

When “Ask and You Shall Receive” Fails

Hermeneutic Immunization, Spiritual Self-Blame, and the Epistemology of Petitionary Prayer

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Revised August 2026

Central claim

The target is a strong Christian assurance presented as a dependable public promise that petition changes external outcomes. Such a promise gains support over ordinary medical and social variation only from a difference in results or frequencies specified before observation. The every-outcome rule supplies no such difference: it confirms grantings and reclassifies every denial; the reviewed studies show no robust, replicated clinical advantage, and flexibly attributed favorable cases do not establish one. This does not exclude occasional opaque answers or prayer’s relational and coping value; neither confirms dependable intervention.

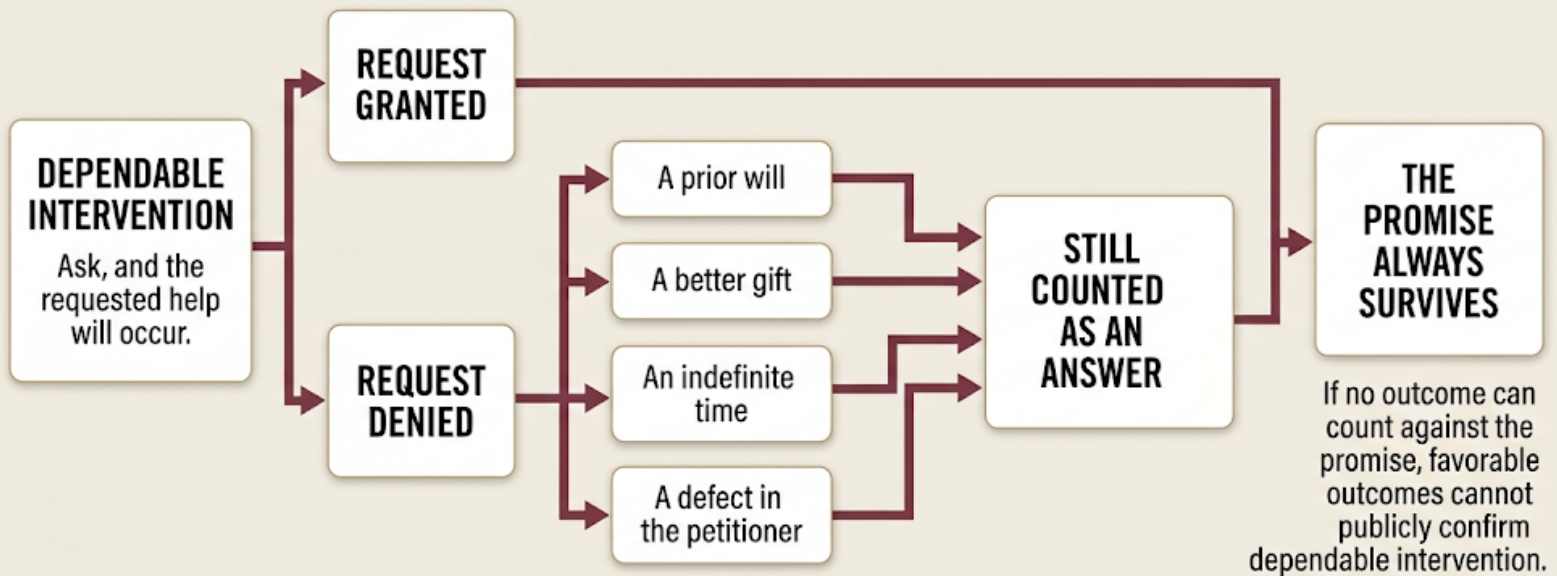
Preview:

Target promise	Expected difference	Rescue pressure	Bounded result
Broad prayer assurances present petition as reliable intervention for faithful petitioners.	A live promise specifies in advance some result or pattern that would raise or lower confidence relative to ordinary variation.	Granting confirms; denial becomes prior will, a better gift, delay, or petitioner deficiency.	The rule supplies no confirmation by itself, and no robust clinical advantage independently rescues the strong promise; other values remain open.

The argument tests the distance between confidence-generating public rhetoric and retrospective explanations of failure. It does not require a universal laboratory law of prayer.

