

How I Pray

By

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I define prayer by the word *contact*. Real prayer is making that contact with the infinite Creator of the universe. I've come to understand that the essence of prayer is not just the words but the actual connecting. Let's say you say the Lord's Prayer. It has meaning, but they're words. The difference is that praying with contact means that you know that there's somebody there on the other side, you know that God is there. You absolutely know the existence of the Creator. It's like an electrical charge; it's not just space or air. There's a connection between you and your Creator.

Being Muslim, by obligation we have to make our five prayers a day. The reason I want to highlight that is that I don't make contact every time I pray. The prayers are obligatory and regular, but, for whatever reason, sometimes your mind is wandering, and you don't always

make the contact. So you do the prayers because you're obligated to.

We have *Fajr* prayer in the morning; that usually occurs sometime around five or six A.M. Then we have *Thuhr* prayer, which is in the afternoon—usually around twelve or one o'clock. Then you have the *Asr* prayer. You also have *Maghrib*, a late-afternoon prayer that you say after the sunset. Then you have the evening prayer, *Asha*, that's usually about nine-thirty or ten P.M.

The prayers are not really lengthy. The *Fajr* prayer is the shortest prayer; you only have to do two *rakahs*. *Rakahs* are the movements in Muslim prayer: standing, bending, kneeling, head on the floor. To complete one *rakah* would be to stand, to bend, to kneel, to put your head on the floor, and then get back up again. For the noon prayer and the afternoon prayer and the prayer that's late at night, you do four *rakahs*. For the prayer that comes right after sunset, we do three *rakahs*. The *Fajr* takes about five minutes. In the afternoon, however, it takes close to ten minutes to pray.

There's a ritual, set prayer during these times. With every prayer, we say,

*In the name of God, most gracious, most merciful,
Praise be to God, the Cherisher and Sustainer of all the worlds,
Most gracious, Most merciful,
Master of the day of judgment,
Thee do we worship and Thine aid we seek,
Show us the straight way,
The way of those on whom Thou has bestowed thy grace,
Those whose fortune is not wrath,
And who go not astray.*

Every *rakah* begins with that prayer, and it's the most often-said prayer in Islam. It's called the *Alfatiha*, or the opening.

All of the prayers are made up of chapters or verses from the Koran. The other prayers differ because you can pick and choose the ones that you like as long as they make up one complete *ayet*, or one complete paragraph. One would be, "To Thee have we granted the fount of abundance, so turn to your Lord in prayer and sacrifice." That's one of my favorites.

As I've matured in my faith and in my life, I connect more often now. When I'm getting ready to come to prayer, I'm much more aware of what is about to happen besides the fact that I'm getting ready to say some words or repeat a poem or a story or something like that. What I'm actually doing is fulfilling an obligation. For prayer is not something we made up; it's been requested through all of the faiths. That's how the Lord's Prayer came about; God asked that we pray to Him. As we mature, as we study our faith and get more understanding, the meanings of these things become deeper to us. That meaning makes the attitude different. Sometimes when I get ready to begin prayer, I can't even pray because the reality of what is about to happen is so overwhelming, I just kind of cry; I am that filled up.

But there was a time when I didn't even know that I could connect; I just prayed. As children we go to bed, we say our prayers at night or whenever it is, and it doesn't occur to us that there's any connection. We're talking, we say our prayers, and that's it. For me that was all I did for a long time. Prayer was just a natural way of life. But what eventually would come to my understanding would be the contact or the fact that there was another layer or level to what this prayer was all about. I think that such knowledge comes from studying your faith, which means that you're learning more about your Creator and the awesomeness of this whole reality. The day came when it was like a light bulb coming on—you

know you're praying because God asked you to pray, told you to pray. All along I thought I was praying because I wanted to pray, but the reality is that we pray because God has asked us to pray. When I realized that, it was like, "My God, this is really awesome. Let me listen to what God has asked me to do." As you think about it, and go deeper and deeper into it and get more reality, all of a sudden you're standing in the midst of prayer and you realize what it all means.

Now, how does prayer affect everyday life? I have a business and a family and a husband and children and grandchildren and things like that, and so there are times when I'm pulling myself out of what is very consuming, and therefore I'm not really tuned in to the prayer. But it's obligatory, and God knows that we are not perfect, so that even though I don't feel like I'm connecting, at least I'm fulfilling my obligation, and maybe somewhere along that line God will show His mercy on me.

I'm fortunate in that my husband is also a praying man. Early on in our marriage, when we wouldn't see eye to eye, he would be the one who would say, "Let's say a prayer over this." Now, there you are, in the middle of a healthy discussion (as we call them!) when suddenly you stop and pray for guidance: I attribute *that* to why our marriage is together today. When you come up out of prayer, it puts everything in perspective. I certainly agree with those who say, "A family that prays together stays together." Even though you might have been as mad as you could have been at the time, once you finish praying, you just have to realize that you must put things in perspective and recognize that the most important thing is what God wants you to do. It wasn't that every time we finished prayer, I necessarily agreed with my husband, but it helped in terms of how we handled our differences.

