

Prayer

By Roberto Santiago

A prayer is a plea or requests for something desired or an expression of honor, praise, gratitude or thanksgiving to a superior being, such as God of Christians, with power to fulfill the request and accept the expressions of love. Some religions prayers are directed to man-made lifeless objects, idols of wood, stone or gold that they believe exercise power over their lives. Some offer prayers to a person, Catholics prayers to Mary. Is praying the same today as it was to the first Christians? Or, are prayers statements or requests for personal satisfaction, such as, health, wealth and happiness? This (paragraph by Randolph Dunn)

Phase I – Language & Cultural Phrases

1. “He doesn’t have a prayer.”

I have heard that phrase most of my life. “He doesn’t have a prayer.” We say it when the odds are bad, when something feels sealed before it even begins, when logic tells us there isn’t a path forward. It’s usually not said with theological intention. It’s just language. But it is curious language.

The expression assumes that prayer, at least somewhere in our collective memory, represents possibility. If someone still “has a prayer,” then something is not completely closed. Even people who would never describe themselves as religious still use the phrase. That says something.

I find it interesting how language preserves ideas long after belief has grown quieter. We may not speak about prayer in doctrinal terms, but we still reach for it when outcomes look final. We use it to describe impossibility, as if prayer were the last thin thread between what is and what could still be.

Then there is the other line we use almost automatically: “I’ll pray for you.” Or, “You’re in my prayers.” I have said both, sometimes with deep intention, sometimes because I did not know what else to offer. But what am I really saying when I say that? Is it comfort? Is it hope? Is it an admission that I have reached the limit of what I can fix?

Jeremiah records an invitation: “Call to me and I will answer you.” It appears without explanation, without mechanics, without a diagram of how the exchange works. Just an invitation.

Maybe prayer is less about certainty and more about refusing to declare something finished too quickly. When we say someone “doesn’t have a prayer,” we are really saying hope has run out. If

prayer is hope spoken aloud, then perhaps the deeper issue is not how it functions, but whether we still leave room for possibility.

That thought stays with me.

2. “We’re praying for a miracle.”

Not long after saying someone “doesn’t have a prayer,” we sometimes hear the opposite in very different rooms: “We’re praying for a miracle.” The tone changes when those words are spoken. Hospitals, family meetings, moments when no one wants to say what everyone is thinking.

In English, the phrase sounds active — praying. In Spanish we often say, “Estamos esperando un milagro,” waiting for a miracle. One sounds like action. The other sounds like patience. Both carry the same tension.

What do we mean when we say it? Are we asking for the natural order to bend? Are we admitting that we have run out of options? Or are we simply refusing to close the story before it has finished unfolding?

The word “miracle” still survives in everyday speech, even among people who say they trust only what can be measured. That survival is worth noticing. It suggests that most of us, even quietly, leave a small space for interruption.

Not every prayer ends in what we would call a miracle. Experience teaches that quickly. Yet people continue to use the word. Sometimes I wonder whether the miracle they are hoping for is not always a reversal of circumstances, but the strength to endure them without collapsing. That kind of shift does not appear dramatic from the outside, but it is not small.

The phrase persists because something in us resists finality.

3. “Thoughts and prayers.”

After public tragedy, the phrase appears almost immediately: “Our thoughts and prayers are with you.” It is meant to comfort, and often it does. I have received those words and felt supported. I have also watched how the phrase has shifted over time. For some, it still signals compassion. For others, it feels insufficient, as if it stands in place of something more tangible.

In Spanish, we might say, “Estamos con ustedes en pensamiento y oración.” It carries a slightly different cadence, almost implying presence rather than distance. Still, the question remains.

What exactly are we offering when we say those words? Solidarity? Sympathy? An acknowledgment that we cannot control what just happened?

In the Scriptures, prayer rarely stands alone. Abraham intercedes and continues walking. Moses prays and still confronts Pharaoh. Nehemiah prays and then rebuilds. Prayer does not replace movement; it seems to shape it.

So perhaps the tension around “thoughts and prayers” is not really about whether we pray, but about what we expect prayer to do. Is it a substitute for action? Is it an expression of helplessness? Or is it something that changes the one who prays before it ever changes a circumstance?

That may be where the discomfort begins. Because if prayer does nothing, the phrase is empty. But if prayer changes something — even if that something is us — then the words carry more weight than we sometimes admit.

And that brings us to the next question: when we say prayer changes things, what do we mean by “things”?

4. “Prayer changes things.”

I have seen that phrase on church signs for years. “Prayer changes things.” It sounds confident, almost guaranteed, as if it promises measurable results. But I have often wondered what exactly is meant by “things.”

Circumstances do not always shift. Illness does not always disappear. Outcomes do not always reverse. Anyone who has lived long enough knows that prayer does not function like a lever that adjusts reality on command. So when we say it changes things, what are we describing?

