of us could not understand why these things happen and why God did not provide miraculous healing.

Over months she gradually recovered and was nearing full fitness when she began to experience pain in her joints. Referred to a physiotherapist, this treatment only made the pain worse. Eventually she was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, an incurable and progressive disease which is the immune system attacking the joints. Although better understood, treatment is not straightforward, featuring a trial and error process with families of drugs, some of which take three to six months to make a difference or to assess their effectiveness. It is a disease which causes intense pain and intense weariness, and for some eighteen months again Alison was unable to work in the church. Again we all prayed, but there was no miraculous cure. Only recently, a combination of drugs and Alison's ability to work around the disease has allowed her to get back to work part-time – but she is limited in so many ways and still in constant pain.

We both remember, in the light of this, a prayer said by a dear friend at our wedding. We had asked a number of people to come and pray with us during the service, and our friend had prayed that our life together would be blessed with good health. Yet like many other families, we have had to cope with a fair share of illness over the years. Did God simply ignore this prayer?

The additional factor is that Alison has been involved in such key work for God's kingdom, and because of her role she has had so many people praying for her health – this intensifies the difficult questions concerning prayer.

The obvious question in all of this is, what *is* God doing in answer to the many prayers being said? The question is so much more serious when you see a person you love suffering. This is a far more difficult problem than that of the scientific laws in trying to understand how God works in answer to prayer, for it questions not just God's ability but also God's will to change the world for good.

The problem with the God of the Bible

If science and suffering both pose really difficult questions to how God answers prayer, the Bible does not give clear and simple answers. This is because it is not written in this way. The Bible does not have a subject index, it does not address philosophical questions in a systematic way, and it does not have any intention of doing so.

Of course, there are now numerous websites that try to do this for you. I came across one the other day which offered the Bible's view on subjects as diverse as hunting, the wearing of T-shirts with slogans, pyramid schemes (financial rather than burial!), and war in the Middle East. I was intrigued, wondering which verse in the Bible gave me guidance on whether I should wear a T-shirt with the slogan "Keep calm and carry on". Of course, to be fair to the website, clicking on

one of these subjects took you to quite an extended essay where biblical principles were applied to each of these questions rather than a single verse which gave a succinct answer. This lack of easy short answers in the Bible is frustrating not only to the person who wants to write a book on prayer, but also to the person who is simply wanting a quick answer to how God answers prayer.

Yet the Bible understood in the Christian tradition is much more interesting, exciting, and important than just a long “Frequently asked questions” appendix to the concept of God. It is the record of God’s self-revelation through his acts in history, covering large time periods, various cultural contexts, and relationship with individuals, groups, and nations. It is a divinely inspired and God-breathed collection of sixty-six different books featuring a wide spectrum of different types of literature. Some of this literature, such as the book of Romans, does provide a carefully constructed logical argument on a particular aspect of how God deals with human beings. But there are other genres in the Bible, the purpose of which is not logical argument but stories to draw us deeper into relationship with the God of the Bible. So the parables of Jesus give us insight into the kingdom of God which we need to live with and struggle with on the journey of being a disciple. Therefore, the Bible’s teaching on prayer comes in lots of different places and sometimes in exhortation, sometimes in story, and sometimes in example.

The biblical writers are united in their encouragement to see the importance of prayer and its centrality in the Christian life. Thus Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians, “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (5:16–18).

However, when we get to asking the question about how God responds to prayer we encounter a number of pictures which do not fit into a simple pattern. Prayer is likened to a child–parent relationship, but it is also likened to a persistent widow and a rather dodgy judge (Luke 11:2; 18:1–8). The prayer of a righteous person is commended as having great effect, and yet God seems to answer the prayers of people with myopic understanding, frail faith, and questionable lifestyle. At times God seems to respond directly to a person’s prayer in seemingly changing his mind and direction of action, and at other times seems to weave a person’s prayer into a narrative which already knows its end. Much to our modern frustration, questions of unjust suffering are rarely explored and never in the philosophical terms we would prefer. Thus the book of Job through story and dialogue shows the inadequacy of many simplistic answers to suffering and leads us into a new encounter with the living God of creation. In a similar way, God’s special and unusual actions are presented alongside his constant sustaining of the universe without any exploration of the relationship between these two things.

Over the years I have come to accept and embrace this nature of the biblical account. I am an evangelical Christian

and that means that for me the Bible is supreme in all matters of faith and conduct. But the problem of evangelical Christianity has often been to exalt certain doctrinal formulas above the authority of the Scriptures themselves. Rather for me, it is a matter of constantly going back to the richness of the Bible and living under it. One of my great heroes, the Baptist preacher Dr Alan Redpath, once said it is great when you go to the Bible, tap it with a silver hammer, and it falls into three neat pieces – the basis of a sermon! But, he said, it is far more powerful when the Bible takes your pride, expectations, and inadequate understandings and breaks you into pieces!

