Prayer As Medicine

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Heal me, LORD, and I will be healed; save me and
I will be saved, for you are the one I praise.
Jeremiah 17:14

Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

- James 5:14-16

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Outline

- The science of prayer as medicine
- The theology of prayer
- Practical guidance on prayer in healthcare settings

Intercessory Prayer: RCTs 1964-2006

- Randomized, controlled trials of intercessory prayer (IP) for patients
  - ICU, chronic medical illnesses, pre-intervention (CABG, PCI)
  - Randomized to standard care vs. standard care + IP
- Participants unaware of their allocation
- Prayer offered by persons or prayer groups located elsewhere ("Distant IP" or DIP)
  - The people who were praying did not know the study participant personally

Roberts L, Ahmed I, Davison A. Intercessory prayer for the alleviation of ill health. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2009, Issue 2. Art. No.: CD000368

Intercessory Prayer: RCTs 1964-2006

- Meta-analysis of 10 trials including 7,646 patients

- Significant heterogeneity
- No difference in rates of good vs. bad outcomes
- No difference in rate of adverse events
- Non-significant trend toward lower mortality in the IP group

- Subsequent RCT of distant IP on COVID survival was negative

Roberts L, Ahmed I, Davison A, 2009; Valle Soubihe Junior et al, Heliyon 2023

Intercessory Prayer: Limitations of RCTs

- Study designs did not replicate the usual practice of IP
  - Patients didn't know whether they were being prayed for
  - They may or may not have believed in prayer themselves
  - They did not participate in the intervention
  - Prayer was offered at a distance by persons who didn't know the patient
  - Did not control for the occurrence of other prayer

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Subsequent research

Prayer is a common form of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM)

- Used by > 40% of Americans

- Studies of “Proximal IP” (PIP)
  - Subjects allocated to prayer experienced in-person prayer
  - Blinded allocation not possible

- Not mechanistic



https://www.ministerialassociation.org/prayer/grow-a-prayer-ministry/

Subsequent research

- Variety of endpoints
  - Physiological
  - Psychosocial
  - Quality of Life (QOL)
- Bundles of various spiritual interventions
  - Prayer, meditation, journaling, gratitude
  - Mindfulness



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Prayer for survivors of acute coronary syndromes

Assessed health-related quality of life (HRQOL) between 1 and 6 months post-hospital discharge

1,039 study participants recruited at 6 Massachusetts medical centers

33% women, 88% White

2/3 of subjects prayed for their own health, and 88% were aware of IP by others

Adjustments made for demographic, psychosocial and clinical variables

Both petitionary prayer and IP were significantly associated with better HRQOL (aOR 1.49 and 1.72, respectively)

Abu et al, BMC 2019

Prayer for depression

- Randomized cross-over trial of 74 outpatients meeting DSM criteria for depressive disorder, allocated to a prayer intervention vs. wait-list control
- Recruitment using posters in doctors' offices waiting rooms
- Weekly in-person, 60-minute prayer intervention for 6 weeks
- Prayer performed by a lay minister trained in intercessory prayer. "During the prayer sessions, the prayer minister prayed and was often joined by the participant in praying various form prayers, prayers releasing hurts, and prayers of blessings on those who had offended them."
- Marked improvements in depression and anxiety among participants randomized to prayer. Benefits persisted 1 month later.

