



Six Prayers God Always Answers





Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.  
Carol Stream, Illinois

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SIX  
Prayers  
GOD  
ALWAYS  
Answers\*

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*Six Prayers God Always Answers*

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Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920.

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Herringshaw, Mark.

Six prayers God always answers / Mark Herringshaw and Jennifer Schuchmann.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4143-1867-7 (hc)

ISBN-10: 1-4143-1867-7 (hc)

1. Prayer—Christianity. I. Schuchmann, Jennifer, date. II. Title.

BV220.H44 2008

248.3'2—dc22

2007050575

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Printed in the United States of America

14 13 12 11 10 09 08  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# 1 PRAYER DOESN'T WORK

PRAYER DOESN'T WORK.

God works.

We often get that confused, don't we?

We think there is a certain formula we have to follow—a right way of doing prayer. If we do it right, God will answer. It's like using the correct postage after a rate change: the proper stamp ensures delivery. But when our prayers don't get answered, we believe we're somehow at fault. We "prayed the wrong way." There are lots of ways we could have screwed up—not having enough postage (read: good deeds); mislabeling the envelope (praying to Jesus when we should have prayed to God); or forgetting to seal it (with a promise to do better next time).

If that's how you think, this isn't the book for you. We don't believe there's a *right* way or a *wrong* way to pray. Yes, biblical literature, church history, and religious

tradition present some great guidelines when we need an example to follow, but the truth is that prayer is nothing more than communication with God. Some of us prefer long, elegantly handwritten notes on premium stationery. Others prefer text messages with abbreviated words that aren't grammatically correct (and that parents can't decipher). But regardless of *how* we pray, it isn't prayer that changes things. *It's God who changes things.*

Sometimes we forget that.

We're so caught up in our own expectations of what prayer should look and smell like that when we look for God's reply, we limit our thinking to a #10 business envelope in the mailbox, when perhaps God is answering us with a marshmallow, an old lady's smile, or something else so completely unexpected that we miss it.

Consider the example of the Sunday school teacher who asked her young students to guess the answer to a question.

"Okay, class, I'm thinking of something brown and fuzzy that jumps from tree to tree. Does anyone know what I'm thinking of?"

No one in the class responded, so she tried again.

"Okay, it has a bushy tail, plays in your yard, and is very hard to catch. Now do you know what I am thinking of?"

Again the kids remained quiet.

Exasperated, the Sunday school teacher gave it one last try.

"Okay, it's a small animal that eats nuts. Does anybody know what I am talking about?"

Finally, Bobby raised his hand.

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“Teacher, I know the right answer is Jesus, but it sure sounds like you’re talking about a squirrel.”

From our earliest experiences at church, we learn that it is more important to be right than to be authentic. So it’s no wonder that, when it comes to prayer, we’d rather say the right words, follow the correct formula, and assume the designated posture, even when it feels phony to us.

### SET UP FOR FAILURE

Regardless of our competence or success at work, home, or school, and independent of our awards and accolades, we continue to experience situations where we feel out of control. Life brings an endless parade of intense moments of beauty, pain, injustice, confusion, and hopelessness, that takes us past the end of ourselves and leaves us searching for someone or something else.

We never have enough.

It’s never good enough.

We continually come up short.

Life is hard, and we often seem ill-equipped for the challenges.

What if this is intentional?

Could it be that we were set up to fail on our own?

What if the Creator of the universe shaped a world that is complicated beyond the comprehension of the people who live there? So complicated that they can’t exist in it without crying out for help?

What would that world look like?

It would be a world filled with desperate and needy people.

And everyone would be praying.

### ADMIT IT OR NOT—YOU PRAY

Jordan is a typical twelve-year-old American boy: interested in basketball, video games, and text messaging his friends. His life is complicated, and his toys are sophisticated.

While at a friend's house, Jordan discovers a toddler book that captures his attention. The board book contains six magnetic cardboard cars that can be placed on the pages and moved around. Designed as an interactive storybook for toddlers, the toy is lying idly on the table until Jordan finds it. He opens the front cover, takes out the cars, and insists on "testing" the cars on every page in the book.

When Lily, the eleven-year-old girl of the house, catches Jordan playing with her little brother's book, she can't help but comment, "Uh, Jordan, you're playing with a baby toy."

Instead of being embarrassed, Jordan turns to Lily and says, "Oh, you know you play with it, too, when no one else is around."

