

Jesus and the Mystery of Prayer

Read [Matthew 6:9–13](#)

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Stanley Praisnath was riding in the elevator of the south tower of the World Trade Center when American Airlines Flight 11 struck the north tower. Being in the elevator, he had not heard the explosion from the north tower. But when Stanley walked into his office on the 81st floor (he was an assistant vice president at Fuji Bank), he saw a red-orange flame coming from the north tower.

With others, he went back down the elevator. But in the lobby loudspeakers assured everyone that their building was secure; they could return to their offices. With others, Stanley got back on the elevator.

He was back at his desk, on the phone, when a giant airplane caught his eye out the window. He heard its engines rev as it grew bigger and bigger, coming head-on. He dove under his desk—on top of which he always kept a Bible—and he said a prayer: “Lord, I can’t do this. You take over.”

The nose of United Airlines Flight 175 crashed into Stanley’s very floor; a “wing,” he said, “sliced right through the office.” There was a deafening explosion (Stanley would suffer temporary hearing loss), a ball of flame, and then darkness. Stanley was the only one left on the 81st floor. In fact, upon impact everyone on floors 78–82 had been swept away. Stanley at first thought they had heartlessly left him behind, before he realized later what had happened. The ceiling was caved in, part of the floor collapsed, partitions and walls flattened, and every piece of furniture and computers destroyed. Everything except for Stanley’s desk, under which he huddled, somehow alive.

The documentary that told Stanley’s story (*Miracles in Our Midst*) pointed out that with the epicenter of the crash less than 50 yards from Stanley’s desk, and thousands of gallons of jet fuel igniting, “the banker’s chances of survival should be nonexistent. Yet when the cataclysmic roar of the crash subsided, Stanley Praisnath is very much alive.”

Stanley, after more answers to prayer, made it out of the building. He said, “... there is a God, and He hears and intervenes.”

Stanley Praisnath credited his miraculous escape to a prayer.

THE MYSTERY OF PRAYER

As a former unbeliever who had an experience with God through a simple, heart-felt prayer, I understandably have been fascinated by prayer ever since. In that moment 30 years ago, I became aware, quite suddenly and surprisingly, of the supernatural power of prayer.

In my years as a pastor, I’ve had the privilege of seeing many prayers get answered—prayers of individuals, prayers by congregations, and a fair number of my own prayers. Prayer is exciting.

It is also mysterious.

First of all, sometimes prayers don't get answered. For example, I am sure that many other prayers on 9/11 went unanswered, even as Stanley Praimnath was escaping. Why is it that some prayers don't get answered?

Second, even though I know prayer is the Great Invitation—to talk to Almighty God, King of the Universe—sometimes I'm not motivated to do it. Why is that?

Third, there are many different approaches to prayer, so much so that it can be confusing. For example, in an ad in my local Westchester Times paper, a New Age group said the thing to do is find a quiet place and sing the sound HU (pronounced "hue") as a song of love. For some, the time of day and the posture of prayer are important. We're all familiar with television images of devout Muslims kneeling in prayer together. For others, the place is important. We're all familiar with television images of devout Jews who practice prayer at the "Wailing Wall." In the religion I grew up in, the number of prayers was important. To be forgiven for our sins, we were instructed to pray specific memorized prayers a certain number of times.

And there are various other approaches to prayer—from lighting candles, to wearing certain articles of clothing, to meditation. I even came across a uniquely modern approach to prayer: a website that offered to send your prayers via radio wave transmitter to the place in the universe where the Big Bang may have occurred, and which was, therefore—according to the website—"the last known location of GOD." Which of these approaches is right?

WHO HAS THE ANSWERS?

Who should we listen to when it comes to the mystery of prayer?

My choice is Jesus Christ. According to the pages of the New Testament, Jesus had insight into prayer that no one else has ever had. In the Gospel of John, he prayed, "*Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me*" ([John 11:41–42](#), emphasis added). Jesus said that he knew God always heard his prayers, which was another way of saying that God always answered his prayers. Who else could make such a claim? Jesus did—and then backed it up by raising Lazarus from the dead in response to his prayer ([John 11:43–44](#))!

In the next chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus prayed spontaneously, "*Father, glorify your name!*" The Bible says that a voice came from heaven: "*I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.*" God was carrying on an *out loud* conversation with Jesus from heaven. (The people were so shocked that some said that the voice from heaven must have been thunder.) It is impressive enough that God would carry on an out loud conversation with Jesus from heaven, but it is perhaps even more impressive that this did not impress Jesus! He said to the bystanders, "*This voice was for your benefit, not mine.*" Prayer was so real to him, silent or otherwise, that he did not need to hear the sound of God's audible voice to make it more real ([John 12:28–30](#)).

Not to mention the fact that he walked on water, calmed storms, and healed all kinds of sicknesses and disabilities—all of which, he said, came from his prayer relationship with the Heavenly Father: *“I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does”* ([John 5:19](#)). If Jesus *saw* what the Father was doing, that means he was in communication with him. Communication with God is another name for prayer.

The same is true of his teaching, which has changed the world—he said he got it from his prayer relationship with the Father: *Jesus answered, “My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me”* ([John 7:16](#)).

Who should we listen to when it comes to the mystery of prayer? I think the answer is Jesus Christ.

THE MODEL PRAYER

The good news is, Jesus taught us what he knew! He taught about prayer in many places in the Bible, but especially in the Lord’s Prayer—or, as it is often called, the Model Prayer.

9 *“This, then, is how you should pray:*

‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

10 *your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

11 *Give us today our daily bread.*

12 *Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

13 *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one, for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.*

Amen.’ ”

[MATTHEW 6:9–13](#)

I prefer “**Model Prayer**” to “**Lord’s Prayer**” as a name for this prayer for two reasons. **First**, this prayer contains a line that Jesus himself could never have prayed: *“Forgive us our debts”* (**12**). The Bible is clear that Jesus was sinless ([1 Peter 2:22](#), [Hebrews 4:15](#)), so he could never have personally prayed this prayer.

Second, this prayer was meant to be just that: a *model for prayer*. Sometimes Christians pray this prayer word for word. There is nothing wrong with that, especially in group situations, like in church. But if the repetition of this prayer becomes an empty ritual, just words we repeat over and over because we think they will earn us favor with God, then we are violating Jesus’ own words in his introduction to the Model Prayer: *“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words”* ([Matthew 6:7](#)). Jesus gave this prayer to us as a model—to show us the kinds of things we should pray about, and how we should pray about them.