

Introducing the Online *Spectrum* Book and Film Club

Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?

A book by Philip Yancey

(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006)

BY DANEEN AKERS

I've always appreciated Philip Yancey's books because he writes as a pilgrim, not as a pastor. Not that I don't appreciate pastoral perspectives, but often they seem to skip over the doubts, questions, and laments that I have. Yancey dives into thorny and complicated problems, seemingly without fear that truly mining their depths could leave him or his readers with less faith than they started with. It's his honesty and rawness that allows me to listen to his eventual conclusions (or even just continuing questions).

In *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* Yancey addresses the big questions. Why pray if God already knows the future? Why are so many prayers seemingly unanswered? What about all of those seemingly clear promises in the Gospels about asking and then receiving? If we agree to pray, how do we go about it?

As someone who has always struggled with prayer, I appreciated exploring these questions with a fellow pilgrim, even if at the end I still have doubts. I especially enjoyed the stories Yancey shared. Somehow when faced with big theological issues, like how prayer works, I find the most meaning in the shared humanity I find in the stories of others facing struggles. A few nuggets that leaped out at me in my reading:

- Prayer in the Bible frequently "lacks serenity, to put it mildly. In prayer, God seems to encourage ritual lament" (67). Just read the Psalms to see how prayer can be filled alternately with hope and joy and the next minute despair

and sorrow. The range of human emotion and experience is appropriate—even necessary—prayer material.

- The problem of prayer is profound and great minds have explored its depths. C. S. Lewis found that the same argument against prayer (why do it if God knows best) can be made for any human activity— isn't it all meaningless if God's going to make it work out one way or another?

God could have arranged things so that our bodies nourished themselves miraculously without food, knowledge entered our brains without studying, umbrellas magically appeared to protect us from rainstorms. God chose a different style of governing the world, a partnership which relies on human agency and choice.

- This partnership with God means that prayer must be accompanied by action. Yancey returns to this point again and again. God works through human agency. The Good Samaritan didn't just pray for the man lying half-dead on the side of the road, he also acted. Yancey repeatedly emphasizes that we are God's hands in the world. He quotes the Catholic priest and author Ronald Rolheiser on this point:

A theist believes in a God in heaven whereas a Christian believes in a God in heaven who is also physically present on this earth inside human beings.... God is still present, as physical and as real today as God was in the historical Jesus. God still has skin, human skin, and physically walks on this earth just as Jesus did.... To pray "God, please help my neighbor cope with her financial problems," or "God, do something about the homeless downtown" is the approach of a theist, not a Christian. God has chosen to express love and grace in the world through those of us who embody Christ. (244)

I found this point to be the single most profound take-away from the entire book. Yancey also comes back to it when looking at Jesus' life and miracles. Why didn't Jesus miraculously cure world poverty instead of feeding five thousand? Why didn't he eradicate the polio virus instead of healing the paraplegic? Jesus touched the lives of the people in his life just as I have a responsibility to those whose lives I'm a part of—this means some of us will have wide circles, some of us small, but we are all the living embodiment of what God's love in the world looks like.

- There's something to be said for fixed prayers, especially during times of "spiritual dryness, when spontaneous prayer seems an impossible chore" (179). As someone who grew up Adventist without ever seeing something like *The Book of Common Prayer*, this especially caught my eye. Also as someone who seems to go through a lot of dry spells in the praying department, I think I'm going to experiment with this.
- In addition to fixed prayers, there's something to be said for silent, meditative prayers. Martin Luther was said to counsel that, "The fewer the words, the better the prayer" (190). I'm reminded of the portions of *Eat, Pray, Love*, where Liz Gilbert finally quiets her mind in meditation through the use of short prayers or mantras. For a verbivore like myself, being quiet doesn't come naturally, so finding something to pray about isn't my problem—rather, I need to learn the discipline of silence. Yancey reminded me that this is probably deeper prayer than my extemporaneous babblings.
- Like me, Yancey finds the miraculous stories of God saving Christians from the Twin Towers or from plane wrecks problematic. Were not the other people praying? Were they not also good people? When we throw around miracles like this, we lessen their impact, which Yancey does believe in but finds to be rare events. This is an especially sensitive topic when dealing with medical healings, and Yancey recounts stories of letters he has received from readers talking about their personal horrors—stories that made me weep—and the seemingly empty, unanswered prayers for healing.
- The great problem rests in what Yancey terms the "Sweeping Promises" of the Bible. "In a nutshell, the

main difficulty with unanswered prayers is that Jesus seemed to promise there need not be any" (234).

