

# Thoughts, Prayers, and Other Nice Ideas



**It happens every time.** You don't even have to be a celebrity. Just get into an accident, fall ill, lose a loved one, or suffer an affliction of most any kind. Then let it be known and the sentiments will follow: *Thoughts. Prayers. Thoughts and prayers. Positive energy. Good vibes.*

So it's not just Tiger Woods. When the greatest golfer of the past 25 years sent his car careening and rolling to a frightening crash in February, the response was not surprising. The same expressions of concern and support that you and I might receive came flooding across every media channel, social and traditional. And surely Woods' phone—and those of others on his team—blew up with similar texts. It's a quick and easy way to show that we know and that we care. But let's hope it's only a beginning.

## What are thoughts worth?

Greeting cards probably aren't the best place to gather wisdom, but sometimes they arrive with just the right dose of encouragement. In days of grief, it can be nice to slice open an envelope and

pull out a card that says simply, "Thinking of you." It's a blessed sign that we're not alone at just the time when we can feel painfully so. It is an expression of compassion, even if at a distance.

Scripture does not speak mystically when it considers the content of our thoughts. As we might expect, thoughts can be good, bad, or neutral. The apostle Paul encouraged the Philippians to think well: "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." And he discouraged a different kind of thinking among the Romans: "Do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh." In this dichotomy, "thinking of you" is a kindness, and any words we add to these, written honestly and caringly, might be deemed *lovely*.

Thinking takes time. Certainly, if we have bought a card, added a note to it, and prepared it for mailing, we are making more than a little effort to think about the other person. This is more than a text or a tweet, which might allow us to shoot off an ac-

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ceptable thought without truly thinking.

Thinking also returns over time. A hurting person knows we have really been thinking of them when we come back later and check in with them. Grief lasts, sometimes for months and years. And in the case of injured athletes, innumerable testimonies point to the depression that can arise when one is sidelined over a long stretch. Your text on the day of or your card in the ensuing days provide evidence of a first thought for the hurting friend. But if you come around a month later, then again and maybe again, you show that your thoughts weren't cheap; they have lasting worth.

Hopefully, this repeated expression of thoughts for another sounds like ministry. It is. Paul told the Philippians to “value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” Then he went on to write, “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who... made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant...” If in our true, active thinking of others we are serving them, then this is a ministry of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Finally here, we should not miss the chance to think more broadly when first thinking of a friend. A serious accident like the one Tiger Woods suffered should cause us to consider our own mortality and our own blessings. Do we ingest each day's events as seriously as we should, recognizing that we are never promised tomorrow? Are we reminded of the miracles and mercy God has worked in our own life? Taking the time to think about these important questions in context of considering our friend's pain allows us to grow in our own faith and in our compassion for others.

Paul assured the Philippians, “I have you in my heart.” When we take time and effort to think of others and to express the depth of that thought to them, we show that they are in our heart, where Jesus resides.

## The strength behind our prayers

Maybe you never knew that prayer was such a loaded word. But consider for a moment what goes through your mind when you read this tweet from one celebrity to another when a challenge has come: “Thoughts to you, my friend.” Or this: “Thoughts and prayers to you, my friend.” To the first you may think, *Probably not a Christian*. To the latter you may instead think, *I wonder if he/she is a Christian?!* That tweeting celeb may be tapping out the quickest signal of sympathy available and we're diving into judgments of faith and salvation. Let's redirect the questions.

How often have you said to a person who has voiced a need, “I'll be praying for you,” only to forget all about that prayer until the next time that person calls or crosses your path? All together now: *Guilty!* It looks like our concern, then, should be not with the commitment to prayer in others, but the commitment to prayer in ourselves.

Let's start with a powerful difference between thoughts and prayers. Thoughts are direct; prayers are diverted—and that diversion delivers what we never can because it runs through God.

The beauty of praying for someone is that they don't need to be a believer in God for our prayers to be answered. And very few people turn prayers down. They figure that if we have an “in” with The Big Guy, why not let us try?

But we understand prayer to be so much more than that. God isn't just a Big Guy or The Man Upstairs. He is the Creator and sustainer of the universe, and in the person of Jesus Christ, he met every need imaginable as a healer and friend. Jesus, we know from the letter to the Hebrews, “sympathizes with our weaknesses.” The context of this passage refers to temptation, but we are weakened in so many other ways, and Jesus understands these as well. No wonder his name is the proper password for our prayers! To pray for another is not to dispense our own heart to the one who is hurting, but to ask God to dispense his.

Beyond offering to pray, though, we must really pray. Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.” While this does not mean that Paul

prayed without interruption for the Ephesians—he had others on his prayer list!—it told them that they had not left his mind since he last saw them. And they had not left his prayers. He was then thinking of them and praying for them. Thoughts *and* prayers.

But Paul wasn't modeling a rote or lifeless discipline. He let the Philippians know, "In all my prayers for you, I always pray with joy..." When we pray for others, we are doing a work that produces joy in us. And why not? In praying, we are reminded of our friendship, reminded of things our friend may have done in the past for us, and reminded of the powerful hand and loving heart of God, who hears and responds to our prayers.

Lastly, if your friend is not one who yet believes in Jesus, add this to your prayers. Ask the Lord to use this season of difficulty to draw your friend forever to him, to make this the day of your friend's salvation.

### Those 'other nice ideas'

Ironically, about a week before Tiger Woods' accident, I was prompted by a different round of online sentiments to tweet a question of my own: "So when someone says they're sending positive energy, exactly how does it arrive?" Yes, it was facetious, but I was curious what answers it might provoke. Turns out, not many. (That's kind of how I roll on Twitter.) There was one nomination for "carrier pigeon" and one for "laser beam." This is the realm we're dealing in when we start moving toward "positive energy" and "good vibes." And while it would be nice if people agreed that these are flights of fancy, the day after Woods' crash, the Northern California Golf Association posted this message on Facebook: "Positive, healing vibes to the Big Cat and his family."

The Bible doesn't speak of energy and vibes, because the Bible is about personal connection: God to woman, God to man, people to people. It has no place for impersonal forces like energy and vibes, as zippy as these may sound. Power belongs to a person: God.

Jesus was once approached by a group of religious leaders who had been thinking about a big

question, one they hoped would trick him. They set up a convoluted hypothetical scenario where a woman kept marrying each of seven brothers after the preceding one had left her widowed. "Who will be her husband in heaven?" they asked. Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God." It's an important lesson in the mistakes we make when we only think we know the way the world works. But when we keep to God's word in the Bible, we find God—and it is God who answers prayer and meets people's real needs.

We should never hesitate to offer compassion and support for those who are hurting. At first, this may mean a simple "thoughts and prayers" message. But the more personal we make it—"Know that I am thinking of you and praying for you"—and the more extensive we are in offering our time and assistance, the more truthful those thoughts and prayers prove to be and the more life-giving they become. 🙏

<sup>1</sup>An exceptional work in caring for the hurting and grieving is Stephen Ministries. Find out about the resources and training they offer at [stephenministries.org](http://stephenministries.org).

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