Sometimes I have noticed that prayer changes the person who prays. Not in a dramatic way, but in a quiet rearrangement of thought. It slows the reaction. It exposes motives. It reveals what I actually want beneath what I first asked for. There have been times I began praying for a specific outcome and ended up confronting my own impatience instead.

Is that “changing things”?

When David prayed in confession, something shifted before circumstances did. When Job protested, the situation did not immediately improve, yet the conversation deepened. Jesus prayed in Gethsemane and the cup did not pass, but he stood up and walked toward what awaited him.

Perhaps “prayer changes things” is less about bending events and more about refusing to remain unchanged while events unfold. That may not fit neatly on a sign, but it feels closer to lived experience.

And it brings us back to the larger question that keeps forming underneath all these phrases: if prayer is not control, not magic, not escape, then what is it?

5. “Everything happens for a reason.”

I have heard this phrase offered in moments of loss more times than I can count. It is usually said gently, almost protectively, as if the words themselves might soften the impact of whatever just happened. Sometimes I have said it too. I am not always sure what I meant when I did.

Does it mean that every event is carefully arranged? That suffering has a hidden blueprint we simply cannot see yet? That nothing is random, even when it feels deeply unfair? The phrase sounds comforting, but it can also close a conversation too quickly. It can move past grief before grief has had a chance to speak.

In the book of Job, his friends were very confident that everything happened for a reason. They had explanations ready. Suffering must be connected to fault. Disorder must be connected to consequence. Their system felt stable because it made sense of the chaos.

Job was not so certain.

He did not deny God. He did not abandon belief. But he refused the neat formula. He questioned, he argued, he demanded an audience. He spoke out of pain without first polishing it into theology. That, to me, is striking.

If everything were simple and cleanly explained, there would be no need for protest. Yet Job prays precisely because the explanation feels insufficient. He speaks not from clarity but from confusion. Not from acceptance, but from tension.

Maybe that is where prayer becomes necessary — not when we understand the reason, but when the reason feels incomplete. Perhaps “everything happens for a reason” is sometimes our attempt to quiet uncertainty, to restore order quickly so we can move on. Prayer, on the other hand, may be what we do when certainty refuses to satisfy us.

One approach closes the file. The other keeps the conversation open.

I am not sure which one is easier. I am fairly certain which one is more honest.

6. Why Pray at All?

If God already knows everything, why pray? If outcomes unfold regardless of what we say, why speak at all? And if suffering continues — if illness does not always reverse, if injustice persists, if doors close despite sincere requests — what exactly is prayer doing?

I have asked that quietly more than once. There are familiar answers available: relationship, obedience, faith, dependence. They are not wrong. But sometimes they arrive too quickly, as if the explanation is eager to settle the discomfort before the question has fully formed.

So I try to come at it differently. Why do human beings speak at all when they cannot control the outcome? Why does someone stand at a graveside and talk to someone who will not answer? Why does a parent whisper over a sleeping child? Why does a person in pain speak into a dark room? Speech itself is relational, even when there is no visible reply. We talk not only to transmit information but to remain connected.

Perhaps prayer works in that same human register. It may not be about informing God of something unknown. It may not even be about persuading Him in the way we persuade each other. It may be about refusing isolation. About keeping the line open when silence would suggest that everything is sealed and self-contained.

In the Old Testament, Abraham argues. Moses pleads. David confesses. Job protests. None of them provide new data. They are entering a conversation. Jesus prays too — not ceremonially, but repeatedly. Before decisions. After miracles. In exhaustion. In distress. If he was not updating God's knowledge, then something else was happening. Alignment, perhaps. Strength. Honesty. Surrender. Maybe even resistance to despair.

It could be that prayer is where the illusion of self-sufficiency begins to thin out. It might be the place where we admit that control has limits, even when we would rather pretend otherwise. Or maybe it is simply what human beings do when they sense that reality is larger than what they can measure or manage.

Prayer does not seem to survive because it is efficient. It survives because silence feels incomplete. And sometimes I wonder whether the deeper question is not whether prayer changes outcomes, but what happens to a person who never prays at all.

That question does not accuse. It just lingers

Phase II – If Someone is listening

7. To Whom Are We Speaking?

I have been in rooms where someone says, “Let’s pray,” and the air shifts almost immediately. Some people bow their heads without hesitation. Some pause, unsure how to position themselves. Others remain still, eyes open, watching. No one explains what is about to happen. It is simply assumed that someone is listening.

But who?

When we say “thoughts and prayers,” where do those prayers go? When a mother whispers beside a hospital bed, when someone alone in a car says, “God, help me,” when a person under pressure mutters something upward without thinking — who exactly is on the other side of that moment?