Boelens et al, Southern Med J, 2010

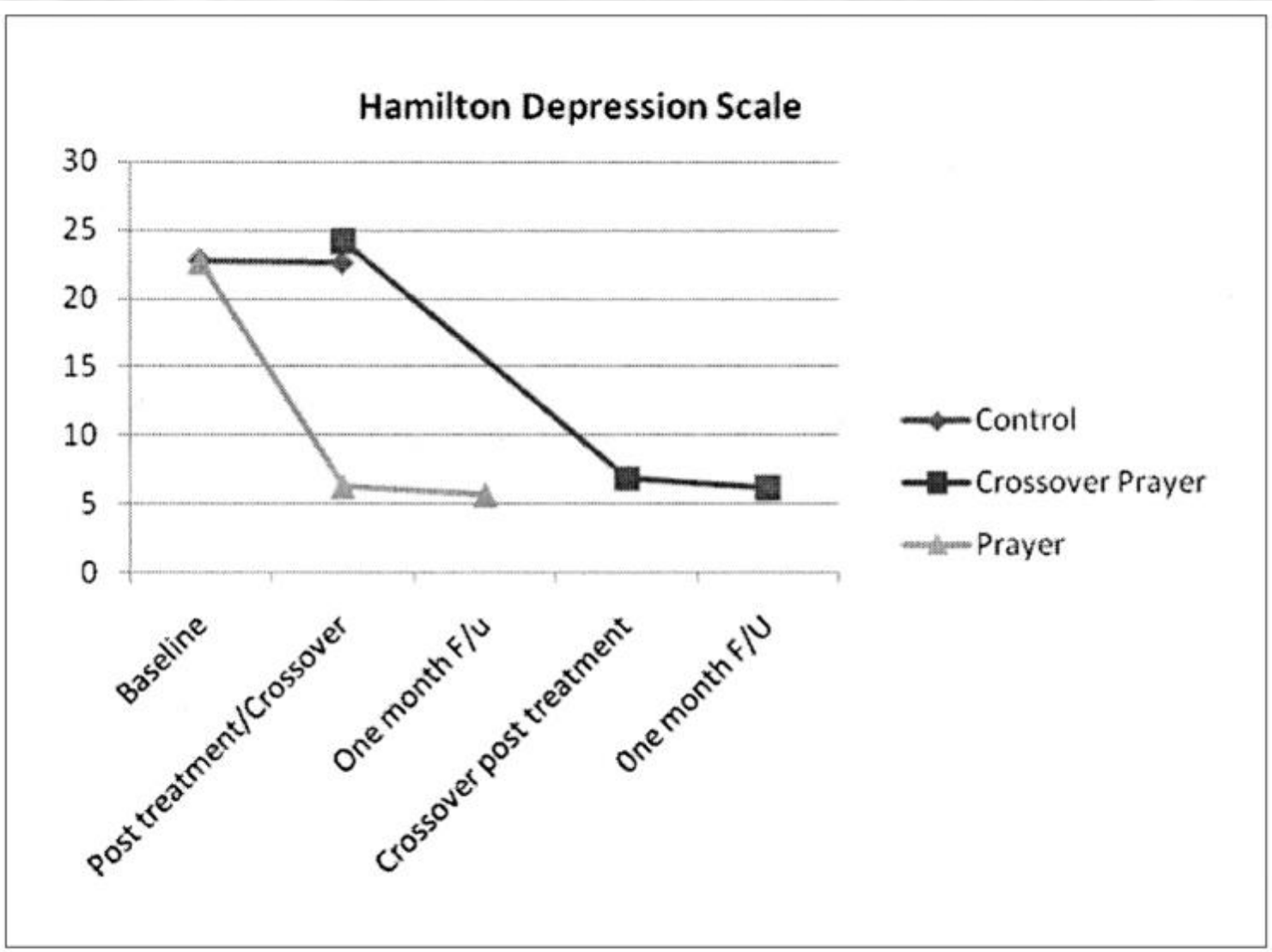


Figure 2. Hamilton Depression Scale values.
< 10–13 Mild; 14–17 Mild to moderate; > 17 Moderate to severe.

