

"Prayer" vs "Choice and Avoidance"

Post by "Kalosyni" of February 16, 2026 at 8:19 AM

In yesterday's Zoom a topic came up (very briefly and not in any detail) that could be very rich and also in need of exploration...prayer.

I don't think we have any direct evidence of prayer by Epicurus, and since he was a materialist perhaps he did not do any prayer. I would define our current understanding of prayer as distinct from ancestor rituals or sacrifices to ancient gods. Here in the US, the way that prayer is currently thought of is often originating from Judeo-Christian ideas and prayer rituals. Then there is the New Age movement which expanded that to include Hinduism and Native American (etc.), but they are all based on the idea that one's thoughts can affect the Universe and that God or the Universe is listening and will grant your wishes if you pray with a pure heart. For those people who are raised in a religion but then moved on and over to studying Epicurean philosophy, then it may seem that the habit of praying is still there in the mind or the back of the mind. And for those who feel clear about the nature of the Universe this could then create a cognitive dissonance.

A main benefit of prayer is the development of a feeling of courage. (And a related question is does Epicurus or Philodemus say anything about courage).

There is the famous AA prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

Courage to change the things I can, and Wisdom to know the difference." And this can be compared to this excerpt in Letter to Menoeceus: "He understands that the limit of good things is easy to fulfill and easy to attain, whereas the course of ills is either short in time or slight in pain; he laughs at (destiny), whom some have introduced as the mistress of all things. (He thinks that with us lies the chief power in determining events, some of which happen by necessity) and some by chance, and some are within our control; for while necessity cannot be called to account, he sees that chance is inconstant, but that which is in our control is subject to no master, and to it are naturally attached praise and blame."

I think that a downside of prayer is that it could get in the way of knowing specifically what you want, because sometimes a prayer originates from a vague "feeling" and not a specific "want" - for example saying to yourself: "I pray that everything will turn out okay" vs "I would like to have a safe journey and feel relaxed, and now I can think of specific ways that I could go about increasing my safety and relaxation". So getting in touch with desires and specifically spelling out those desires can be more empowering than prayer when you think about specific actions you can do...and thus leading to greater courage.

Post by “Godfrey” of February 16, 2026 at 4:03 PM

My understanding of prayer is pretty much limited to the idea of praying *to* someone/something that has power to intervene and grant something to someone. In this sense it is similar to talking. However, somewhere along the line I heard someone refer to another way to pray, which is to listen.

This latter version seems to have more validity, and doesn't require any supernatural or imaginary entity to listen to. It's basically a form of meditation: getting quiet and listening to whatever comes up.

Per Lucretius 5:11203+/_: *True piety is for a man to have the power To contemplate the world with quiet mind.*

Post by “DaveT” of February 16, 2026 at 4:26 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

A main benefit of prayer is the development of a feeling of courage.

I can agree with your statement as a goal of praying. As I think about it, Christians probably pray mostly to ask divine intervention of some sort.

For example John 16:23–24 The New King James Version

"23 And in that day you will ask Me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. 24 Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full."

And of course the shared prayer of most all Christians "...give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses..., lead us not into temptation...; deliver us from evil,..."

So, I consider this concept of the divine direction to pray as the primary "no go" distinction with Epicurus' self actualization. As I understand Epicurus, he would not abide by the doctrine of divine grace, and the intercession of the Virgin and the saints (for Catholics at least).

Psychologists, Sociologists, and Archaeologists among others will never be able to pinpoint the cause of the human urge to attribute divine power to control the universe. That urge seems likely to me in most, if not every existing religious belief. And religions no matter the time or era or location will never investigate or dig into a concept that relies upon "Faith" in the unknowable. Nor will they abide in questioning the foundations of their particular faith.

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 18, 2026 at 10:22 AM

Here is an interesting article from the Psychology Today website, and which would be related to the topic of "Epicurean choice and avoidance"...