Visual preview:

THE EVERY-OUTCOME PROBLEM



The map isolates the every-outcome classification rule: a granting confirms, while four rescue routes return denial to vindication. When every possible result or pattern receives the same verdict—especially by shifting failure onto the petitioner—that rule supplies no discriminatory public support. The limited conclusion concerns this rule, not every purpose of prayer or every God-concept.

Abstract

Strong Christian assurances about petitionary prayer can function as confidence-generating promises of intervention: faithful asking should make a practical difference. The problem is not that every petition fails or that a free deity must behave like a repeatable mechanism. It arises when favorable outcomes count as confirmation while every unfavorable outcome is reassigned to prior will, a better hidden gift, indefinite timing, or a defect in the petitioner. This paper proposes a content-preservation constraint: a qualification preserves a public promise only if it can be stated before the result, materially guides expectation, and permits some result or pattern to lower confidence in the promise. Controlled studies and reviews do not establish that no petition has ever been answered, but neither do they show a robust, replicated clinical advantage in the settings studied. An every-outcome rule supplies no independent contrast; it becomes more troubling when failure is displaced onto petitioners, eroding confidence in ordinary evidence while protecting institutional authority. That structure warrants a cautious gaslighting analogy in some cases, not a blanket charge of conscious abuse. Prayer may still function as relationship, lament, solidarity, attention, or coping. Those goods, and the logical possibility of occasional opaque answers, do not confirm dependable intervention. On the outcome evidence considered here, the stronger promise lacks the public warrant its rhetoric claims.

Keywords: petitionary prayer; unanswered prayer; hermeneutic immunization; spiritual self-blame; gaslighting; religious coping; self-sealing claims

1. The Promise Under Pressure

Christian devotional teaching can present petitionary prayer in expansive, ordinary language. Matthew 7:7–11 links asking with receiving and compares divine care to a parent who does not substitute a useless object for food. Mark 11:23–24 joins confident petition with mountain-moving imagery. Matthew 21:22 and John 14:13–14 use similarly broad formulations. These passages may admit contextual and theological qualifications, but when used as assurances their devotional force is not modest: they invite confidence that petition can affect what happens.

That confidence matters because disappointment is later managed against the background the rhetoric created. A believer prays for healing, sobriety, employment, protection, reconciliation, or relief. When the requested event occurs, the result can be treated as an answer. In the pattern examined here, when it does not, the promise is preserved by reclassification: the requested event conflicted with the deity's prior will; denial was a superior gift; the timing remains hidden; or the petitioner lacked faith, surrender, purity, patience, or interpretive maturity.

The paper targets a specific claim, not prayer as a whole. A *God-concept* is a specified conception of a deity, including the character, intentions, powers, and mode of action attributed to that deity. The target here is a Christian God-concept paired with a *strong intervention promise*: faithful petition under publicly taught conditions provides dependable access to divine action that can alter external outcomes in ways relevant to the request.

This is stronger than several claims the argument leaves open. Prayer may sometimes coincide with an extraordinary event. A person may have private reasons to interpret an event as an answer. Prayer may express dependence, reorder desire, sustain attention, coordinate a community, or help someone endure. A theology may also state from the beginning that petition is primarily formative rather than causally interventionist. None of those positions entails the strong promise under examination.

Contemporary philosophy helps keep the target exact. Davison (2017) distinguishes bringing about what was requested from merely replying to a request and asks what role a petition could play in a contrastive explanation of an outcome. Oren (2025) shifts attention from the conceptual possibility of answered prayer to what the public record should do to rational confidence in its efficacy. The present argument adds a question about failure management: what remains of the promise when negative outcomes are prevented from bearing evidential weight?

The governing thesis is direct. Outcome evidence can support a public promise over a live alternative only if some prospectively specified result or pattern is more expected under the promise. If positive outcomes support the promise while every negative outcome is recoded as success, hidden wisdom, or petitioner defect, that

classification rule supplies no contrast. A robust, independently measured advantage could still provide one, but the controlled evidence reviewed here does not show such a clinical advantage, and flexibly attributed ordinary cases do not establish one. The practice may preserve devotion; it does not thereby publicly warrant the original assurance of dependable intervention.