Her immediate blush and slight smile betray what she won't admit—she plays with her little brother's toys.

And why not? Some things are too irresistible. We may not want to admit it, but prayer is one of those things that a lot of us play around with when no one else is looking. Especially when we're desperate.

When Emily was thirteen, she borrowed a valuable necklace from a friend, intending to return it. When she discovered the necklace was missing, she panicked. First, she tore apart her own room. Then she started through the rest of the house. Eventually, the whole family helped in the search.

Emily was terrified, and rightly so. From behind a

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torrent of tears, she cried out, “Help me, God! Where is it?” She took a breath or two and her face relaxed, reflecting a strange peace that settled upon her. A thought flashed through her mind. She ran down the hall to her room, swung open her closet door, and searched for a particular pair of forgotten jeans. There in the pocket of her jeans, she found the necklace.

Those two events—a prayer hurled into the air and a sudden insight that solved the problem—happened close enough together that a reasonable person might suppose a connection, maybe even a genuine cause-and-effect relationship.

Events like these have occurred together so often throughout history that we have come to believe, in our collective consciousness, that prayer actually makes a difference in the real world. So we pray.

Apparently, we always have.

#### PRAYERS FROM HISTORY

Our ancestors scratched their prayers on cavern walls:

“May the Master of the Buffalo grant us success  
on our hunt.”

“May the One behind the Clouds send us rain.”

“May the Hand That Moves the Stars lift away my  
grief.”

Many of the architectural wonders built by the great river-valley civilizations in Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, and China, and in the mountain and forest city-states of Central and South America, are religious structures. In those worlds

so distant from our own, human actions were permeated with the scent of prayer.

When the Constitutional Convention of the not-so-united American states convened in Philadelphia in May 1787, the fledgling nation needed a viable government, but few gamblers would have wagered that the feuding former colonies would ever forge a “United States of America.”

A heated debate raged for weeks. Part of the New York delegation had already departed for home. Others were preparing to follow. At a crucial moment, an aged Ben Franklin tottered to his feet. Franklin, at that time, was the most distinguished and accomplished living American. Though a Deist steeped in the Enlightenment, who espoused an impassible separation between God and the physical world, Franklin roused his squabbling fellow delegates with the following appeal:

In the beginning of the contest with G. Britain, when we were sensible of danger we had daily prayer in this room for the Divine Protection. Our prayers, Sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a Superintending providence in our favor. . . . And have we now forgotten that powerful friend? or do we imagine that we no longer need His assistance. . . .

The longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writ-

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ings that “except the Lord build they labor in vain that build it.” . . .

I therefore beg leave to move—that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven, and its blessings on our deliberations, be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to business.<sup>1</sup>

Almost immediately, the Convention turned a corner. In the following days, the delegates crafted history’s most original and enduring outline for human government: the Constitution of the United States of America and its first ten amendments, the Bill of Rights.

Serious and not-so-serious students of history now disagree over the religious beliefs our Founding Fathers once held. But the reasonable proximity of the events must be noted alongside the incongruity and irony of this scene. Ben Franklin, champion for scientific empiricism and a skeptic of anything “spiritual,” credited shifts of history to the supernatural intervention of God. He then pleaded with his colleagues to pray for a solution to their impasse.

Constitutions from conflict.

Word pictures on the walls of caves.

Necklaces from forgotten jeans.

## LANGUAGES

We talk to God, but we don’t all speak the same language. One person’s prayer comes wrapped in a work of art, like Fabriano’s *Nativity*, Handel’s *Messiah*, or little Jimmy’s finger painting, *Jesus Raises Stinking Lazarus*.

Another prayer might appear as a dramatic enactment, such as the Jewish Passover or a Native American rain

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dance. Prayer might waft above a city, sung from atop a mosque tower. It might tumble from the lips of a sniffling child, meander along the lyrics of a Kentucky bluegrass song, or conceal itself in the eloquent silence of a Benedictine friar.

Communicating with God takes many forms in its effort to express our common predicament. Our reach is never long enough, our fingers never nimble enough. We run out of time, stamina, and will. Our ambitions outpace our capacity, and the gap cannot be spanned by noble savagery or advanced technology.

And then?

We kneel down. We look up.

And when we don't get the response we're expecting, we look inside ourselves and ask, "What did I do wrong?"