Boelens et al, 2009

Prayer for pain and anxiety

Randomized, controlled, non-blinded study

Enrolled 180 participants with anxiety, pain or both

Subjects recruited during routine office visits to a primary care clinic

Participants: 83% black, 78% female, low median annual income

Randomized to receive either proximal IP or soft music for 5 minutes
Surveys at 2 and 6 weeks post-intervention

Jacobson et al, Ann Fam Med 2026

Prayer for pain and anxiety

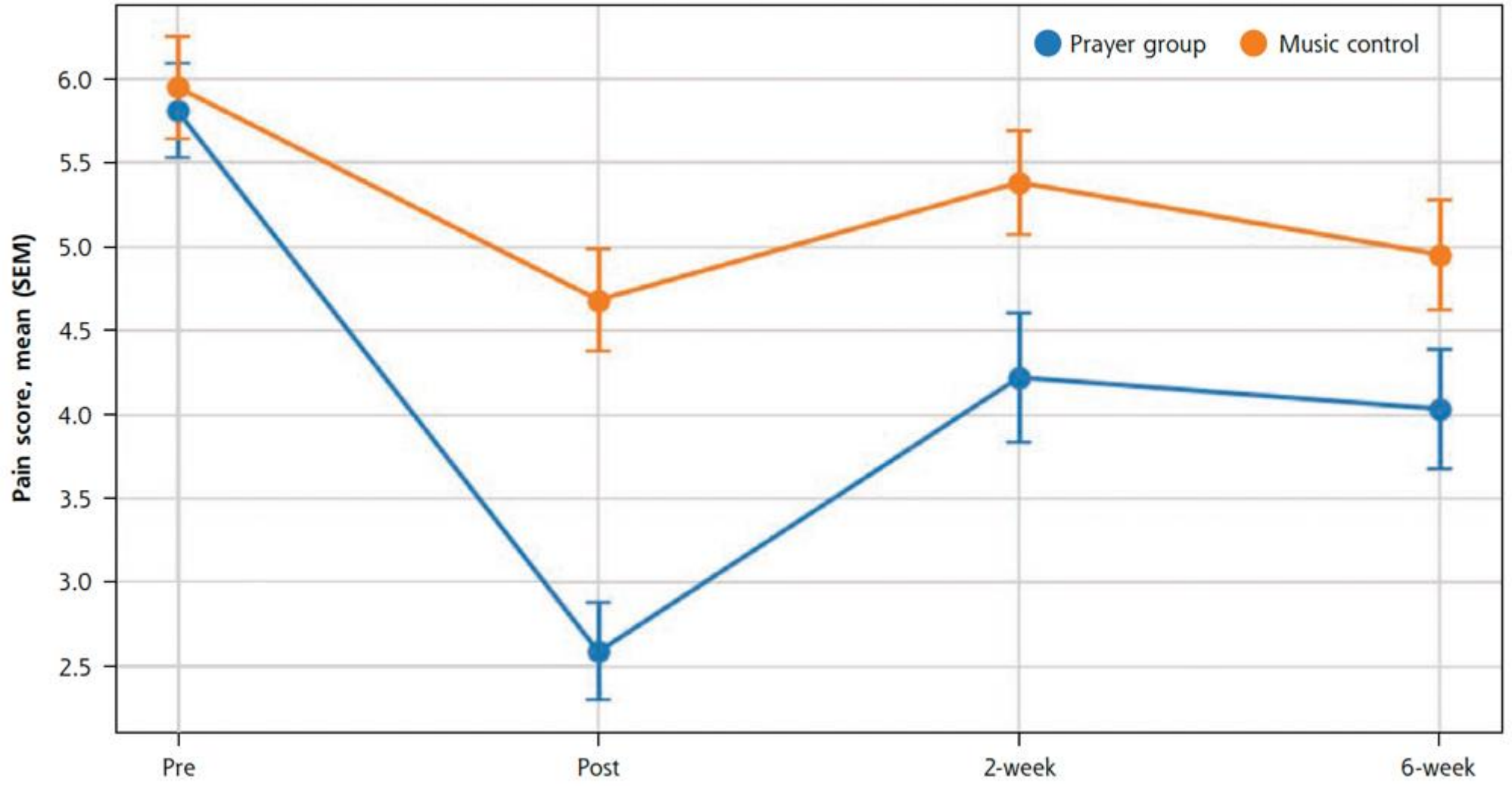
Participants randomized to in-person prayer were more likely to report experiencing physical and spiritual sensations during the intervention, encouragement and feeling valued.