Content-Preservation Constraint

A qualification preserves a public prayer promise only if it can be stated before the result, materially guides what should be expected, and leaves some conceivable result or pattern that would lower confidence in the promised intervention. A condition introduced only after failure, under a rule that classifies no possible record as failure, protects the claim by weakening what it predicts.

This constraint does not assume that all meaningful claims must be laboratory laws. Promises between persons are context-sensitive; agents may decline requests for reasons. Yet a promise still differs from a posture of unconditional trust. If no sequence of denials could rationally lower confidence in what was advertised, the assurance has ceased to guide expectation as an assurance.

2. What the Texts and Their Public Use Lead People to Expect

A defender may object that the relevant texts were never blank checks. The Johannine phrase about asking in the name of Jesus concerns alignment with a mission and character, not a verbal suffix. Mark's mountain is rhetorically heightened. Matthew's audience, kingdom setting, and ethical context matter. These points can be legitimate interpretation.

The decisive question is not whether context exists. It is whether the conditions are taught with enough content, and early enough, to shape expectation before the result. A church cannot reasonably trade on the confidence of broad language before a crisis and then appeal to a much thinner theology only after denial. If the actual teaching is that petition ordinarily changes the petitioner rather than the world, that should be said when confidence is invited. If external intervention is rare, opaque, and not publicly distinguishable from ordinary outcomes, the rhetoric should reflect that modesty.

The parent-and-bread analogy makes the tension especially vivid. Its force depends on recognizable care: a decent parent does not answer a basic request with something useless or harmful. A reply may explain why a loving parent sometimes refuses. But if every nonreceipt is automatically classified as a better gift, the analogy no longer supplies the ordinary standard by which it initially persuaded. Its evaluative content has been reversed.

The same point applies to faith conditions. A prospective condition can be demanding without being immunizing. A community could define the kind of request, the relevant moral limits, the time window, and what would count as nonfulfillment. By contrast, an invisible deficiency inferred from the mere fact of denial is not an independently assessed condition. It converts the promise into a closed inference: every genuine petitioner receives; this person did not receive; therefore this person was not genuine. That form is valid only if the first premise is independently established. It cannot be used as evidence for itself.

The intended reader is therefore the believer who was asked to expect intervention and later asked to reinterpret its absence. The paper does not demand theological naivety. It demands symmetry: qualifications should govern both success and failure, and the same evidential standards should apply before and after the outcome is known.

3. The Public Record: Pressure without Overclaiming

No clinical trial can test every theology of prayer. A free personal agent is not a drug, traditions disagree about what may be requested, and a study protocol cannot verify faith, moral fitness, or divine reasons. These limitations matter. They block the inference from a null trial to the conclusion that no petition has ever been answered.

They do not make the public record irrelevant to a strong intervention promise. If religious communities regularly encourage confidence in material help, healing, or protection, then a long record without a stable discernible advantage should reduce confidence in that public description. The weaker and more selective the operative theology becomes, the less it supports the original confidence-generating rhetoric.

The empirical literature is more mixed in detail than a slogan suggests. The large STEP trial found no benefit of intercessory prayer for complication-free recovery after cardiac bypass surgery; participants who knew they were being prayed for had more complications, although the trial did not establish why (Benson et al., 2006). A meta-analysis of fourteen studies found no statistically discernible overall effect, with the pooled estimate shrinking further when a controversial study was removed (Masters et al., 2006). A Cochrane review found no clear benefit across major outcomes and judged the evidence too equivocal to recommend either for or against intercessory prayer (Roberts et al., 2009).

One systematic review did report a small statistically significant pooled effect while still classifying intercessory prayer as an experimental intervention rather than an established practice (Hodge, 2007). That result should not be concealed. It shows why the conclusion must be calibrated: the literature is methodologically heterogeneous, sensitive to inclusion choices, and not a clean demonstration of either metaphysical absence or robust intervention. What it fails to supply is a strong, reproducible clinical advantage in the domains these studies test.

Ordinary experience creates a parallel pressure. A successful surgery may be credited to petition; an unsuccessful surgery may be assigned to hidden wisdom. Employment may count as provision; unemployment as formation. Rescue may count as care; nonrescue as a different form of care. Each interpretation may be possible in a particular case. The epistemic problem arises when the classification rule is asymmetrical: positive outcomes add confidence, but negative outcomes never subtract it.