#### WHAT PRAYER IS NOT

It is said that St. Catherine's Monastery near Mount Sinai, Egypt, still honors the final will and testament of three monks who lived there twelve centuries ago. One monk, who was a doorkeeper, wanted to keep his job forever. In honor of his request, his mummy still sits beside the door he guarded when he was alive.

Behind that door lived the other two monks. Each had taken a vow to devote his life to perpetual prayer. One would pray while the other slept. They never spoke to or saw each other. Their only connection was a chain that ran through the wall and was attached to their wrists. When one had completed his prayers, he would yank the chain as a signal for the other to begin.

When the two men died, their skeletons were laid side by

side in caskets. And there they rest today, still united by the same chain.<sup>2</sup>

Some historians believe that rigorous monastic disciplines like the one practiced by these two monks helped to preserve civilization during the cultural deterioration of the early Middle Ages.

Perhaps.

But anecdotes like these, told as sermon illustrations by well-intentioned pastors, may unintentionally decrease not only the occurrence of prayer but also the number of active pray-ers. When the average twenty-first-century Westerner hears of such eccentric dedication, a typical response might be, “If this is what it takes to pray to God, count me out.”

Prayer isn’t accomplished by some divine formula. Its power isn’t amplified if we assume some sort of ascetic or monastic posture.

Religion has a way of complicating prayer, making it self-conscious, rehearsed, and . . . well, awkward. We found through some informal research that although nearly everyone in church feels comfortable requesting prayer aloud in a small group, nearly eight out of ten feel uncomfortable actually praying aloud. In other words, 80 percent of the people we surveyed had no problem verbalizing their requests to a pastor, teacher, or small-group leader—even in front of their peers. But they became physically uncomfortable when asked to verbalize their prayers directly to God when others were listening.

Well-meaning prayer tutors often respond to this issue by teaching acronyms such as A.C.T.S. (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication) as a way of remembering what to include in a prayer. But the result is that we get

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hung up on the steps. *Did I spend long enough on the A? And do I really need more T before I can get to the S? How much C?* They seem to emphasize style over substance. Prayer techniques meant to teach us to look up often have the unintended consequence of making us look over our shoulders. *Am I doing this right?*

Prayer isn't work. Or at least it shouldn't be.

Prayer should be like communicating with a lover.

Sometimes words aren't necessary.

Regardless of what the magazines teach, a good kiss doesn't happen from good technique. It's not about how warm, moist, and soft—if so, we'd all be kissing cinnamon rolls.

It's not the how but the who.

Prayer, like a kiss, is best when it's about the *other person*.

Especially if the other person is God.

## WHAT PRAYER IS

Prayer is a conversation with God.

Real prayer has the same elements as a real conversation—bold questions, bursts of emotion, and room for silence. Think of the times when you've had a real, honest-to-goodness conversation with someone you love. It can happen at any time—when your teenager comes home from school, over the dinner table, in bed with your spouse, or in the middle of the night when your toddler wakes up from a nightmare. Conversation isn't rehearsed; it just bursts forth as a response to the situation.

Ellie bounces into the kitchen, where her mom and dad are finishing their dinner. "Can I go to a friend's house tonight and take the car?"

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“Whose house?” asks her mother.

“What time will you be home?” asks her father.

“I’m just going to Sarah’s. I’ll be home by ten.”

“Is anyone else going with you?” asks Mom.

“No, just me, but Cindy’s meeting us there.”

“Is there gas in the car?” asks Dad.

“I’ll check,” she says and runs out the door. A few minutes later, she’s back in the kitchen with a report that the gauge is almost on *E*.

Her dad hands her some cash, tells her he loves her, and reminds her to drive carefully.

There is no formal presentation to this encounter. Nobody carefully planned their words. Ellie, in a hurry to get to her friend’s house, asked the most direct question she could. Everything else that took place in the exchange was a result of that first question.

Ellie’s conversation wasn’t self-conscious or insecure.

Prayer shouldn’t be either.

We don’t carefully calculate our words into some sort of exploitative formula; instead, we’re focused entirely on the person to whom we’re speaking—to their responses, as well as our own.

Good prayer is like talking with children. We’re more interested in hearing what they’ve said, or how they’re reacting to what we’ve said, than we are in carefully selecting our words.

