

"Fun and insightful." BOOKLIST

A YEAR OF
**Living
Prayerfully**

*How a Curious Traveler Met the Pope,
Walked on Coals, Danced with Rabbis, and*
REVIVED HIS PRAYER LIFE



JARED BROCK

Foreword by Mark Buchanan



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A Year of Living Prayerfully: How a Curious Traveler Met the Pope, Walked on Coals, Danced with Rabbits, and Revived His Prayer Life

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Foreword

I SAW THIS ON A BUMPER STICKER recently: “You’re unique, just like everyone else.”

It made me think of Jared Brock—or, as I know him, Jay. It made me think of him, not because the slogan fits him but because it doesn’t.

Jay *is* unique, like *no one* else.

Indeed, I’ve never met anyone so gloriously, extravagantly, utterly himself. He is the original, and there are no copies. He inhabits his own skin without remainder and without apology, and brings to everything he does—and he does a lot—childlike wonder and serpentlike shrewdness. And always he abounds with life. He laughs from the belly, lives from the heart, loves without caution, and thinks from a mind as rich and supple and generous as any I’ve ever met. And now he’s written a book!

And not just any book. It’s, well, unique, like no one else’s. It’s on prayer, as you can see, but look, look inside: this is not your standard manual of prayer, full of scoldings and techniques and pep talks and guilt trips. This is . . . something entirely different.

I’ll try to describe it in just a moment.

But first a *caveat emptor*: once you start, you can’t stop. You will be swept up in the sheer force of the storytelling, the beauty of the prose,

the many comedies of error, the exotic cast of characters, and—above all—the drama of Jay’s prayer life. He is pulled heels first from a life of rote and dutiful prayers and thrown headlong into an encounter with the living, listening, speaking God. You will be pulled and thrown likewise. Consider yourself warned.

Now about the book. It’s like Jay himself, like his flesh became words. It is delightful and engaging company. It is a memoir, a history, a paean, a confession, a whodunit, a field guide, a travelogue. Jay, sometimes all alone and sometimes alongside his beautiful, long-suffering wife, Michelle, wends his way across the globe and finds himself, sometimes by sheer dint of human persistence and sometimes by seemingly divine intervention, in the thick of things: dancing with Hasidim, lunching with the pope, tripping across fire, forcing his wife to a *mikvah* bath in a near-frozen lake, hanging out with celebrities and celibates and communists and fundamentalists, and on and on.

But mostly it’s about one man learning to pray. It’s about one man having his world reordered as he, by turns, limps and leaps, crawls and runs, begs and storms his way to the throne of grace.

On the way, we cheer him on, worry for him, worry for Michelle, laugh at him, laugh with him, hope the best for him, wonder if he’ll live to tell the story. We also fall in love with him (and even more, Michelle; sorry, Jay).

And strangely, wonderfully, we learn to pray with him.

But not to pray like him. His story frees us to live our own story, to find and enter our own fellowship with the Father through the Son by his Spirit.

My prediction is that this story of the revolution of one man’s prayers will invite you to a revolution of your own, but it will be unique, like no one else’s.

Consider yourself invited.

Mark Buchanan



Author's Note

MANY NAMES AND CERTAIN LOCATIONS have been changed in order to protect the identities of those involved. The sequence of events has been altered in order to facilitate a somewhat sane reading experience. For all you smart researcher types who want to figure out the actual order, you might as well put this book in a blender.¹ All I can promise is that everything in the following pages actually happened.

¹ Don't forget to add orange juice.



CHAPTER 1

Hamilton, Ontario

MICHELLE AND I DECIDED TO live prayerfully for an entire year. It was a nice, shiny idea. But where should we start?

With *For Dummies*, obviously. I borrowed a copy of *Christian Prayer for Dummies* from the library. The cover was so enticing:

- Find your own prayer style!
- Explanations in plain English!
- “Get in, get out” information!
- Icons and other navigational aids!
- Tear-out cheat sheet!

That last one was really important. I would hate to pray without cheating. I flipped to the cheat sheet.

The cheat sheet included items like “Incorporate Christian Prayer into Your Life in Three Weeks” and “How to Hear God’s Voice during Christian Prayer,” but I was skeptical. This book was published in 2003. A lot had changed since then. Would it still work today? I didn’t have a landline anymore; surely the Almighty had updated His contact methods too. Was He an Apple or an Android guy?