Table 1 shows why the pressure is cumulative rather than dependent on any single trial.

Evidence strand	What a strong promise leads us to expect	Observed pressure	Limited contribution
Controlled trials	A repeatable advantage in at least some advertised domains under fair tests	No robust, replicated clinical benefit across the best-known trial and major syntheses	Weakens public therapeutic confidence; does not test every conception of agency or every private petition
Everyday attribution	Success and failure evaluated by the same prospective conditions	Success is easily credited while failure is redescribed after the event	Identifies confirmation asymmetry; does not settle the cause of any one event
Pastoral interpretation	Conditions stated clearly enough to guide petitioners before outcomes	Hidden will, timing, or petitioner defects may become visible only after denial	Raises an immunization concern; some prospective qualifications can remain legitimate
Coping outcomes	External intervention distinguished from effects on attention, emotion, and community	Prayer can help some people cope even where external effects remain unshown	Preserves real human value; cannot by itself confirm the stronger causal promise

Table 1: The evidence strands converge on a problem of public warrant while retaining their separate limits.

The result is not a study inventory. It is a comparative point. Evidence could discriminate in the promise's favor if prayer produced a prospectively specified difference in relevant outcome rates or patterns. The studies reviewed here show no robust, replicated clinical advantage, while flexible post hoc attribution makes ordinary favorable cases non-discriminating. Relative to a baseline of ordinary medical and social variation plus such attribution, the record considered here does not carry the evidential weight claimed for dependable intervention. It remains compatible with occasional intervention, but compatibility alone is not confirmation.

4. Four Routes That Protect the Promise

Failure management can take more than one form. The routes below are not automatically illegitimate. Each becomes immunizing when it is unrestricted, retrospective, and used to ensure that no denial counts against the public assurance.

4.1 Prior will

The first route says that a request is granted only when it matches what the deity had already determined to do. A moral limit of this kind can be sensible. Petition is not authorization for cruelty, contradiction, or arbitrary control over another person.

The trouble begins when prior will explains every result but predicts none. If the requested event occurs, petition was aligned. If it does not, petition was misaligned. The believer has no prospective way to tell the difference, and the occurrence itself becomes the only evidence for the condition. Prayer may then remain a practice of consent or relationship, but it no longer functions as dependable access to a causally open intervention.

4.2 The better-gift defense

The second route treats denial as superior provision. Illness, loss, or silence may build patience, deepen dependence, redirect a life, or prevent an unseen harm. Such goods are possible, and suffering sometimes is incorporated into later growth.

Yet possibility is not identity. A petition for healing is not answered in its ordinary content merely because illness later acquires meaning. If every nonreceipt of the requested good counts as receipt of a better unrequested good, the relation between request and answer disappears. The defense protects benevolence by changing what counts as fulfillment.

The evidential price should be stated openly. A theology may affirm that the deity under examination always gives what is ultimately best rather than what is requested. That is a different assurance from dependable petitionary intervention. It may be coherent, but it should not inherit evidence generated by the stronger promise without argument.

4.3 Indefinite timing

The third route postpones assessment. The request may be granted later, in another form, or beyond the petitioner's lifetime. Delay can be justified; many human promises include reasonable waiting. A time horizon becomes immunizing only when it is indefinitely elastic and no interval can count as nonfulfillment.

A promise addressed to finite lives must retain humanly usable content. If rescue after the crisis, reconciliation after death, or explanation beyond all possible observation automatically counts as the promised answer, the petitioner cannot distinguish waiting from denial. Indefinite timing preserves hope by removing a failure condition.

4.4 Petitioner deficiency

The fourth route moves the explanatory burden into the person who prayed. Denial reveals doubt, pride, hidden sin, deficient surrender, impatience, or inadequate spiritual maturity. Sometimes a person's motives are mixed; self-examination is not inherently abusive. The danger appears when an invisible defect is inferred from failure and made impossible to disconfirm.

This route is uniquely costly because it protects the promise by privatizing public failure. The petitioner suffers both the unmet need and a new suspicion about personal worth or sincerity. The person is placed in an

unwinnable position: confidence before the result is required, while the adverse result is later used to prove that the confidence was never genuine enough.