While the multi-genre and multi-purpose nature of the Bible poses problems to understanding how God responds to prayer, perhaps the real “problem” of the biblical God is the one thing that is stated clearly and unambiguously across all the different genres of Scripture – that is, God is the one who answers prayers. As we shall see, some of the options to avoid the problems of science and suffering are to remove the possibility that God actually does something in response to prayer. Prayer can be seen as thanksgiving, confession, and meditation on God’s goodness. It certainly is that, but the biblical writers see it as more than that. Intercession and petition – that is, asking God to do something in response to prayer – is unashamedly presented and encouraged in the Bible. This may seem an obvious point but it can easily be lost in theological discussion. It is worth just giving a flavour of this from the biblical writers:

Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant.

Genesis 25:21

They buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in the tomb of Saul's father Kish, at Zela in Benjamin, and did everything the king commanded. After that, God answered prayer on behalf of the land.

2 Samuel 21:14

David built an altar to the Lord there and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Then the Lord answered his prayer on behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped.

2 Samuel 24:25

They were helped in fighting them, and God delivered the Hagrites and all their allies into their hands, because they cried out to him during the battle. He answered their prayers, because they trusted in him.

1 Chronicles 5:20

So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.

Ezra 8:23

You who answer prayer, to you all people will come.

Psalms 65:2

“Go and tell Hezekiah, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life.’”

Isaiah 38:5

But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John."

Luke 1:13

His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him.

Acts 28:8

One cannot read these passages without being struck with the knowledge that this is a God who, in the experience of the biblical writers, acts in the physical world and answers prayer. For Christians, our supreme revelation of the nature of God is in Jesus. Jesus matches his teaching on prayer with his example of prayer, praying at times alone and at times with his disciples. And his teaching is clear that part of the relationship that he makes possible with the Father comes with the invitation to ask:

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

"Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

Matthew 7:7-11

And yet I still pray...

Even in our scientific and increasingly secular Western world, prayer continues to be practised widely. Surveys show that 75 to 97 per cent of Americans claimed that they pray once a week and 57 per cent one or more times a day.¹ In fact, the proportion of people who pray has remained the same in the US over a time period of forty years, although the frequency has declined.² A 1997 *Newsweek* survey reported that 87 per cent of Americans agreed that “God answers prayers” and 82 per cent said that when praying they “ask for health or success for a child or family member”. In another survey conducted by Gallup, three in ten Americans reported a “remarkable healing”, of whom 30 per cent linked this healing to their own or other people’s prayers.

I understand this. My own personal experience of science and, to a lesser extent, suffering makes me question a whole number of aspects of prayer and how God answers. However, my experience of God in the Bible and in my daily life continues to encourage me to pray expectantly that God will act. But this, I hope, is not because I simply live in two different worlds, shutting out the difficult questions by immersing myself in loud choruses and sheltering in a bubble of Christian subculture.

1 General Social Survey 2008; Bader, C., Dougherty, K., Froese, P., Johnson, B., Mencken, F. C., Park, J., et al. (2006). *American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insights to the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the US: Selected Findings from the Baylor Religion Survey*. Waco, TX: Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion.

2 Poloma, M. M. and Gallup, G. H., Jr (1991). *Varieties of Prayer: A Survey Report*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International.

I continue to pray because, as I have struggled with the difficult questions, I have learnt and am still learning some valuable lessons into how God might act in response to prayer. This has not been one overarching and simple explanation, but rather a kaleidoscope of insights which sometimes form coherent patterns and sometimes are somewhat chaotic.

This book is an attempt to share those insights. First, I have learnt to identify and reject some unhelpful views of God derived from popular views on how God answers prayer. This is the area explored in Chapter 2, where I suggest that it is easy to slip into bad theology and this has a long-term negative consequence for prayer. Chapter 3 goes back to the Bible to suggest that the biblical material is far more complex on prayer than we often acknowledge. Here it is important to look at specific incidents in their own contexts, rather than the usual approach, which is to “flatten out” the biblical complexity by synthesizing themes across the whole of the Bible. By taking Scripture seriously, we can fruitfully engage in the complexity of life and the complexity of the question of how God works in response to prayer. Chapters 4 and 5 explore my particular interest in how science impacts this question, arguing that the scientific ideas which proved so detrimental to belief in prayer and God acting in unusual ways in the universe are now outdated. New understandings of the natural world in quantum theory and chaos do not give an easy solution to how God works, but they do give possibilities and, more importantly, challenge the way that pre-twentieth-century

science has been used in theology. I find these understandings exciting and encouraging in my own prayer life. Chapter 6 attempts to bring together into some kind of pattern the biblical, scientific, and practical ideas which help me have some understanding of how God answers prayer and what that means for my own prayer life. This is far from a perfect pattern, and many questions – not least the problem of unjust suffering – remain unanswered.

This book is not an attempt to provide a definitive answer to how God answers prayer. It is more a record of a personal and an ongoing journey of how a Christian who wants to take both the Bible and science seriously begins to think about these things.