I was also suspicious of the book’s author. According to his For Dummies author page, the author had created fourteen For Dummies products, including *Christianity for Dummies*, *Christian Prayer for Dummies*, and *Yahoo! SiteBuilder for Dummies*. Which compelled me to ask, Did Yahoo still exist?

Page one. Right in the middle, boxed and bolded, I read this disclaimer:

The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate.

This left me with all sorts of questions, such as when, exactly, would be an appropriate time to consult a professional? Wasn’t that why I was reading the book in the first place? Where did one find a prayer professional? What, precisely, *is* a prayer professional?

I grabbed a dictionary and found this definition for the word *professional*: “Following an occupation as a means of livelihood or for gain: *a professional builder*.”

Clearly, I needed to find someone who got paid to pray.

I googled “prayer professional,” and it produced 44,300,000 results (in 0.2 seconds), but they all appeared pretty fruitless.

Well, not entirely. I found a prayer request from a consultant that read, “I request prayer for my trip to Denver July 9–20 to be safe and successful to achieve my goal of 32 net sales @ net volume of \$222,500.” So that was something.

I changed my web query to “prayer consultant,” which produced

much better results. Using LinkedIn, I connected with a prayer consultant named Don Pierson. Don's actual title is "Prayer Strategies Specialist," which sounded impressive. I scheduled a phone call with him for the next day.

"Prayer is like a greased pig at a county fair—often pursued but rarely grasped." CHRISTIAN PRAYER FOR DUMMIES

With Don's call a day away, I had plenty of time to consult *Christian Prayer for Dummies*. I skimmed through the table of contents, and I'll be honest—I skipped directly to Chapter 17: "Ask and It Shall Be Given—I'd Like a Porsche, Please."

I was disappointed to discover that you actually have to read the context of a Bible verse if you want your prayers to work. I also learned that Italian sports cars weren't around when the Bible's original manuscripts were written, so it might be better to ask for a chariot or a donkey (which gets better mileage anyway).

One thing caught my eye:

THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF PRAYER:

1. You double your chances of successful in vitro pregnancy if you're prayed for.
2. Heart attack survivors recover quicker if they're being prayed for by someone.
3. Getting people to pray for you gets you out of the hospital faster after you've had an angioplasty.

This was great news, to be sure, but maybe the author needed to add an unregistered surgeon's warning. Prayer isn't a strict cause-and-effect relationship. Candy junkies can't manipulate God into getting rid of their diabetes. Prayer is not a substitute for healthy eating and daily exercise.

I skimmed some more. My favorite line: "Hudson Taylor had a

lifelong passion to become a Christian missionary to inland China, and not just because he liked Kung Pao chicken.”¹

After the author called the Lord’s Prayer “The Original Christian Prayer for Dummies,” I called it quits, returning the book to the library, where I assumed it would remain until next year’s Friends of the Library book sale.

“The LORD sustains him on his sickbed; in his illness you restore him to full health.” PSALM 41:3, ESV

Prayer Strategies Specialist Don Pierson is the prayer point man for a denomination in Tennessee, a member of the staff who literally gets paid to pray. A former pastor, church planter, and missionary, he’s been around the block.

Having been on the prayer job for thirteen years, he has no idea how one lands such a job. “I get asked that a lot,” he told me. “All I know is, I have a calling based on Hosea 10:12: ‘Sow righteousness for yourselves, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers his righteousness on you.’ I’m here to break up fallow ground.” He informed me that one can get a master’s degree in prayer but that no one has offered a doctorate yet. Probably so that no televangelist could start a show called *The Prayer Doctor*.

Don has 3,197 churches under his wing, and he spends his time leading retreats, revivals, classes, concerts of prayer, and assemblies. He helps pastors develop strategies to unify their churches for spiritual awakening, and he preaches almost every day. The guy is a spiritual mover and shaker; he gets stuff done. Don was heading out to a meeting as we spoke, and I could hear him driving while talking on his cell phone. I quickly prayed for his safety.

¹ I’m sure you realize the obvious untruth of this statement. Taylor arrived in China in 1854, but Kung Pao chicken didn’t arrive until 1866.

Don told me there are three types of prayer. Crisis prayer is the most popular of the three. Such prayers are urgent, earthly, and temporal. The help-me-pass-this-test, please-heal-my-neighbor, fix-my-marriage kind of prayers that we all pray.

