

IS GOD LISTENING?

(Condensed from an article by Kenneth L. Woodward -Newsweek - 3/ 31/'97)

In a nation where public cynicism seemingly knows no bounds, trust in God persists. In a recent *Newsweek* survey, 54 percent of adults said they pray every day (29 percent more than once a day). Eighty-seven percent said they believe God answers their prayers at least some of the time. An astounding 86 percent said they accept God's failure to grant their prayers. And only 15 percent said they have lost faith – at any time – because their prayers were unanswered.

Gary Habermas, chairman of the philosophy department at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., is by belief and by habit a praying man. In the 1980's he kept a prayer list with hundreds of names, often of people he didn't know. He prayed for their jobs, their health, their children, and after observing a remarkable set of healings, concluded that personal prayer works. So when his grandmother was 87 and fell deathly ill, he sat by her bedside in "serious prayer." To his delight, she recovered.

In May 1995 when his wife of 23 years was told she had stomach cancer, he prayed more anxiously than ever to God. He didn't mean to be selfish, so he prayed. "If it's not your will that she be spared, then your will be done." But he didn't want to be judged indifferent either. "But you understand I really want her to make it".

By one measure, he failed. Debbie died. But before she did, she told her husband, "God spoke to me. Three words: I love you." Haberman was torn between grief and gratitude. "She had doubted God's love all her life, yet now she was as sure of his love as she was of mine," He says. "I trust him to have a good answer to my prayers. That's not the same as knowing what that answer will be."

According to some theologians, modern science now presents an increasingly compelling model of how the world works. Thus religion, if it is to remain intellectually honest, must reconcile its ideas about God with the universal laws of nature.

But then how does one explain miracles? To many believers, they are direct acts of God, often in response to their prayers. To scientists like physicist Paul Davies of the University of Adelaide in Australia, an inexplicable event is only inexplicable because we don't yet understand it. Still, while the scientific community may have no way to prove an act of God, there are some – doctors, for instance – who are convinced that prayer can significantly improve a patient's health. And several of them are designing tests to try to confirm it.

One of the most intriguing experiments began in Sept. 1996 and will eventually involve some 60 patients at the Arthritis/Pain Treatment Center in Clearwater, Fla. Because rheumatoid arthritis has certain manifestations – including swollen joints – relief of those symptoms can be measured easily. While all patients received standard medical care, some were prayed for while others were not. Some patients experienced remarkable short term results. At the start of the experiment one patient had 49 tender joints. After four sessions with a hands - on praying minister, he had only eight. Six months later he no longer needed pain medication. He said: "There's something weird going on here, and I love it."

Many are discovering that prayer can be as powerful as it is mysterious. Late on a black, noiseless night in upstate New York, a young woman decided to take a shortcut home. As she walked up the steep unlit path she heard steps behind her faster than her own. An instant later a man was upon her, tightening her scarf around her neck and ripping at her pants. At home, her mother woke from a deep sleep, seized with fear that something terrible was about to happen to her daughter, immediately went to her knees in prayer. After fifteen minutes of begging God to protect her daughter, she felt at peace and returned to a sound sleep. Back on the path, the would be rapist suddenly ceased his assault. He cocked his head — almost beastlike — and fled down the hill. Coincidence? Luck? Or divine intervention? The mother and daughter are both convinced that God intervened that dark night. One believer wryly commented. "Maybe answers to prayer are coincidences, but before I started praying I didn't have any coincidences".