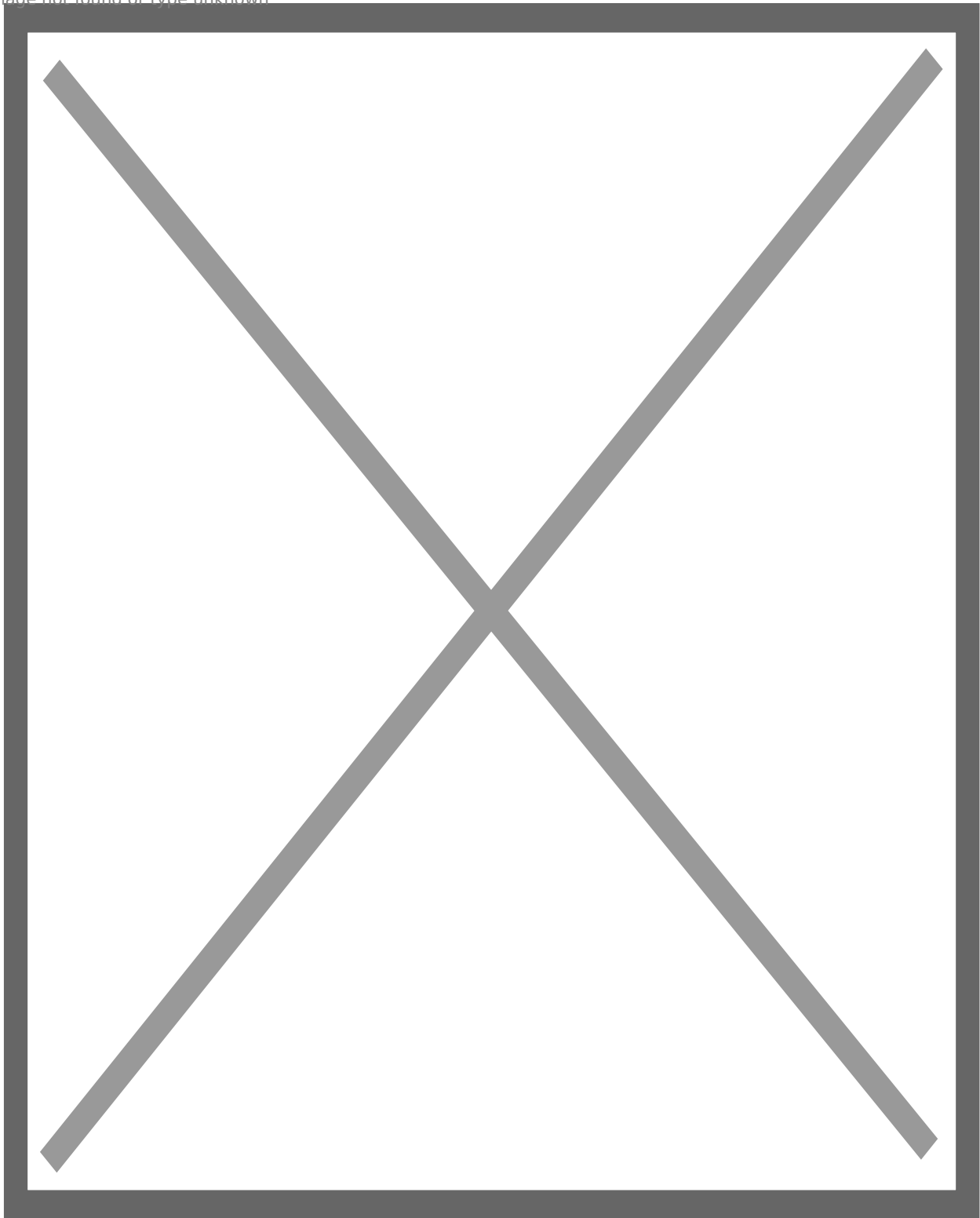
Quote

Resourcefulness underlies [resilience](#). The more ways you know how to get things done, the more options you have when your usual approach hits a wall. The more ways you've solved problems before, the less daunting new problems feel. Yet many people never target resourcefulness as a skill they can build. They stick to a narrow playbook of how they get things done, and don't consider venturing beyond that.