Rescue route	Legitimate prospective form	Immunizing form	Evidential price
Prior will	Public moral and theological limits shape requests in advance	Alignment is inferred solely from whatever occurred	Petition no longer discriminates between causal openness and predetermined outcome
Better gift	A denied request is acknowledged as denied while later goods are assessed separately	Any nonrequested outcome is renamed the answer	Request and fulfillment lose their ordinary connection
Timing	A meaningful interval and recognizable fulfillment remain in view	No duration or final condition can count as nonfulfillment	Hope is preserved by removing a failure state
Petitioner deficiency	Independently assessable conduct or motives matter prospectively	Failure itself proves hidden doubt or unworthiness	Public pressure is transferred into untestable self-blame

Table 2: The same theological theme can function as clarification or immunization depending on whether it constrains expectation before the outcome and retains a failure condition.

Together, the routes create an every-outcome structure. Granting confirms the promise. Denial confirms prior will or superior provision. Delay protects future confirmation. Continued concern confirms immaturity. No possible branch is allowed to reduce confidence in the claim that generated the expectation.

The every-outcome problem

1. Outcome evidence favors a promise over a comparator only through a result or pattern that is more expected under the promise. 2. An unrestricted rescue rule assigns the same favorable verdict to grantings and to every denial recast as a hidden condition, superior gift, delay, or petitioner defect. 3. The rule therefore supplies no discriminatory support by itself; only an independently demonstrated difference in results or frequencies could do that work.

5. Clarification or Hermeneutic Immunization?

Interpretation is unavoidable. Texts have genres, audiences, idioms, intertexts, and histories of reception. A later interpretation is not suspect merely because it is later or because it limits a surface reading. The distinction is between clarification that preserves and improves understanding and adjustment whose main achievement is preventing disconfirmation.

Lakatos (1978) distinguished theoretically progressive adjustments from degenerating rescue in scientific research programmes. Scripture is not a scientific model, but the epistemic contrast travels: some qualifications generate new understanding, organize evidence, and risk being wrong; others merely shield a prestige claim. Festinger et al. (1956) documented how deeply committed communities can reinterpret failed expectations rather than surrender the central commitment. Sincerity does not prevent this mechanism. A rescue can be psychologically earnest and epistemically self-sealing at the same time.

Three questions make the distinction practical:

1. Was the qualification stated with similar clarity before the outcome was known?

2. Would stating it fully in advance have materially lowered the confidence the broad rhetoric created?
3. Does the qualification identify any observable or experiential pattern that would count against the promise?

An interpretation is progressively clarifying when it answers the first question yes, gives a principled account of the second, and answers the third with a real failure condition. It is immunizing when it appears mainly after denial, would have changed the initial invitation, and makes every possible result compatible with success.

This framework also avoids a common overreach. Unfalsifiability does not by itself make a statement meaningless or false. Many claims about persons, history, and value are not settled by simple experiments. The narrower conclusion concerns one use of outcome evidence: a classification rule that preserves the claim whatever occurs cannot by itself make a favorable case discriminatory confirmation. An independent, prospectively specified difference in rates or patterns would be another matter; the reviewed record supplies no robust example. One cannot close the evidential door only when the news is bad.

6. When the Gaslighting Analogy Is Warranted

The term *gaslighting* is often used too loosely. Disagreement, mistaken reassurance, sincere theological complexity, and even a poor argument are not automatically gaslighting. The paper's charge must therefore be structural and conditional.

Abramson (2014) describes gaslighting as an attack on a person's standing as an interpreter of experience. Stark (2019) distinguishes tactics that sidestep supporting evidence from tactics that displace the problem onto alleged defects in the person reporting it. Sweet (2019) shows why the phenomenon is not only interpersonal: authority, dependency, and institutional inequalities can make reality-undermining practices effective even when they are not reducible to a single liar's strategy.

Applied to prayer disappointment, the analogy is strongest when five features converge:

1. a broad promise or assurance created a reasonable expectation;
2. the requested event did not occur;
3. the nonoccurrence is denied evidential standing rather than candidly acknowledged;
4. the explanatory burden is moved to an uncheckable defect in the petitioner; and
5. an authority relationship makes the petitioner dependent on the institution's reinterpretation of both the promise and the self.

