

PRAYER

MADE EASY



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INTRODUCTION: A SHOT IN THE DARK

Believe it or not, a prayer was the first test-run for the technology that made satellite-streaming networks available in the US.

The year was 1978, and the RCA company had just placed its first SATCOM unit into orbit around the earth. It was exciting—new technology that enabled television broadcasts from just about anywhere to just about every major market in the United States. This was something destined to compete with, and possibly replace, the industry-dominating cable television system.

A hungry young salesman named Al Parinello had been tasked with selling RCA's invisible innovation ... and he was failing.

“Think about it,” Parinello said later. “You couldn’t see it, you couldn’t touch it, and there was no way to demonstrate that it actually was up there 22,300 miles above the equator. So it was a concept sale.” Al’s job, then, was to “basically convince new emerging networks that

satellite distribution of their television product ... was the wave of the future.”

It was a struggle, to say the least.

Imagine Mr. Parinello’s excitement when he finally got a call from a customer asking to buy two hours of satellite time. It was a local pastor, and this was going to be the absolute, first order ever for RCA’s SATCOM television distribution system!

“Where’s the uplink going to be,” Al asked the good reverend.

“We’ll use your New Jersey uplinking facility,” he said.

“Okay, great,” Al said. “Now, where do you want us to bring the signal down? We have facilities in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Miami, wherever....

Where do you want the signal to go?”

“I want the signal to go to God.”

Al was a little caught off guard. “What do you mean you want it to go to God?”



“This is a program that my parishioners and I have put together,” the pastor said patiently. “It’s our message to God, and we want to send it to him by satellite. It’s just going out there; it’s not coming back.”

Al Parinello thought for a moment, no doubt wondering if God even had a television set to receive satellite signals. Then he made an executive decision: As long as the pastor’s check would clear, Al would take the money—and send the congregation’s prayer up.

“Okay,” he said. And so, in 1978, RCA’s first SATCOM transmission was a prayer sent from earth to nowhere.¹

With all due respect to that disco-era pastor and his well-meaning congregation: *What a waste!* Firing off a shot in the dark is not at all what prayer is about.

God isn’t hiding in the deep recesses of space, hunting for an internet connection to allow him to stream our heartfelt prayers to him. His Holy Spirit is down here, with us, constantly near, always ready to listen when we call out his name. No broadcast technology—or anything else!—is required to reach him.

Still, Al Parinello’s first satellite sale does serve as a reminder that many of us continue to misunderstand what prayer really is, and why it matters.

Your prayers don't have to be a hit-and-miss mystery or a performance or a commercial transaction broadcast into a black hole beyond the stars. Prayer can be natural, normal, ordinary, meaningful, and *transformative*. In your daily life, connecting with God really can be *Prayer Made Easy*.

WHAT IS PRAYER, REALLY?

Obviously, God and people have been talking to each other since the beginning of time, as evidenced by the conversations between Adam, Eve, and God, as well as times when God had private discussions with people like Noah and Abraham. But prayer as we know it (when someone addresses God directly) is first referenced in the Bible in Genesis 4. Adam and Eve were still living and their son Seth had recently become the father of their grandson Enosh. The world was still relatively new, but its population had grown significantly. “At that time,” Scripture reports, “people began to *call on the name of the LORD*” (Genesis 4:26 NIV).

The Hebrew word used for “call on” brims with meaning and implications. At its most basic, it indicates the idea of summoning and is even translated that way when it’s used in other Scriptures like Exodus 10:16 and 1 Kings 22:13 (NIV). The root word can even be more aggressive, something akin to “accosting” somebody or forcefully demanding a specific person’s attention, but that’s not all. To “call on”

someone could also indicate proclaiming fame or praise, crying for help, claiming possession of, responding to a person, and even worship.

In the context of Genesis 4, then, when people began to call on the Lord's name in the time of Enosh, it seems



likely their prayers included identifying themselves as God's people, expecting him to draw near and give attention to them, praising and worshiping him, giving offerings, and making requests of him.

God himself added another aspect to prayer in Genesis 20, formalizing the idea of *intercession*—that is, one person praying to God on behalf of another.

Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were in the land of Gerar. The king of that country, Abimelech, thought Sarah was Abraham's sister and took her to be one of his many wives—until God intervened. He appeared to Abimelech and frightened the daylights out of him by saying, “Return the woman to her husband, and *he will pray for you*, for he is a prophet. Then you will live” (Genesis 20:7). “Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and his female servants” (Genesis 20:17).

Throughout the rest of Scripture—and human history—the activities of prayer as indicated by these passages in Genesis have stayed remarkably consistent with what these earliest people lived out: (1) expecting/demanding God’s attention, (2) praising and worshiping, (3) requesting God’s help, and (4) interceding for others. Modern thinkers have tinkered somewhat with these features, describing prayer as adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication—or some other easily remembered sequence. Bestselling author Anne Lamott summed up prayer in three words that seem appropriate: “Help. Thanks. Wow.”²

Notice, though, that these are the *activities* of prayer—not a *definition* of prayer. For that we have to look beyond what we *do* when praying and think about *what’s happening* when we pray. We must ask: What’s the essence of prayer—its *life* (so to speak)? What makes prayer something more than just a simple recitation of words or lifeless rituals? What’s going on when we turn our thoughts toward heaven and whisper, “Our Father ...”

In other words, what is prayer, really? Theologians tell us that prayer is a number of important-sounding things:

- “Communion with God.”³
- “The act of petitioning, praising, giving thanks, or confessing to God.”⁴

- A “reflection and action ... [an] ecstatic experience of the ‘ground of being’ ... [a] response and request.”⁵

But if those explanations do little to enliven your spirit or increase your understanding of prayer, try this simple definition: *Prayer is when we seek the company of God.*⁶

Yes, certainly, during prayer we always include one or more of the activities of prayer mentioned above, but praying is so much more than that!

- It's those moments when your heart actively longs for God's Spirit (with words, emotions, actions, silences, images, pains, joys, and more), and he communicates with you—listening, comforting, emboldening, answering, prompting, acting, whispering, waiting, weeping, smiling, and more).
- It's you and Jesus together, in the same space and time, both attentive to and responsive to the other.
- It's a private family gathering, that place where your immortal soul meets with his forever presence, and you both pause eternity to spend fleeting, perishable time together.

This is both the mystery and simplicity of prayer. It's something so simple that anyone can do it, yet so incomprehensible that we write book after book after

book about how to pray—and are still incapable of unveiling its true beauty and power in life.

So what are we to do?

Well, we pray anyway. We *seek the company of God*—even though we can't fully understand it—and we cooperate in the transformation that this encounter brings. We do this because, as seminary professor Norm Wakefield so eloquently put it: “God listens.”⁷

PRAYER BY THE NUMBERS⁸

- In America, the majority of people (56%) report they do not pray daily.
- Only about one in five Americans (19%) participate in a prayer group.
- Nearly one-quarter of Americans (23%) say they pray at least a few times a month, while roughly one-third (32%) say they never or seldom pray.
- More women (50%) than men (37%) are likely to pray every day.
- A higher percentage of Muslim Americans (67%) pray each day than Christian Americans (60%).