This was the section I personally had the most trouble with. It's one thing to read how theologians address the thorny issues of prayer, but the challenge is that the Bible is pretty explicit in some places, such as: "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (and many other examples). Yancey valiantly looks at many reasons why prayers go unanswered—some are trivial, some are contradictory or inconsistent (look at football games or wars), some are made without good intentions on the part of the pray-er, some are answered in bigger picture terms, and so forth. However, I wished that Yancey had delved into how we got Jesus' words (I'm sure he's aware of translation history)—maybe those verses reflect a bias of the writer. But that brings up such a complex topic that I can imagine he realized this book would turn into a series. Although Yancey does provide some conclusions, I'm still left thinking this is a big problem (and one commonly exploited by pastors who make their parishioners feel they just don't have enough faith; that's why their prayers are unanswered).

- In the end, one of the best reasons we have for praying is Jesus. Surely if anyone was privy to God's will it was him, but he still prayed—even angrily and tearfully at times. That's probably a good example for us all.

These are just a few ideas that struck me—this is actually quite a lengthy book, so I'm barely doing it justice to pick out a few nuggets, but I would love your thoughts, too. ■

To read the discussion that followed this review, go to the *Spectrum* home page, click the Reviews link, and scroll down to the May 1st post.

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The Amish rank forgiveness as one of their greatest responsibilities.

The Power of Forgiveness

A film by Martin Doblmeier
(Journey Films, 2008)

BY SHASTA NELSON

In 1998, there were only a handful of studies that had researched the subject of forgiveness. By 2005, that number had climbed to 950. *The Power of Forgiveness*, the latest documentary from Martin Doblmeier, traces the growing scientific interest in forgiveness during these years.

This movie ironically reflects my own journey those same years as I developed my own expertise on the subject, not so much from studying it at seminary, preaching it as a pastor, or being such a generous giver of it, as from making life decisions that made me desperately aware of how much I longed to receive it. I confess up front that my experience in needing forgiveness outweighs my experience in extending it.

The Power of Forgiveness weaves together stories and interviews from people who have journeyed the road of forgiveness. These stories range from personal injustices to ones that involve entire communities. The stories highlight the complexity found within the word *forgiveness*, from generational conflict in Northern Ireland and religious persecution during the days of the Holocaust to the ethnic injustices against African slaves and the losses endured by families of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

While watching the film, I found multiple themes voiced from a range of scientists, victims, mental health professionals, and theologians. Among them was the most obvious: Forgiveness is difficult. Always.

However, scientific evidence and religious teachings from all belief systems seem to agree that forgiving others is worth the pursuit. Researchers who interviewed those whose trust had been violated showed that the blood pressure of all interviewees spiked when they began to recount the wrongs done to them—whether or not they had forgiven their offenders. Data seems to agree that one can forgive, but still not forget.

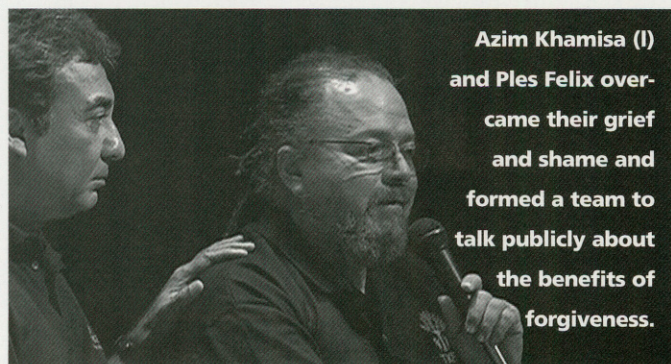
But a difference could be seen as victims continued to tell their stories. The blood pressures of those who had forgiven normalized quickly as they recalled the details. Meanwhile, the pressures of those who had not yet forgiven—regardless of how much time had passed or the size of the offense—continued not only to raise as they retold their stories, but also to leave them with resting heart rates higher than those of their forgiving peers.