Resourcefulness can give you a greater sense of security in your life and more trust in yourself.

Read the full article here:

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[7 Ways to Increase Your Resourcefulness](#)

Practical ways to become someone who can figure anything out.

www.psychologytoday.com

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4947-prayer-vs-choice-and-avoidance/>

Post by “Eikadistes” of February 19, 2026 at 8:41 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

since he was a materialist perhaps he did not do any prayer.

Philódēmos records Epíkouros of having written that "it is fitting for us to pray". In *On Piety*, he affirms that their opponents observed the Epicureans to share "propitious offerings and sincere and sonorous prayers" to the gods. So, *even then*, the opponents of Epíkouros, who accuse him of being impious, *still* document ancient Epicureans to have engaged in "sonorous prayers".

What *kind* of prayers? At least, whatever was being recited at the local *theatron*. Since it is not otherwise specified, I imagine they would have used the available prayers, just as they patronized the available civic festivals and available religious rituals provided in Attica. Perhaps a traditional hymn in Athens would have provided familiarity and calm, like our yearly Christmas tunes:

ORPHIC HYMN 15 (TO ZEUS)

Zeus invaluable, Zeus imperishable, here, *you see*, we [bear] testimony: you [are] to be revered, delivering and pre-eminent. Oh, King — by your lead it was revealed on this account, divine, Earth, Goddess, Mother, mountains and resounding cliffs, both sea and all, as high as heaven, positioned within, Zeus Timekeeper, sceptered, thundering, wild, All-Generator, beginning of all, and end of all, Earthquaker, Increaser, Purifyer, All-Shaker, Flashing, Thundering, Electrifying, Nourishing Zeus; Hear me, One-of-Changing-Form, permit, *then*, immaculate health, and peace, Goddess, and immaculate magnificence of wealth.

Ζεῦ πολυτίμητε, Ζεῦ ἄφθιτε, τήνδε τοι ἡμεῖς
μαρτυρίαν τιθέμεσθα λυτήριον ἠδὲ πρόσευξιν.
ὦ βασιλεῦ, διὰ σὴν κεφαλὴν ἐφάνη τάδε θεΐας,
γαῖα θεὰ μήτηρ ὀρέουσά θ' ὑψηχέες ὄχθοι,
καὶ πόντος καὶ πάνθ', ὀπόσ' οὐρανὸς ἐντὸς ἔταξε
Ζεῦ Κρόνιε, σκηπτοῦχε, καταιβάτα, ὀμβριμόθυμε,
παντογένεθλ', ἀρχὴ πάντων, πάντων τε τελευτή,
σεισίχθων, ἀύξητά, καθάρσιε, παντοτινάκτα,
ἀστραπαῖε, βρονταῖε, κεραύνιε, φυτάλιε Ζεῦ ·

κλύθί μευ, αἰολόμορφε, δίδου δ' ὑγίειαν ἀμεμφῆ
εἰρήνην τε θεᾶν καὶ πλοῦτου δόξαν ἄμεμπτον.

*Zeú polytímēte, Zeú áphthite, ténde toi ēmeís
martyrían tithémestha lytérion édè próseuxin.
ó basileû, dià sên kephalēn ephánē táde theías ,
gaîa theà métēr oréousa th' hypsēkhées ókhthoi,
kaí póntos kaí pánth', opós' ourános éntos étaxe
Zeú Krónie, skēptóúkhe, kataibáta, ombrimóthyme,
pantogénethl', árkhē pántōn, pántōn te teleuté,
seisíkhthōn, auzēntá, kathársie, pantotinákta,
ástrapaeîe, brontaèe, keraünie, phytálie Zeú;
klythí meυ, aiolómorphe, dídou d' ygíeian ámempthē
eirénēn te theàn kai plóutou dóxan ámempton.*

I'm sure most of us here both reject the narrative of the nativity, while also enjoying a few Christmas songs that were inspired by the celebrations related to the mythic birth of Christ. I have to imagine that Epicureans were the same in their preference for familiar comforts.