This pattern does not require every pastor to intend domination. Intent matters to moral blame, but a practice can still erode self-trust through its structure. A minister may sincerely believe that doubt blocked the outcome. The epistemic effect on the petitioner can nevertheless be relevantly similar, even when its degree, duration, and moral responsibility differ: ordinary evidence is made suspect, institutional interpretation becomes decisive, and the failure of the public assurance returns as an accusation against the person who relied on it.

The analogy weakens when the conditions were clear beforehand, denial is openly admitted, the petitioner's character is not attacked, and leaders permit the outcome to reduce confidence in a strong claim. In such a setting, painful theological disagreement may remain, but the central reality-undermining mechanism is absent.

The careful formulation is therefore not that unanswered prayer is gaslighting. It is that *institutional gaslighting-like management* can occur when a community preserves a confidence-generating promise by training petitioners to distrust straightforward evidence and to interpret failure as proof of their own hidden defect. The criticism targets that mechanism, not the intelligence or sincerity of religious people.

7. Intervention and Coping Must Be Kept Separate

Prayer can matter even if the strong intervention promise is weakened. It can focus attention, create ritual structure, express grief, sustain hope, invite moral reflection, connect a person with a community, and offer a language for endurance. These are not consolation prizes. They are human goods with their own standards of assessment.

Research on religious coping supports a differentiated view. Pargament (1997) and the RCOPE work distinguish helpful and harmful religious coping patterns rather than treating religiosity as one uniform variable (Pargament et al., 2000). A meta-analysis found that positive and negative forms of religious coping tend to associate with better and worse psychological adjustment respectively (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). A recent pooled analysis across diverse United States cohorts likewise found different relationships for positive and negative religious coping, with variation across cultural groups (Britt et al., 2026). These findings concern coping and adjustment; they do not establish supernatural intervention in the external event.

That distinction matters in both directions. A critic should not infer that a practice is worthless merely because external causal efficacy is unshown. A defender should not infer that emotional regulation, social support, or meaning confirms the stronger intervention claim. A secular ritual, conversation, meditation practice, or support group can also improve coping without thereby proving the metaphysics attached to it.

A mature theology may deliberately define petition as participation, lament, surrender, or transformation. That position avoids much of the evidential challenge because it no longer promises the same external result. Its intellectual cost is not incoherence; it is candor about a change in claim strength. The therapeutic or relational account should not be presented as though it were what expansive intervention rhetoric had publicly guaranteed all along.

The rational alternative is transparent separation:

- assess external intervention claims by the public differences they lead people to expect;
- assess private religious interpretation within the person's wider evidence;
- assess coping by psychological and social outcomes, including possible harms; and
- assess textual interpretation by whether its conditions are principled, prospective, and content-preserving.

This separation protects both rigor and humane practice. It permits prayer to retain genuine value without turning that value into evidence for a promise that survives only by changing its meaning.

8. Objections and Replies

8.1 The promises were always conditional

Conditions of faith, moral alignment, discipleship, and abiding are present in the texts and traditions. The objection succeeds against a blank-check reading. It does not answer the content-preservation problem. A condition must be specified well enough to guide expectation before the result and must not be inferred only from failure. Otherwise the condition is functioning as an escape hatch rather than a public limit.

8.2 A free deity cannot be tested

A personal agent may notice a test, refuse cooperation, or act for reasons the experiment cannot model. This limits what controlled trials can establish. Yet the strong public promise concerns ordinary lives outside laboratories too. If intervention is presented as causally important, then the absence of a stable, replicated advantage in the reviewed clinical literature remains relevant, while favorable ordinary cases need comparison rather than attribution alone. A reply that makes intervention undetectable in principle may preserve logical possibility, but it cannot also use favorable outcomes as publicly detectable confirmation.

8.3 Some answers may be rare and selective

They may be. The paper does not rule them out. A rare, selective, opaque phenomenon warrants a correspondingly modest public claim. It does not warrant universal-sounding confidence unless independent reasons support that confidence. The rhetoric and the operative theology should be brought into alignment.

8.4 Hidden goods can justify denial

They can. The problem is not that unseen goods are impossible. It is that mere possibility cannot make every denial evidentially neutral while every granting remains positive evidence. A specific hidden-good defense needs reasons to believe that the good exists, that denial contributes to it, and that the good could not be secured at lower cost. Without those reasons, the defense shows compatibility rather than confirmation.