Sometimes prayer means we get naked—as with sexual intimacy—revealing parts of ourselves that no one else has ever seen. The only reason we can do this is not that the lights are turned off, but because there is trust in the relationship.

God doesn't ask us to undress in front of him, and then go off and share the details with his buddies. He doesn't betray us, even when we've shown him *everything*. Prayer, like a comfortable, intimate conversation, is a safe place to be vulnerable. And whether or not we get enough *A* and *C* before our *T* or *S*, God will still be there in the morning.

### PRAYER IS INSTINCTUAL

Prayer can and does flow deliberately from discipline or habit, but it can also burst forth instinctively. Often the most precious prayers don't look like prayers at all. They come out unbidden. They accidentally rupture, impulsively burst out, or covertly distance themselves. They are buried in our unfiltered reactions to the joys and pains and fears of typical days in typical lives. If such prayers could find a voice of their own, we might not even realize they were prayers at all. They sound unassuming, unpretentious, brash, down-to-earth, and often shockingly irreverent.

A near miss at a busy intersection and someone screams, "Oh, my god."

An employer breaks a promise and the victim mutters, "Oh, my god."

A patient hears a medical report, covers her mouth, and weeps, "Oh, my god."

A soldier deployed in the desert holds a perfumed letter and pounds his helmet against a concrete wall, venting, "Oh, my god."

It is hardly an exaggeration to call prayer an instinct. Before we think, consider the implications, weigh the probabilities, or balance our philosophic algebra, we pray.

Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, many New

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Yorkers found themselves in the throes of two indulgences most would have resisted in less-complicated times. Hundreds threw themselves into sexual encounters with total strangers, and thousands lost themselves in public displays of prayer.<sup>3</sup> Here's how Peggy Noonan described the instinct to pray in her *Wall Street Journal* column on September 28, 2001:

In the past 17 days, since the big terrible thing, our country has, unconsciously but quite clearly, chosen a new national anthem. It is "God Bless America," the song everyone sang in the days after the blasts to show they loved their country. It's what they sang on television, it's what kids sang in school, it's what families sang in New York at 7 p.m. the Friday after the atrocity, when we all went outside with our candles and stood together in little groups in front of big apartment buildings. A friend of mine told me you could hear it on Park Avenue from uptown to downtown, the soft choruses wafting from block to block.

There is comfort in the touch of others . . . and in the touch of Another.

Consider the explosive growth, through the last half of the twentieth century, of the practice of Christian prayer in atheist China. Defying bitter opposition from a thoroughly secular Communist government, somewhere between 50 million and 100 million people in China privately but regularly practice some form of Christian intercession.<sup>4</sup>

Spiritual connection is an unquenchable, untamable human drive. Civil institutions may attempt to forbid it.

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Religious institutions may attempt to regulate it. But prayer, one of the most intimately personal and democratic of human impulses, thrives.

And it always will thrive, because prayer rises from the deepest wells in the human soul: the desperate awareness that we are inadequate to manage the challenges of our own lives.

Alone in his suburban Minneapolis house, Jay saw flames. Despite his certainty that everyone else was gone, he yelled, “Fire!” He recognized the stupidity of it the moment he opened his mouth, yet he continued to yell “Fire!” to the empty house. Unbeknownst to him, his daughter was in the basement. Had Jay not yelled—despite his conviction that no one was in the house—it is likely she would have died.

Some may be certain there is no God. And if there is, he is hands-off. He doesn’t hear us. And he doesn’t answer our prayers. Yet we still call out to him. We toss up prayers like we toss up a rubber ball.

But what if there were real meaning behind our throw-away words?

What if these casual words we speak are actually sacred?

What if our prayer promptings are not only *to* God, but also *from* God?

#### OH, MY GOD

Two college girls were in the hallway talking about the night before. One sipped her overpriced latte while the other waved her Diet Coke in a dramatic retelling of a conversation with her boyfriend.

“When he found out, he was like, ‘Oh, my god,’ and I was like, ‘Oh, my god.’”

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For most of us, our only thought about such a situation would be how to walk past the speaker without, like, getting sprayed from, like, an overflow of soda, should, like, her gesticulations get any more boisterous. But when Billy walked past this very conversation, he heard something that most of us wouldn't.

A poem.

Specifically, a haiku.