Not everyone answers that the same way. Some imagine a personal God who hears. Others speak more vaguely of a presence, or a force, or something beyond language. Some admit they are unsure but speak anyway. And there are those who are convinced no one is listening at all — and yet, in certain moments, words still rise.

That interests me.

If there is no listener, then prayer remains inside the person who speaks. It may steady the mind. It may organize fear. It may help someone endure. Billions of prayers across centuries would dissolve into silence, never received, never answered — simply human breath released into an immense and indifferent universe.

Another possibility is that prayer is relational — that when we speak, we are addressing a real “You” beyond ourselves. Not simply an interior coping mechanism, but an actual listener. If that is true, then prayer does not end with the person who speaks.

The difference between those two possibilities is not small. If prayer is self-address, it remains inside the mind. If it is relational, it moves outward. Most of us live somewhere between those assumptions without fully examining which one we are operating from.

Before asking whether prayer changes things, or whether everything happens for a reason, there may be a simpler question underneath both.

When we pray, are we talking ourselves through the moment — or are we speaking to Someone?

That question does not need a rushed answer.

But eventually, it asks for clarity.

8. When the Answer Doesn't Come (Job)

There comes a point in the story where Job stops responding to his friends and begins speaking past them. They have already done their part. They have explained his suffering. They have connected loss to fault, pain to hidden error. Their system is orderly. If something has gone wrong, there must be a reason.

Job listens. Then something shifts. Instead of arguing with them, he turns his words elsewhere. He speaks as if Someone else is in the room. "I will speak in the anguish of my spirit. I will complain in the bitterness of my soul." There is no attempt to sound composed. No effort to soften the tone. He sounds wounded, frustrated, insistent.

What strikes me is not the volume of his pain, but the direction of it.

He is not venting into emptiness. He wants an audience. "Oh, that I knew where I might find Him." That line has always stayed with me. It is not philosophical. It feels almost physical — as if he could walk to a place and stand there until he is heard.

The silence that follows does not stop him. It stretches the conversation. The losses remain. The questions remain. No immediate explanation arrives to steady the ground. Still, he continues.

If prayer only makes sense when answers arrive quickly, then Job should have stopped early. Instead, his words grow more direct. More exposed. Almost confrontational. He is not debating whether God exists. He is speaking as if He does — and demanding that the relationship account for what has happened.

There is something honest in that kind of prayer. It refuses to pretend the pain is smaller than it is. And maybe that is part of why this story survives.

It suggests that prayer is not always calm. Sometimes it sounds like protest. Sometimes it sounds like someone knocking on a door that does not open immediately.

Which brings us to another layer of the question.

If we assume there is Someone listening, what do we do when that Someone seems silent?

9. When Prayer Feels Like Belonging (Abraham)

After sitting with Job's protest, I found myself returning to another scene. The tone shifts here. Abraham stands overlooking a city that is about to be destroyed. The outcome seems decided. And yet he begins to speak.

When I read it now, I don't hear defiance. I hear familiarity. "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" The question is careful, almost measured. Then he lowers the number — fifty, forty-five, forty — moving slowly, respectfully. The exchange continues without strain.

What stays with me is not the negotiation itself, but the sense that Abraham speaks as someone who belongs. He knows the One he is addressing. He understands the weight of that presence. And still, he asks. There is reverence in his tone, but there is also steadiness. He is not trying to seize control of the outcome. He is standing inside a relationship that has grown strong enough to hold the question.

Earlier in his life, he did not sound like this. The story of Abraham is a long road — leaving, wandering, waiting, learning. By the time he stands over that city, something has settled in him. He speaks not as a stranger to God, but as someone who has walked long enough to trust the character of the One he addresses.

The city is not spared. The conversation does not bend history in the way the numbers might suggest. But Abraham is not silenced for asking. The dialogue stands.

When I sit with that, it shifts the way I think about prayer. It does not feel like emergency language. It does not feel like ritual obligation. It feels like belonging — like someone who knows he has the right to speak because the relationship has been lived into over time.

And that brings me back, quietly, to the question that keeps circling underneath all of this.

Why pray at all?

If prayer is not about control — the city was not spared — then perhaps it is about standing before power without shrinking. Perhaps it is about speaking as someone who knows he belongs, even when the future does not unfold the way he hopes.

That does not answer the question completely.

But it keeps it honest.

STILL WORKING ON THESE

Part III — Prayer Beyond the Self

10. Pray for One Another

Shared burden and participation

11. In Solitude (Jesus at Prayer)

Rhythm, withdrawal, and alignment

12. If It Is Possible (Gethsemane)

Desire, surrender, and tension

13. Why Have You Forsaken Me?

Prayer at the edge of silence

Part IV — Where It Leaves Me

14. The Prayers of the Saints

Do words disappear?

15. I Still Pray.