8.5 The gaslighting language is unfair

It would be unfair as a blanket label for religious care or for every mistaken explanation. The argument uses the term only when the structure includes evidence sidestepping, defect displacement, authority dependence, and erosion of self-trust. Where leaders acknowledge failure, avoid blaming petitioners, and allow evidence to revise the claim, the analogy does not apply.

8.6 Prayer is primarily relational

That may be a coherent and valuable account. It is not a reply on behalf of a strong intervention promise unless the relation itself was the outcome promised. A relational theology should say plainly that petition does not provide dependable leverage over external events. Doing so preserves the practice by relinquishing, rather than vindicating, the stronger public assurance.

9. Conclusion

The central question is not whether every reported answer can be disproved or whether a deity could ever have reasons to deny a request. It is whether a confidence-generating promise remains a public evidential promise after every adverse result has been insulated from evidential cost.

In the targeted practice, broad New Testament assurances create an interventionist expectation. The public record considered here does not supply a robust, replicated advantage matching that confidence. Failure is then routed through prior will, a better gift, indefinite timing, or petitioner deficiency. Each route can have a legitimate prospective form. Used without limits after the fact, however, the routes form a closed loop in which granting confirms and denial cannot disconfirm.

The cost is not merely abstract. When the loop assigns nonfulfillment to hidden doubt or spiritual inadequacy, the petitioner is asked to distrust ordinary evidence and to interpret suffering as evidence against the self. Under conditions of authority and dependency, that can become institutional gaslighting-like management even without a conscious plan to deceive.

Prayer need not be abandoned. It may remain lament, relationship, attention, solidarity, moral reflection, or coping. The honest distinction is that these goods do not by themselves confirm dependable external intervention. A coping practice can be worthwhile as coping. A relational practice can be worthwhile as relationship. Neither needs the evidential credit of a stronger promise.

The conclusion is therefore firm and bounded. An every-outcome rule supplies no public confirmation by itself; the reviewed controlled evidence provides no robust, replicated clinical advantage, and flexibly attributed ordinary cases do not establish one. On this outcome evidence, the strong intervention promise lacks public warrant at its advertised strength. What remains may still sustain devotion or include occasional opaque intervention, but

neither possibility can fairly generate confidence before the outcome and evade assessment after it. Intellectual and pastoral integrity require stating the operative promise at the modest strength its failure conditions can actually bear.

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

- P1.** Outcome evidence can publicly support a strong intervention promise over ordinary medical and social variation only through at least one of two contrasts: a prospectively specified, outcome-sensitive classification or an independently measured advantage in relevant results or frequencies.
- P2.** An unrestricted rescue rule is not outcome-sensitive: it treats grantings as confirmation and reassigns every denial to prior will, a better gift, indefinite timing, or an uncheckable defect in the petitioner.
- P3.** Therefore, the unrestricted rescue rule supplies no discriminatory public support by itself.
- P4.** The controlled evidence reviewed here does not show a robust, replicated clinical advantage, and ordinary favorable cases interpreted through flexible post hoc attribution do not independently establish such an advantage.
- P5. Conclusion:** The outcome evidence considered here supplies neither required contrast and therefore does not publicly warrant dependable intervention at the advertised strength. Occasional opaque intervention and relational, devotional, or coping value remain open without being confirmed by the every-outcome rule.

Validity. P1 states the two ways in which the outcome evidence under review could provide the needed contrast. P2 and P3 exclude the first; P4 excludes the second for the reviewed record. The bounded conclusion follows. The inference does not derive atheism, the impossibility of an answered petition, or a verdict on reasons for religious belief unrelated to observed outcomes.

Support for the premises. P1 is a conceptual claim about discrimination between live alternatives. P2 characterizes the unrestricted rule targeted by the argument; whether a particular community actually uses that rule remains an interpretive and empirical question, and communities that state prospective conditions and acknowledge denial are counterexamples to its application. P4 is an empirical assessment of a limited and heterogeneous literature, not proof that every petition fails. The inference is deductively valid conditional on these premises, while their application and evidential strength remain open to case-specific assessment.

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