Significant improvements in pain and anxiety in the intervention group ($p=0.001$ to 0.03) that persisted during short-term follow-up.

Effects of prayer were independent of the subject's belief in prayer

Jacobson et al, Ann Fam Med 2026

Figure 2. Line Graphs of Pain Scores by Group



Note: Pain was evaluated on a 0 to 10 point pain intensity numerical rating scale.

Jacobson et al, Ann Fam Med 2026

Other studies of proximal prayer

Improvements in hearing and vision immediately post PIP among Mozambicans attending healing services

Improvements in patients with RA assigned at enrollment to PIP vs wait-list control. Benefits persisted 1 month later. No additional benefit to DIP.

Migraine patients randomized to petitionary prayer had higher pain thresholds vs controls

Improvements in pre-operative anxiety in patients randomized to intercessory prayer.

Matthews et al, Southern Med J, 2000. Westenhofen et al, J Headache Pain 2026.
Boelens et al, Int J Psych Med, 2009; Awaludin et al, J Holistic Nursing 2024

Recent meta-analyses of proximal prayer

In meta-analysis of 6 RCTs, prayer resulted in medium to large beneficial effects on pain intensity and pain tolerance.

In meta-analysis of 23 RCTs, spiritual interventions resulted in significant decreases in systolic and diastolic blood pressure.

Among 16 RCTs, spiritual interventions improved fatigue and QOL in patients with cancer.

Brown et al, Southern Med J, 2010; Matthews et al, Southern Med J, 2000
Boelens et al, Int J Psych Med, 2009; Awaludin et al, J Holistic Nursing 2024
Jarego et al, J Religion and Health 2023; Izgu et al, Eur J Oncol Nursing 2023

Summary of recent studies

Proximal intercessory prayer (PIP) has:

- small positive effects on physiological parameters (pulse, blood pressure)

- larger positive effects on pain, anxiety, depression, functional recovery and QOL

- appears to be free of adverse effects

Jacobson et al, Ann Fam Med 2026

Theology of prayer

God is omniscient and omnipotent

He instructs us to pray

Prayer is depicted as making a difference



Theology of prayer

The effectiveness of prayer depends in part on the pray-er

Motives of the pray-er

- “You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend it on your pleasures” James 4:3



