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**BECOMING
THE ANSWER
TO OUR
PRAYERS**

PRAYER FOR ORDINARY RADICALS



IVP Books

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Introduction

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT PRAYER. But it's not really about how to pray. There are lots of good books to help you learn to pray. This one is about becoming the answer to our prayers.

We live in inner-city communities that are usually known for their activism, not their prayer life. In fact, writing this book has been a discipline, as we try to listen amid all the noise of wildly busy lives, and speak nothing more or less than we hear God speaking to us. On good days, it has felt like there were three of us writing together.

We know we need prayer. Like roses need water, we need a connection to God that sustains, guides and makes us into something beautiful. As students at Eastern College, outside of Philadelphia, we fell in love with God's vision for a kingdom on earth where the weak find justice and there are no longer any poor. Learning from friends in the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA), we relocated to neglected neighborhoods and helped start The Simple Way (Philadelphia) and Rutba House (Durham, North Carolina), communities of hospitality and peacemaking. The daily

struggle to put our hope in God's light despite the darkness of inner-city blight has driven us to conversation with God. We want to understand prayer because we know we can't live without it.

For many of us who live active lives among the poor and marginalized, prayer doesn't make the top of the urgent to-do list. After all, wouldn't God rather have us feed the masses, help a kid with homework, take a friend to detox, heal the broken or liberate the captive? Surely Amos tells the people of God to shut up with their songs and worship and feasts and festivals, and take care of the poor (Amos 5:21-24). Without justice for the poor, religious activities are little more than annoying noise in the ears of God, and the prayers that used to smell like incense to God become a nauseating stench when there is no flesh bringing those prayers to life.

This is all true. And yet we have seen many a "radical" Christian suffocate, entangled in the weeds of injustice. Even entire "intentional Christian communities" are flailing because they have not learned to pray together. Many of us have a sour taste in our mouths from corny Christian retail, like the signs that say "The family that prays together stays together." We admit that it's often easier to complain (or write a book) than it is to pray. We ourselves confess feeling tired, confused, annoyed, even counterfeit in our prayers.

This is not a book about the kind of prayer where we tell God things God already knows, as if Jesus needs a reminder that kids are dying in Sudan. Nor are we talking about the kind of prayer that excuses us from responsibility. Any time we ask someone for help and hear "I'll pray about that," we know to start working on plan B. As our friend John Perkins from

CCDA says, “When you see someone who needs a handicap ramp, don’t go pray for a ramp! Build them a ramp.”

When we pray to God asking, “Why don’t you do something?” we hear a gentle whisper respond, “I did do something. I made you.” Prayer is important. Just as important is the call to become the answer to our prayers.

We have so much to unlearn before we learn.

Our friend Tony Campolo tells the story of his grandson going off to say his evening prayers. The boy said, “Hey everybody, I’m going to pray, does anyone want anything?”

Many of us started off this life praying simple little prayers, trying to ask God to do the things we want. “Take care of Mommy.” “Help me not get caught taking cookies.” “Help us find our lost puppy.” “Help us win the game.” No doubt, God has a special ear for the prayers of children, even the silly ones asking for girlfriends and the opportunity to be a cowboy. It’s a good thing the Spirit intercedes on our behalf, stepping in to protect us from what we think we want and helping us not to settle for what *we think* we need. It’s as if the Spirit says, “Look I know he said he wanted to be a cowboy, but . . .” The longer we pray, the more we are sure of this: *Prayer is not so much about convincing God to do what we want God to do as it is about convincing ourselves to do what God wants us to do.*

Mother Teresa was once asked in an interview, “What do you say when you pray?” She replied, “Nothing, I just listen.” So then the reporter asked, “Well then, what does God say to you?” Her answer: “Nothing much, He just listens.”

The saints say prayer is less about what we say and more about being with the one we love. Prayer is about having a romance with the Divine. The more deeply we are in love with

someone, the less we have to say. In fact, a sure sign that we know someone deeply is the ability to enjoy one another without words—to simply admire each other.

We once heard a wise elder say prayer is like a little girl playing at the feet of her grandma. She doesn't have to say anything or do anything to please her grandma (who is quite content just watching her play). And the most beautiful moment is when the child starts to grow tired. She just crawls into grandma's lap to be rocked, to hear a lullaby, to feel a kiss on the forehead and the warm embrace of love.

We love these images of prayer as a deep and intimate relationship with God. When we sit back and think about prayer in a quiet moment, this is just the sort of experience we long for. But it's hard to remember these images—harder still to imagine what they could look like in the face of urgent needs and tragic loss. It's hard to know what it looks like to be a contemplative in the hood.

Here's the good news: prayer and action can go together; in fact they must. Otherwise we have little more than a bunch of inactive believers or worn-out activists, and neither do much good for the world. But not all of us are mystics and saints like Francis and Mother Teresa. For some of us, it's hard to know where to begin talking about prayer. So we have turned to Jesus. Beginning with the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray, we ask in part one of this book what it looks like to make the Lord's Prayer a model for daily life. While rooted in the intimacy of children talking to their Father, this prayer is as practical as putting food on the table, paying the bills, getting along with neighbors and wrestling with our egos. As we learn to

reimagine the everyday in light of Jesus' prayer, we begin to live in a whole new world.

Part two focuses on Jesus' prayer for the church in John 17. It's one thing to say that prayer invites us into a way of life. But we still have to name the distinctive nature of the way that Jesus walked. If the church is the body of Christ, then we are called to continue in this way. John 17 offers guidance for how we can do that.

But we've already noted the difficulty of making prayer happen. We need something deeper than know-how and practice. We need the spiritual wisdom of those who've walked with Jesus—those who have grown in intimacy with Jesus while becoming the answer to their prayers. In part three we've listened carefully to the wisdom of the saints. We invite you to join us in chasing after Jesus with them.

Thank God, saints were there to teach us the words of prayer before we knew what we were doing. Because the prayers of others are so important, we've scattered some of our favorites on the pages of this book. These prayers are usually more important than what we have to say, so we hope you'll pause to pray these prayers with us.

This book is dedicated to our mommas who've prayed some long nights—and keep praying for us.