Then there are calling prayers. The prayers of Paul were dominated by calling, especially in Colossians 4. Paul had received a word from God—a very clear direction and purpose—and it trumped every circumstance. Paul was in prison, but he prayed for boldness instead of rescue or escape. His calling was greater than his crisis. When he prayed for others, he prayed for their character in spite of present circumstances.

Then there are Kingdom prayers. Don doesn't believe that we create these prayers, but that "Kingdom prayers come from the King." These are prayers like Jesus' prayer to "send out workers into [the] harvest field." Kingdom prayers are bigger than any one person, denomination, or time in history.

Don believes his job is to help people move from crisis prayer to calling and Kingdom prayer. "Crisis prayer has consumed our churches," he said. "The number of lost people is increasing, but all we're praying about is colds and cancer."

He continued, "I want to see transformation. I pray that people will return to God and begin to pray the way He wants us to pray. Most new believers pray calling and Kingdom prayers, but I've noticed a disturbing trend in older believers. They pray mostly crisis prayers." I gave him a loud "hmmm" and hoped he didn't realize I was one of those people.

"So how do we reverse the trend, Don?"

"If your heart is consumed with Kingdom and calling, you pray differently. When you seek first the Kingdom, the other things don't concern you."

He asked me if I was married, and I said yes. "If you don't talk to your wife, your relationship will get sick. You'll never know each

other's hearts and wills, and it's the same way with God. You can't do His will if you can't hear His voice. Every religion prays. What makes our prayers any different? God speaks back. God doesn't need us to talk to Him, but one word from Him changes us. Prayer is about us hearing from God."

Suddenly I felt uncomfortable. The words sounded familiar. I once heard a talk by Erwin McManus where he asked, "How do you know if you're a Christian? You know you're a Christian because you know the sound of His voice." Now Don was saying the same thing. Problem was, I'd never audibly heard from God. I'd never even had an overwhelming spiritual experience. I'm a rational thinker—I like to process and ponder and write. Don't get me wrong—I really want to hear from God, but is it even possible for someone like me?

"So, Don," I asked hesitantly, "how do I hear from God?"

"You know, Jared, it's a still, small voice. The more time you spend with Him, the less you'll ask that question. You'll begin to recognize the sound of His whisper."

Aside from his full-time day job as a prayer warrior, Don also spends about forty-five minutes a day with God on his own. He doesn't have a set schedule or plan—he just reads the Bible until God speaks, then he journals about it, and then he prays it back to God. The next day, he picks up where he left off.

I asked Don if he ever heard any really good answers to prayer. "Oh yes, every day," he replied. "Last week we had an incredible answer to prayer. There's a girl in one of our churches. She grew up in the church, went on mission trips—great kid. She started dating this guy who was far from God, and eventually married him. Now she's far from God."

I knew where this was going.

"In December the husband thought he had stomach cancer. No doctor had diagnosed him; he just really believed he had cancer. So he put a shotgun to his stomach and pulled the trigger."

Okay, I didn't see that one coming.

"Somehow he survived the trip to the hospital, but the doctors didn't think he'd make it. The church started praying for his salvation. Not for his healing—for his *salvation*. The church commissioned their pastor to lead this man to Christ. The pastor goes to the hospital and leads him to Christ on the spot. And, wouldn't you believe it, the man makes a miraculous recovery.

"Fast-forward a few months. The guy is home, and the pastor calls him up and says he wants to start a Bible study in the man's home. The pastor tells the man to invite all his unsaved friends and family. So he does. Thirty people show up the first night. The man's parents and sister now drive three hours each way to attend every week. They've been going for five weeks now, and already several of them have gotten saved and baptized."

These are the kind of stories I want to be able to tell. This is the kind of faith I want to have, living in the midst of a community of people who have prayed with greater power than the brute force of a shotgun. But how can I tap into what Don has in prayer? How can I hear God's still, small voice? What will it look like in my life, without having to become a "prayer strategies specialist"?

In true prayer-expert style, Don ended our conversation by praying. He prayed for Michelle and me, that our journey of prayer would be fruitful, that God would open doors of opportunity, and that we'd learn to pray more and more calling and Kingdom prayers. He prayed that I would find what I was looking for.

I hung up the phone—and hummed a little U2.