https://www.jesuswalk.com/greatprayers

Theology of prayer

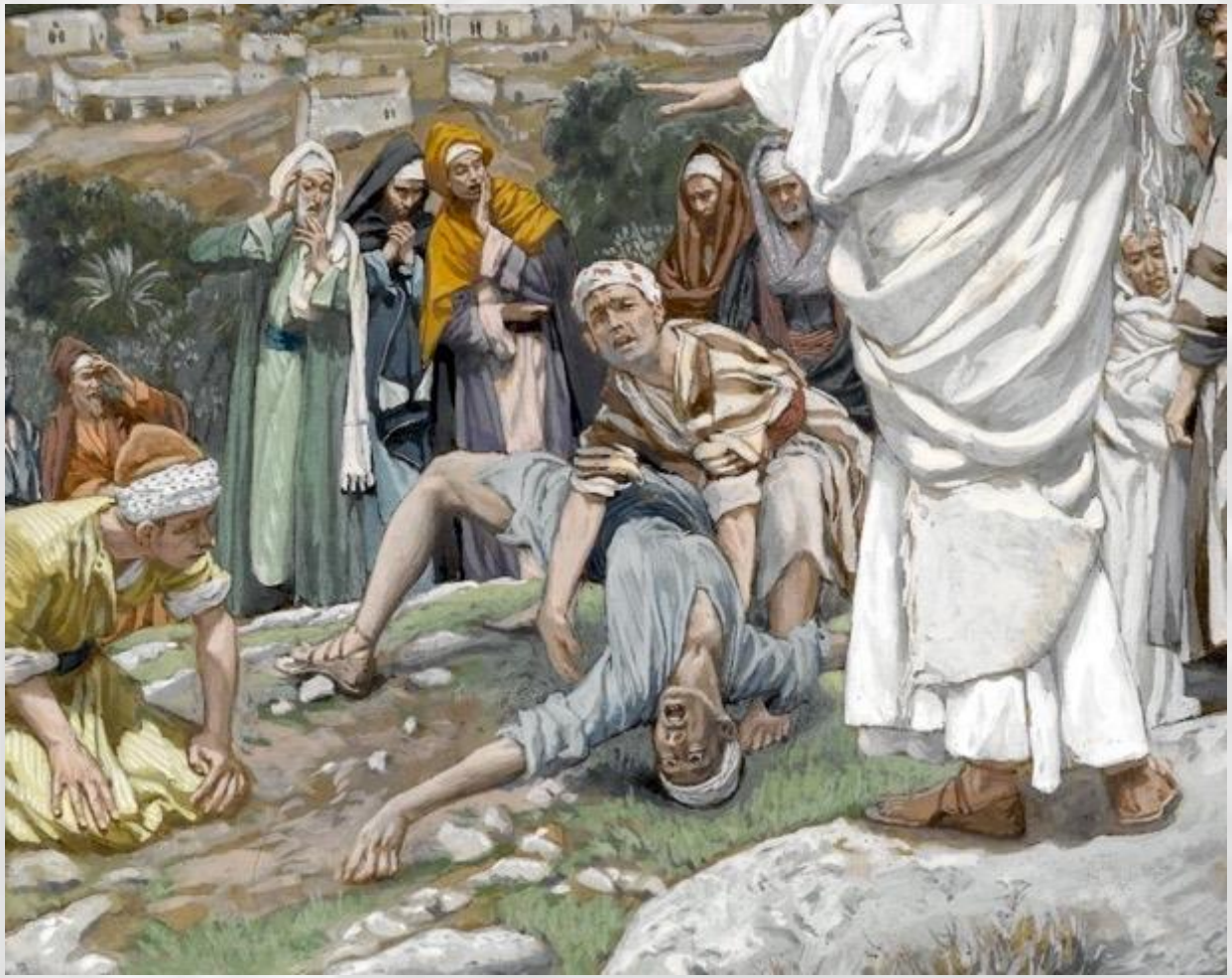
The effectiveness of prayer depends in part on the righteousness of the pray-er

- “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” James 5:16
- “Husbands, be considerate of your wives . . . so that nothing may hinder your prayers” 1 Peter 3:7
- “Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear” Isaiah 59:2
- “Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered” Proverbs 21:13