The key point is the rejection of intercessory prayer. Usually, we imply "intercessory" in the modern world when we say "prayer" to mean wish-fulfillment. Rather, as he writes in *On Lifecourses*, **we pray "in order that [...] we may realize our fulfilments and social conformity with the laws"** (Philódēmos, *On Piety*). Indeed, "prayers and obeisances and such honours for the gods are fitting".

Philódēmos also reports Epíkouros of having written in *On Lifecourses* that "to pray in natural for us", so, in the *first* place, prayer developed organically, like we developed the forms of gods in ancient dreams, so the act of praying precedes the composition of religious hymns. Then, also, there wasn't a great need for an Epicurean founder to craft a prayer that could be privileged by Epicureans as a proper, Epicurean prayer. Any prayer can be an Epicurean prayer so long as the supplicant is not requesting that the object of their reverence perform magic.

...but, in such the event that we needed one, I gave it a [shot](#) a while ago:

AN EPICUREAN HYMN TO HĒDONĒ

PLEASURESS Blessed, PLEASURESS Incorruptible, to *this*, truly, we
are disposed, *testimony*, both liberating and therepeutic;
Oh, Queen, because of your divine image, the good life was disclosed,
flavor, fragrance, radiance, warmth, oh, Goddess Fruitful,
and the immortal good of *friendship*, oh, Mother Bountiful;
PLEASURESS of the GARDENS, *prudent, principled, peaceable*,
All-Mother, Source-of-all, and End-of-all,
Common-to-All, Motivating, Smile-Loving, Nurse of Love,

Faithful, Fearless, Beloved, Nourishing PLEASURESS;
Hear me, LEADERESS: permit, then, immaculate *painlessness*,
peace, and, *Goddess*, also, immaculate *impassiveness*.

Ἦδονή μακαρία Ἦδονή ἀφθαρτε τήνδε τοι ἡμεῖς
μαρτυρίαν τιθέμεσθα λυτήριον ἠδὲ θεραπευτικὴν·
ὦ βασίλισσά διὰ σὴν εἰκόνά θεία ἐφάνη τὸν ἀγαθὸν βίον
γεῦσις εὐωδία καλή θερμὴ ὦ θεὰ πολύφορβος
καὶ ἀθανάτη ἀγαθὴ φίλιος ὦ μήτηρ καρποφορὸς·
Ἦδονή ἐν κήποις φρόνιμη καλή δίκαια
Παντογένεθλ' ἀρχὴ πάντων πάντων τε τέλα
Ποθεινοτάτη φιλομμειδῆς ἐρωτοτρόφος Πάνδημον
πίστη ἄφοβε φίλιε φυτάλιε Ἦδονή·
κλυθί μευ ἠγεμόνη δίδου δ' ἀτᾶρᾶξιᾶν ἄμεμπτον
εἰρήνην τε θεὰν καὶ πλούτου ἀπονίᾶν ἄμεμπτον.

*Hēdoné makaría, Hēdoné áphtharte, ténde toi ēmeís
martyrían tithémestha lútérion édè therapeutiíēn.
ó Basílissa dià sēn eikóna theía ephánē tòn agathón bíon,
geúsis euōdíá kalé thérme, ó theà polýphorbos,
kai athanátē ágathē philías ó méter karpophóros.
Hēdoné èn Kēpois, Phrónimē, Kalé, Dikaía,
pantogénethl' árkhē pántōn, pántōn te teleuté,
Pándēmon Potheinotátē Philommeidēs Erōtotróphos,
Pisté Áphobe Phílie Phytálie Hēdoné;
klythí meυ Hēgemónē dídou d' aponían ámempton
eirénēn te theàn kai plóutou ataraxían ámempton.*

And while it isn't explicitly a hymn, or a prayer, I've always liked Usener fragment 469:

"Thanks [to] the blessed nature that has made the necessities *obtainable*,
but the *unobtainable*, unnecessary."