I think that goes across the board. No matter what is going on in my life, if I can just have the wherewithal to pull myself out and go into prayer, the relief that I get from praying—I don't care *what* the problem is—is immense. Prayer is turning the problem into God's hands; I have to give it up. Whatever it is that's too heavy for me to handle, I have to give it up, and I think that's the value of prayer: the recognition of someone who is really capable of handling every situation and taking control of every affair and getting you together—getting you straightened out or giving you the help that you need. So there's no question: anytime I go into prayer, I come out a better person. Period.

Sometimes I almost "pray without ceasing," as they say, because I can't make it by myself, without God's help. I am in constant remembrance, and I'm forced to be in constant remembrance because I'm in so much need all the time. You have family, you have community life, you have business life; there's so many things going on. You're either in prayer of thanksgiving or in prayer of asking. Sometimes you just want to say, "Thank you, I know I'm fortunate." There are so many times when I'm thanking, but still I need this and I need that. I really know that God can perform and fulfill any need that I have.

I also understand prayer goes hand in hand with work. In Islam you don't pray and just sit there—although as merciful as the Creator is that I've known, there are times when I just sit down and get the blessing anyway. But as Muslims we are taught prayer and good works. You are supposed to pray and then you're supposed to do the best you can. And with that best you're supposed to know that God is aware of your best and will handle the affair after that. There are some things that are bigger than you and I can handle, that we just can't figure out.

I pray for protection, for guidance—for everything. I feel as though I'm in constant prayer. When I'm walking down the street, I'm praying. I make a lot of mistakes, so I'm praying all the time for God to have mercy on me and to help me deal with myself in terms of my shortcomings. I'm in prayer on a constant basis, and in constant remembrance.

Have I received answers to prayers? Oh, my goodness, yes. There are times when I get answers before I can even get the request out. How can I tell? In my lifetime I've had a couple of very, very, soul-searching encounters where I've actually heard a voice. Now, I'm not so sure it was outside of me—I don't want to get spooky—but it happened two times in my life when I was under extreme pressure. It certainly was profound, and it's probably somewhat responsible for my becoming a Muslim. But I normally feel the prayer is answered because I see the manifestation; I ask for something and then it will happen. Patience is critical, and I guess we're all working on that. But there's not much in terms of what I've asked for that hasn't been answered, to be honest about it. I could give you a material example, but it would not be any more rewarding than having a child graduate from college or just graduate from high school. I asked God to protect my children and grandchildren, and they have been well protected and they're doing well and I'm glad.

There was a time when I wanted a wall up in my house and didn't have the money, and out of the blue I got the wall. I wanted to build another room in my basement area because my husband has a very large family. They like to come back and forth and I enjoy them when they come. One of the things that was missing was a multipurpose room that could also serve as an extra bedroom. It was something that I wanted, but there were other things that took up the money, and I just couldn't

seem to get it. So I just asked God to let me be successful in getting the wall up. About a year later I was talking with my brother, and he said, "I'll put your wall up as a gift." It took him about a year, but the wall is up. People come and say, "Oh, this is a beautiful wall," for it's not just a wall but has bookshelves and a beautiful door in it. So, I asked for it, then left it alone, and eventually it happened. I don't think there's anything that doesn't happen just about every day. Maybe that's why I'm in constant remembrance, because I'm also in constant thankfulness for the things that I'm receiving. I've got sense enough to know that they are gifts from God, and I appreciate them. I would like for them to continue, so I'm constantly thanking.

One of the most beautiful things that I've ever seen in my life was when I went to *Haj* in 1978 to Mecca. I can remember going into Medina, having arrived in the airport in Saudi Arabia, and when I stepped out on the balcony, there was a call to prayer at the time. The land is flat, so you can see for great distances, and as far as the eye could see, the whole country was in prayer. Everyplace that I could see, people were doing the rituals for Muslim prayer. It was absolutely beautiful. I enjoy the *Jummah* prayers on Friday where we have congregational prayer. We line up together and bow down together. There's no color, no racism in Islam, so the person next to you could be short or tall, fat or skinny, black or white, poor or rich; it doesn't make any difference. It is so beautiful when people stand together like that. Neither age nor financial situation matter when you go down in prayer to Allah.

We have congregational prayer at home with my husband and the family and our friends. It's a beautiful thing to pray together. I enjoy it when I go to interfaith conferences and events where we have interfaith prayer; I

get just as emotional then. Prayer in every language is beautiful. We have family members who are Baptists, Catholics. You can enjoy the beauty of God any way it's expressed. "Ooh, let me see how you worship? It's just beautiful." "Ooh, look at the way the Jews do it, isn't this just lovely, I love this." "Look at the way the Catholics do it; that's fine too." Was I always able to do that? No. Why wasn't I always able to do it? Because I had been taught to be very dogmatic. Life taught me better. Sometimes I think people are afraid they might be converted if they enjoy someone else's things. I'm just very fortunate in that my husband and I are both strong in our Islamic faith, and I think that is why we can enjoy other folks' faith so much. Instead of any kind of fear we see the beauty. One of the things that makes this country so great is that all the religions have the freedom to worship. I can enjoy the many ways that people worship in America because I know there's only one God.