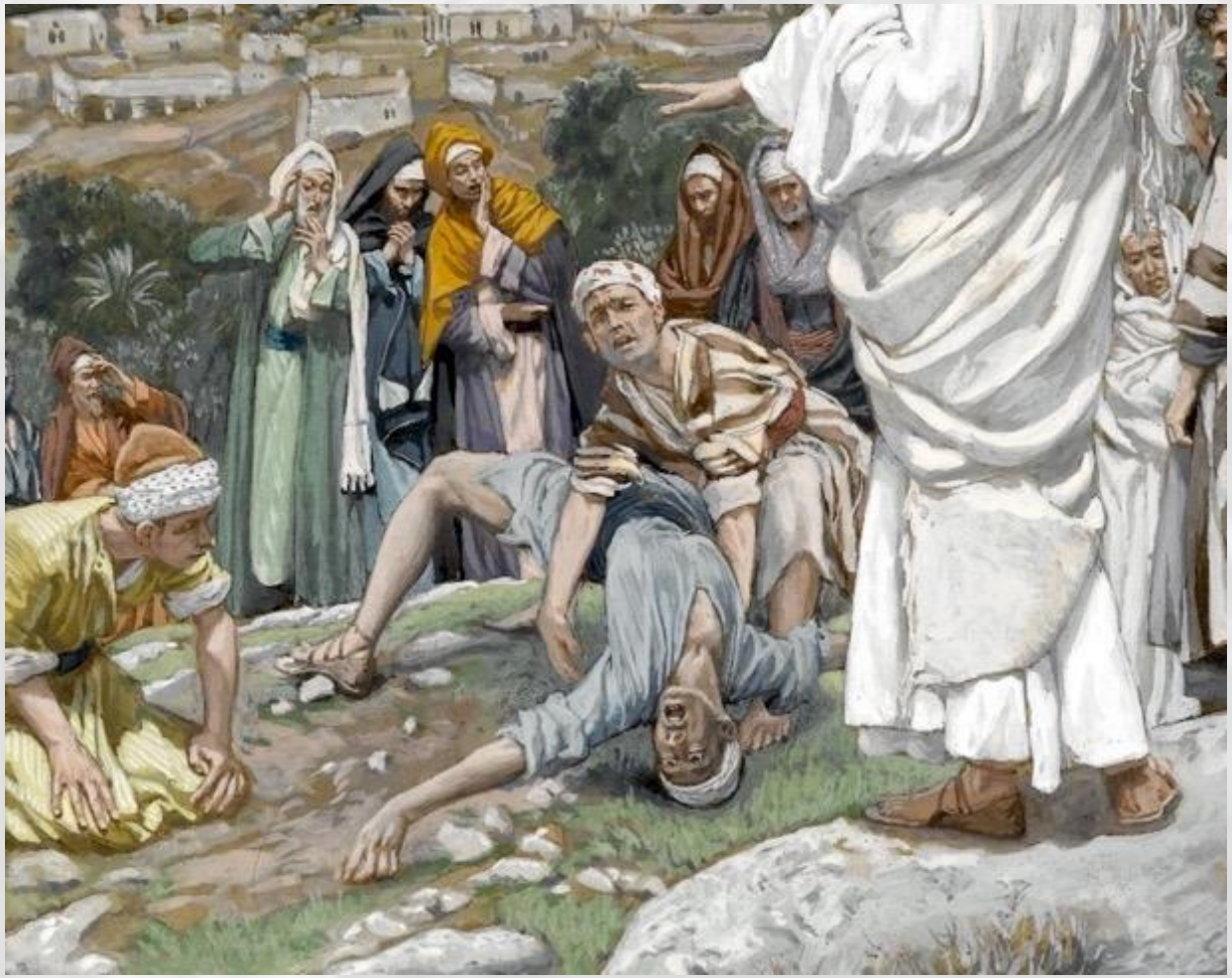
https://www.jesuswalk.com/greatprayers

Jesus healed skeptics who came to him



https://livingfaith.blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/9d7f3-healing_boy.jpg

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https://livingfaith.blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/9d7f3-healing_boy.jpg



https://margmowczko.com/jesus-and-the-royal-official-john-443-54/

Theology of intercessory prayer

We are encouraged to practice intercessory prayer

Prayer has efficacy

. . . especially when the pray-er is right with God and right with others

Faith is not a requirement, but willingness to humbly give prayer a try is required



https://www.crosswalk.com/headlines/contributors/michael-foust

Offering prayer to patients



https://80.lv/articles/grandma-creating-an-ultra-realistic-portrait-in-maya-xgen-zbrush

Offering prayer to patients

Spiritual history

Ask permission

“Can I pray for you?”



https://80.lv/articles/grandma-creating-an-ultra-realistic-portrait-in-maya-xgen-zbrush

Offering prayer to patients

"Would it help if I prayed with you?"

"I always offer to pray with my patients. If you're interested in that, let me know."

"May I add you to my prayer list?"