χάρις τῇ [μακαρίᾳ φύσει](#) ὅτι τὰ ἀναγκαῖα ἐποίησεν εὐπόριστα,
τὰ δὲ δυσπόριστα οὐκ ἀναγκαῖα.

Post by “Don” of February 22, 2026 at 7:11 AM

Interesting topic. Thanks for starting this [Kalosyni](#) !

I fully agree that the popular notion of the word *prayer* is "Oh God, I know you're busy but I need a favor." I'm intentionally being flippant, but this idea isn't new. Lucian gave us [Icaromenippus, an Aerial Expedition](#) where we read:

Quote

we reached the spot where he was to sit and listen to the prayers. There was a row of openings with lids like well-covers, and a chair of gold by each. Zeus took his seat at the first, lifted off the lid and inclined his ear. From every quarter of Earth were coming the most various and contradictory petitions; for I too bent down my head and listened. Here are specimens. 'O Zeus, that I might be king!' 'O Zeus, that my onions and garlic might thrive!' 'Ye Gods, a speedy death for my father!' Or again, 'Would that I might succeed to my wife's property!' 'Grant that my plot against my brother be not detected.' 'Let me win my suit.' 'Give me an Olympic garland.' Of those at sea, one prayed for a north, another for a south wind; the farmer asked for rain, the fuller for sun. Zeus listened, and gave each prayer careful consideration, but without promising to grant them all;

But there are different forms of prayer, even in Christianity, though some are not as familiar to the general populace. I know that I was probably in my 30s (LOL decades ago now) when I discovered this. Even in the psedo-Pauline epistle [1 Timothy 2:1](#), the author gives four types of what can be called generally "prayer": supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings (δεήσεις προσευχάς έντεύξεις εύχαριστίας). A Catholic site provides the [Four Basic Types of Prayer](#):

1. Prayer of Blessing and Adoration (praising God)
2. Prayer of Petition (asking for what we need, including forgiveness)
3. Prayer of Intercession (asking for what others need)
4. Prayer of Thanksgiving (for what God has given and done)

I can see 1 (as [Eikadistes](#) has done with Pleasure and Lucretius has done for Epicurus) and 4 being open to Epicurean applications, not so much 2 and 3. 4 especially seems fruitful given Epicurus' emphasis on gratitude for the good things we have and/or had in our lives. They also include Meditative Prayer in that list further down, and that too seems a potential area of exploration: really noticing our experience of our senses and feelings to get a handle on what our bodies and minds are trying to tell us rather than simply busying ourselves scrolling etc as a distraction from ourselves.

That's all for now. More thoughts later.

Post by "Don" of February 22, 2026 at 7:34 AM

Oh, in response to [Kalosyni](#) 's thread title, "Prayer" vs "Choice and Avoidance", I see choice and rejection (see other threads for my rants on "avoidance" as a translation of φεύγω) as a tactic of Epicurean living practice. Honestly, if we subjected EVERY decision to a decision tree of pros/cons and pleasure/pain, we'd be paralyzed. "Ham sandwich or peanut butter and jelly? Which will give me the most pleasure?" Ideally, practicing choice and rejection should become second nature. Easier said than done!! As an example, I'll admit I like to frame my decision to go to work as a choice, even when I'm tired or frustrated or just REALLY don't want to get out of bed on a cold winter morning. I could quit or not go in, but the pain that would ensue from lost wages, etc., would far outweigh any fleeting pleasure. Therefore, I choose the greater pleasure over time. We need not subject every choice to this tactic, but we should keep it in mind and do it thoughtfully and deliberately when necessary.

Prayer, on the other hand, is a moment of reflection. Taking time from our busy day to reflect, acknowledge gratitude, really *feel* our connection to our bodies and the natural world. Take a beat. Take a breath.

That would be my take on the connection between "Prayer" and "Choice and Avoidance"