Undoubtedly, the process of forgiveness seems to bring benefits, both spiritually and physically. But that doesn't necessarily seem to answer the question voiced by a mother whose son was killed when the Twin Towers collapsed, whose body now lies in a trash heap outside New York City, as she asked a question echoed throughout the interviews: Are some acts unforgivable?

Apparently a proposal has been made to create a Garden of Forgiveness at Ground Zero. Some find comfort in the idea, whereas others think it offensive for a site that commemorates enormous wrongdoing. The question lingers in many forms, but all hint at the same ache: Can you forgive someone who doesn't take responsibility for their wrongs and has not asked for forgiveness or whose atonement or punishment has not been completed? Are there occasions where forgiveness is impossible or wrong? In other words: Do some transgressions outweigh the value of forgiveness?

Those who view this film will be moved deeply. Most likely, they will ask themselves how they would answer the haunting questions of people who hurt deeply as they grapple with the issue of whether it is appropriate for all of us to pursue forgiveness. ■

Shasta Nelson writes from San Francisco, where she is a life coach and pastor. An earlier version of this review was first published on *Spectrum's* Web site. To read the discussion that followed, go to the *Spectrum* home page, click the Reviews link, and scroll down to the May 13th post.



Azim Khamisa (l) and Ples Felix overcame their grief and shame and formed a team to talk publicly about the benefits of forgiveness.

Book and Film Club Selections

The Spectrum Online Book & Film Club

Mark Twain once said, "Good friends, good books and a sleepy conscience: this is the ideal life." While the sleepy conscience bit is a tad hedonistic for good Pathfinders, we are going to take his advice on good books and friends! As part of our continued commitment to community through conversation, we're launching the Spectrum Online Book & Film Club.

Please join us every month for our discussions!

Book & Film Club Selections

April 2008 (Discussion starts May 1st & 13th)
Book: *Prayer* by Philip Yancey
Film: *The Power of Forgiveness*
 Spectrum Website Review
 Filmmaker Interview

May 2008 (Discussion starts May 29)
Book: *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* by N.T. Wright and Marcus Borg
Film: (Classic Film Night) *Jesus of Montreal*

June 2008 (Discussion starts June 26)
Book: *I Don't Believe in Atheists* by Chris Hedges (Note: Also recommended as a companion volume, *God is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens)
Film: *Love and the Devil*

May 2008 (Discussion starts May 29)

Book: *The Meaning of Jesus:*

Two Visions

by N.T. Wright and
 Marcus Borg

Film: (Classic Film Night)

Jesus of Montreal

June 2008

(Discussion starts June 26)

Book: *I Don't Believe in Atheists*

by Chris Hedges

(Note: Also recommended as a companion volume,
God is Not Great, by Christopher Hitchens)

Film: *Lars and the Real Girl*

July 2008 (Discussion starts July 31)

Book: *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*

by Barbara Brown Taylor

Film: (Classic Film Night) *Babette's Feast*

August 2008 (Discussion starts August 28)

Book: *Christianity and Homosexuality: Some Seventh-day
 Adventist Perspectives*

Edited by David Ferguson, Fritz Guy, and David Larson

Film: *For the Bible Tells Me So*

September 2008 (Discussion starts September 25)

Book: *The Bible: A Biography*

by Karen Armstrong

Film: (Classic Film Night) *The Mission*

October 2008 (Discussion starts October 30)

Book: *Finding Darwin's God*

by Kenneth Miller

Film: *Millions*

November 2008 (Discussion starts November 28)

Book: *My Grandfather's Blessings*

by Rachel Naomi Remen

Film: *The Future of Food*

December 2008 (Discussion starts December 31)

Book: *Searching for God Knows What*

by Donald Miller

Film: *Bruce Almighty*

January 2009 (Discussion starts January 29)

Book: *Searching for a God to Love*

by Chris Blake

Film : (Classic Film Night) *Au Revoir, Les Enfants*

(Note: An individual DVD is available

to rent through Netflix and Blockbuster.)

February 2009 (Discussion starts February 26)

Book: *Till We Have Faces*

by C.S. Lewis

Film: *Stranger Than Fiction*

March 2009 (Discussion starts March 26)

Book: *Grace (Eventually)*

by Anne Lamott

Film: (Classic Film Night) *My Left Foot*

April 2009 (Discussion starts April 30)

Book: *The Poisonwood Bible*

by Barbara Kingsolver

Film: *To End All Wars*