Give the patient the chance to be an (often silent) participant in prayer

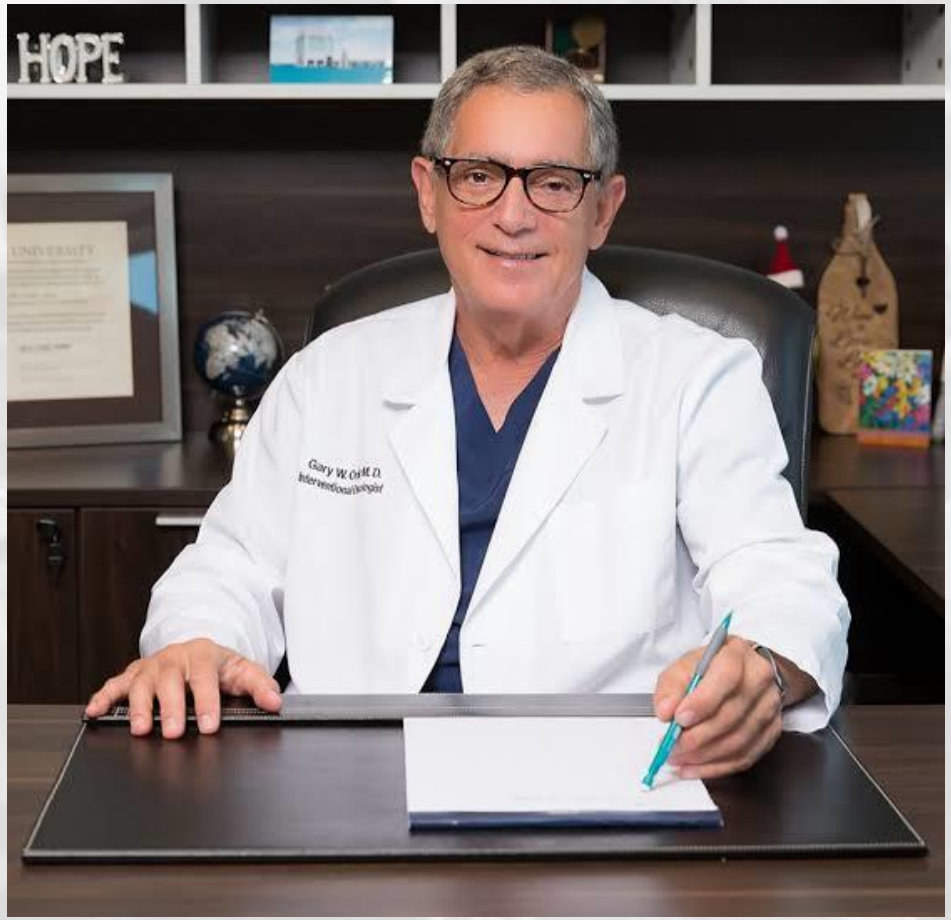


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Don’t limit offers of prayer to Christians

“It is now three years since my diagnosis. Prayer combined with immunotherapy treatment has left me free of metastatic cancer and potentially cured. My journey has taken me from being a scientifically based ‘empirical’ atheist to someone with a profound faith. I suspect we are entering an exciting time where the centuries-long separation of spirituality and science will come together again.”