Haiku originated in Japan in the nineteenth century and were traditionally about nature. Today, a haiku can cover any subject, as long as it follows the general form of seventeen syllables arranged in three lines in a 5-7-5 pattern. Overhearing the girl's words, Billy immediately formatted the casual conversation into a poetic expression:

*When he found out he  
was like oh my god and I  
was like oh my god<sup>5</sup>*

Why did Billy hear a poetic recitation while the rest of us only heard mind-numbing girl talk?

Perhaps it is because Billy Collins is a former poet laureate of the United States. He spends his days writing and rewriting words into verse. He's trained, skilled, and experienced in writing poetry, in plucking phrases out of conversation and turning them into art. The speaker didn't know her words were poetry, or that she was creating literary art. She didn't recognize anything interesting in her language pattern, her choice of words, or her arrangement of syllables. She was just, like, telling a story.

What if it hadn't been Billy Collins who walked by the girls that day? What if it had been, say, Billy Graham? Graham has had a different kind of education and training. What would he have recognized in the casual words of the girls' conversation?

Put another way, what if a person trained, skilled, and experienced in prayer had walked by?

Instead of a poem, would he have heard a prayer?

Would a pray-er laureate have recognized the girl's words as a plea for relationship with a God outside of herself? Would he have understood her need for a *personal* deity as expressed in her words "*my* god"?

Life is tough and we are hopeful. We simultaneously accept our lot and search for ways to improve it. But what if our answer were found in the very words we are most likely to throw away?

The girl in the hallway knows that life is shocking. She knows that some circumstances are too hard to handle on her own, yet like all of us, she presses on, constantly seeking solutions to ease her burdens. What if the solution to her problems were in the words she so thoughtlessly tossed up in the hallway?

There are certain situations that prompt us to pray.

**1. Bargaining Prayers.** We get pulled over for a speeding ticket, and we pray for a warning and promise never to speed again; or our bank account is low, and we promise that if the check doesn't bounce we won't overspend again. "Please God, just this once. I promise I won't do it again."

**2. Questioning Prayers.** When we're alone and lonely,

we want to know whether anyone else is there, whether anyone cares. “God, are you there?”

- 3. Prayers for Justice.** When we see injustice in the world, we pray for things we want less of, such as war, betrayal, abuse, kidnappings, and slavery. We call out in frustration, “God, it’s so unfair!”
- 4. Desperate Prayers.** When we’re desperate, we don’t even stop to ask if God is there; we simply believe it because there is nothing else to believe. We’re so desperate that we can’t do it on our own, and we know it. “God, please don’t let her die.”
- 5. Audacious Prayers.** When we’re so preoccupied with ourselves and our needs, we pray selfish prayers. “God, please let me win the lottery.”
- 6. Prayers of Beauty and Happiness.** When we see great beauty or experience great joy (the taste of a fine wine or chocolate, great sex, a first kiss, a bride floating down the aisle in a cloud of white), we want more, and so we pray, “Oh, God, I want more. Please let me experience this again.”

It seems our prayers well up around the things we love—a child, a spouse’s beauty, our own lives—and things we fear, notably, the fear of losing what we love.

Consider these expressions that we hear around us all the time:

“God, help me. I’ll never do it again.”  
“God, are you there?”  
“Goddamn it!”  
“Save me, God!”

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“Please, God!”

“Oh, god, you’re beautiful.”

Whether on TV, in the movies, or in conversation, people thoughtlessly invoke the name of God into the mundane (“Oh, my God!”) and the profane (“Jesus Christ!”). Believers are offended—convinced it is disrespectful, even blasphemous. Nonbelievers toss it up to a slip of the tongue (“Pardon my French”) or simply give it no thought at all.

But what if these were really prayers?

Oh, sure, they’re not the kind of prayers found in a Baptist Sunday school class or at a Catholic Mass; they aren’t led by a Lutheran minister or a Jewish rabbi.

Tim, a recent seminary graduate hoping to start his own church, asked, “Does a father stop listening to his child because the kid is swearing at him? Or is he able to see beyond the pain and the hurt that life has inflicted, to see it as a cry of a beloved child, wounded, crying out to Abba? Could Jesus see these outbursts as a cry of a wounded brother or sister? How do we know what is in the heart of those who utter such words? Do we even know our own hearts? We might just be condemning the prayers of a hurting child who is crying out, ‘Lord forgive me.’”

God is the judge of these prayers.

And we believe God answers every one of them.

We pray.

God answers.

In the answers, we learn who he is.