

# The Prayer Rulebook

## How I've Learned There Are No Rules

### By Amy Daughters

One of the primary reasons I've always felt so drawn to prayer is that it's a private, one-on-one element of faith. For me—someone who has struggled with self-confidence—this is attractive because no one can tell me I'm doing it the wrong way.

I've also always found it easy to communicate with God during quiet, still moments. It's a connection with such depth that it's difficult to explain with words. It's a deep undercurrent that manifests itself in a physical tightening of my chest accompanied by swells of adrenaline.

These two threads—my Christian inferiority complex combined with God's gift of spiritual connection—have led to a lifetime of praying. And while, yes, I've always been a prayer person, it's not something that was a consistent, rock-solid anchor for me until my late 40s when God blew up my life.

That's when I reconnected with my old camp pal, Dana. I hadn't had any contact with her in 30 years. Through Facebook, I learned that her son Parker was battling cancer. She asked for prayers, and as that was my "thing," I silently joined her prayer team.

### Surprising Urgency

While following through on an online prayer request was a normal occurrence for me, Dana and Parker were different. From the very beginning, I felt drawn in and totally committed in a way that I knew didn't make sense. My prayers for them had an urgency—an emotional resonance—that didn't fit the distance

that separated us.

When Parker relapsed, I was inspired (after further prayer) to write to him and his mom at the Ronald McDonald house in Memphis. Then Parker passed away at only 15 years old.

Devastated for Dana—as any fellow mom would be—I hit my knees again and asked God what I was supposed to do next. The message was clear, “Keep writing the letters and keep praying.”

And that’s what I did. And then Dana began writing back, sharing about her deep, profound, and never-ending grief. We communicated for two years via handwritten letters exclusively, developing an unbelievable bond that transcended what an in-person relationship might have offered in that moment.

While I learned so much from Dana, one of the biggest takeaways was that I couldn’t really do anything for her. My endless words, my updates, my attempts to entertain, my care, and even my repeated reminders that I was praying for her added up to, at best, a well-meaning distraction. And so, to make a difference, I leaned even harder into God and His promises.

These prayers—the non-stop ones for Dana and her family—meant something more. I had to get this right because it was all I could do for them, this precious family that I now believe God had implanted in my flawed human heart.

## **Prayer Questions**

It led to an “Aha!” moment: Though I had previously delighted in the covert nature of prayer where nobody could review my performance, was I even doing it right?

Does God listen more when we get down on our knees to pray? Or are our prayers more powerful in church? Or is it better when

we have a quiet time set aside every day?

Are the prayers of a group more powerful than those of an individual? What about the actual wording? Are we supposed to say the same thing over and over again? Or are we required to come up with something new every time?

What about the order of prayer expressions? Do we confess, then ask God for help—or is it better to offer thanks first, ask for forgiveness, and then make our requests known?

Searching for some sort of “Prayer Best Practices,” I found that many Mormons like to pray together as a family every morning and evening, that devout Muslims pray five times a day, and for those of the Jewish faith the number is three.

And where the Catholic Church has more than a dozen common prayers that can be said verbatim, the United Methodist Church encourages both formal written and spontaneous prayers. The further I delved into the subject I found that, even among Christian churches, there are as many approaches and as much variety as there are denominations.

Prayer could be intercessory, or meditative and contemplative, or seasonal. There were even “listening” prayers.

Which was the best way to garner God’s attention?

## **Minute by Minute**

Eventually, Dana and I reunited in the physical realm. That meant not only could I imagine the depth of her grief via her handwritten words, but now I could also see it in her body language, in her facial expressions, and in her tears—with my own eyes.

I was introduced to her husband Jim and their four daughters—Parker’s dad and sisters. They were also hurting, mostly invisibly and each with his or her own unique set of circumstances and challenges. The need for getting the prayers

“right” was compounding.

Perhaps most critically, I began to understand that Dana’s relationship with prayer had been impacted in a way that couldn’t be gauged. How was she supposed to pray when the most important prayer request in her life wasn’t answered?

I needed to pray for *her* prayers. To lift up all the things she couldn’t.

As our story got out, I began receiving a bunch of prayer requests from a bunch of other people living very real lives. The sheer volume, and even more so, the critical importance of each of these prayers meant that not just one approach was going to “get ‘er done.”

It all added up to a profound realization: *prayer is a minute-by-minute thing for me*. While I was still going to have time set aside each day for prayer, God and I were going to literally communicate all day. About everything.

While sometimes I would still get down on my knees, other times I prayed while doing the dishes or driving or even speaking to another human being. Sometimes I would be in church, reciting just what I was supposed to say, while other times I’d be in my pew silently praying my own prayers. And where sometimes I would have lots of new words for God, other times I would just pray the same thing repeatedly.

And sometimes the prayers—especially for Dana—would be so deep, so guttural, that there would be no words at all.

## **God Is There**

The common denominator, the only element that really mattered, was that God was going to be there in all the moments.

I couldn’t get it wrong. Not because nobody could see it or comment on it, but because it was the Holy Spirit running the entire show. While it felt unscripted, it wasn’t. The

difference was, I wasn't the one directing the program—He was.

It set me free, not just as a prayer person, but as a believer. I wasn't an inferior Christian. I was just a regular, flawed, sinful, hopeful, human being in a relationship with an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God who gets me.

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