- Dr. Gary Onik, at crosswalk.com

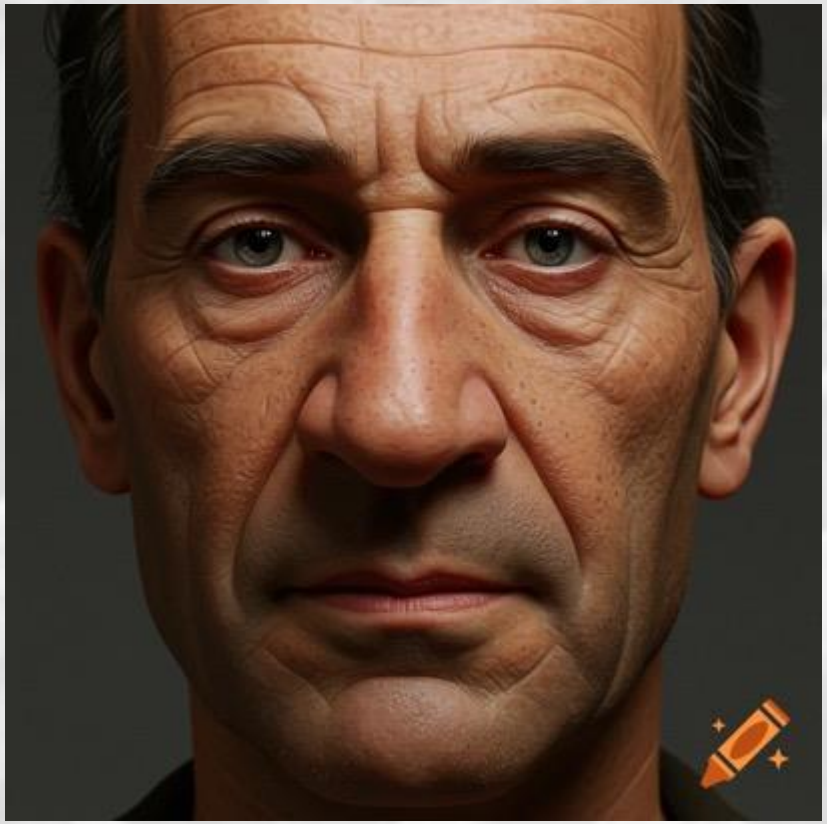


Avoid pitfalls

My case must be hopeless!

Does this person know what they're doing?

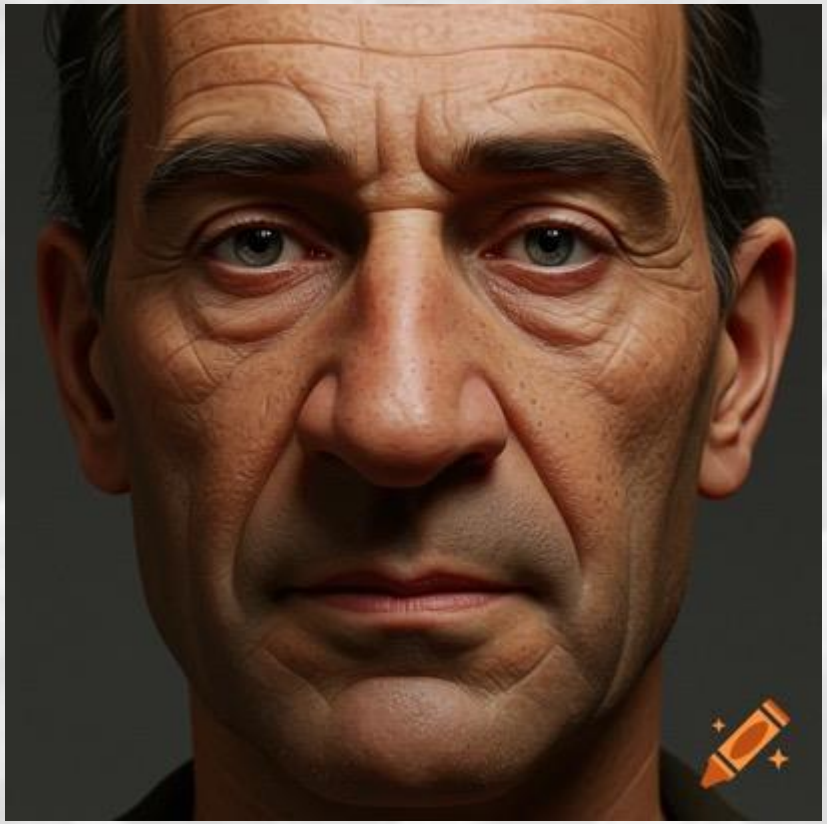
Is this person trying to convert me?



Avoid pitfalls

Forestall these issues:

- “I always offer to pray with my patients . . . “
- “We have a great team taking care of you today . . . my personal belief is that God is here and on your team today, too. Would it help . . . “



What do you pray? Try TREAT

Tell God about the situation

REmember his past love and faithfulness

Ask boldly for help

Trust in God



https://www.crosswalk.com/headlines/contributors/michael-foust

Conclusion

In-person prayer has measurable health benefits

The prayers of a righteous person are effective

Offer prayer in a way that lets your patient opt in

TREAT



Evaluate this session!

