

**ASK  
SEEK  
KNOCK**

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# ASK SEEK KNOCK

PRAYERS TO CHANGE  
YOUR LIFE

# TONY JONES

NAVPRESS 



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## PREFACE

This book, from conception to completion, has been good for my spirit, good for my soul, and good for my life. I've taken a journey through Christian prayer, starting with the pre-Christian prayers of our Israelite forefathers and coming right up to the present day.

I have enjoyed the process from beginning to end, especially seeing how approaches to God and reasons for approaching God are similar from person to person: We're created beings, we desire relationships with our Creator, thus we pray.

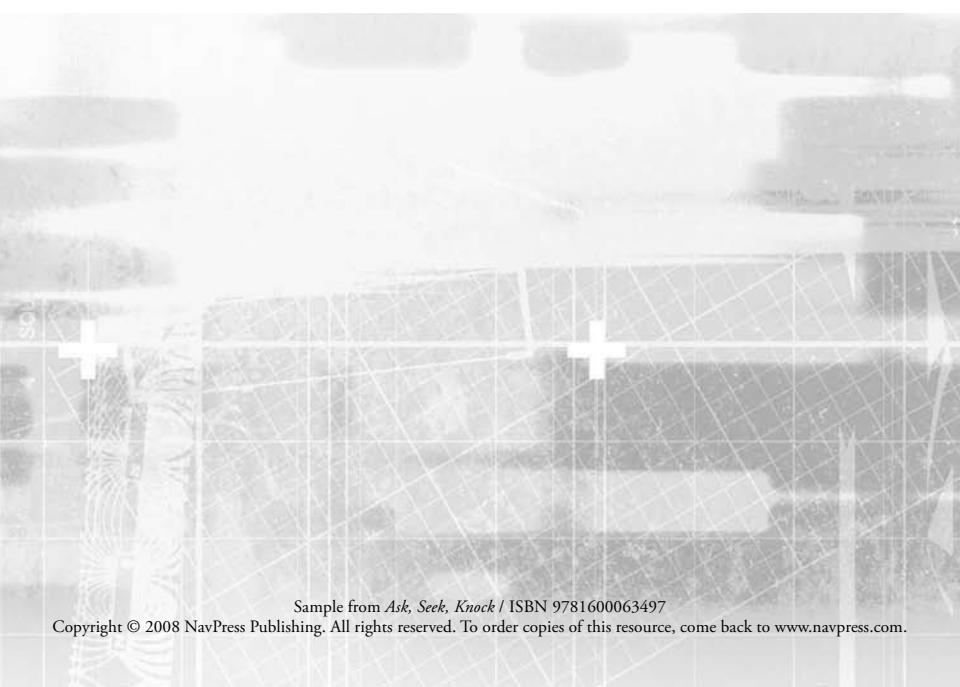
My prayer life has been enhanced as a result of this experience. I pray your prayer life will be enhanced by reading this book and putting its ideas into practice.

My deepest thanks go to my wife, Julie, my partner in everything; our children, Tanner, Lily, and Aidan; and everyone at NavPress.



PART ONE

# INTRODUCTION



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## WHAT IS PRAYER?

We've all had those moments when we've called out to God in prayers so heartfelt and desperate that the prayer was truly the cry of the heart. I've had many such moments in my life. Some turned out to be fairly silly—I wasn't in the bind I thought I was—and others have been frightening moments into which God intervened.

Somewhere between the points of silly and frightening is an experience I remember vividly. I was skiing at Winter Park Ski Resort in Colorado during seventh grade. I spent the morning skiing with my dad and brother, even though my ability wasn't quite up to theirs. After they were sufficiently warmed up and stretched out, they were feeling bold. I was just trying to keep up and not show my nervousness.

We boarded the Olympia Express chair lift and chatted on our way up. At the top, we jumped off the lift, me following my dad and brother. We skied through a narrow opening in a snow fence and past a sign labeled "Drunken Frenchman." A black diamond, the international symbol indicating that the

difficulty of the slope requires expert skiing, was printed on it. Another sign featured smaller print saying something about danger and the required length for skis and the words *at your own risk*, but I didn't take the time to read it.

On a crest along the top of the run, I looked down. I almost puked. The ski run appeared to go straight down, with moguls as tall as I was. My brother went over the edge with no hesitation, carving his way between the bumps. I, on the other hand, stood paralyzed. My skin began to prickle in the same way it does when your foot falls asleep—but it was happening over my entire body. Sweat started dripping from my armpits down my sides. I could feel it. The lump in my throat was too big for me to talk. I had every physical symptom of terror.

My dad must have sensed my anxiety because he asked if we should take off our skis and hike back to the lift in search of another run. When I turned around, I realized getting back would take an hour-long climb. Between that and the fact that my brother would be waiting for us at the bottom, I knew turning around wasn't an option. My dad said he would go first, slowly, so I could follow his path. And he started down.

It was then, standing on that mountain, looking down at certain death—or at least many broken bones—that I uttered

a prayer of profound theological depth: "O God, please, please, please, please, help me to ski this and not be permanently injured." Knowing I was in deep trouble, I cried out to God, like the psalmist:

*Help, GOD—the bottom has fallen out of my life!*  
*Master, bear my cry for help!*  
*Listen hard! Open your ears!*  
*Listen to my cries for mercy.* (Psalm 130:1-2)

I didn't know what else to do except pray. I prayed—and begged and pleaded—that God would give me the strength to do something I couldn't do on my own. Then I started down Drunken Frenchman. As you might guess, I lived to tell about it. I'm here today, still skiing and still praying—and still talking to my dad and brother.

I'm deeply comforted knowing God heard my prayer and cared enough about me, standing at the top of a black-diamond run, to take pity on my situation. The fact that the God of the universe takes personal interest in each of us as we converse with him through prayer is one of the most beautiful aspects of being a follower of Christ.

## OUR WORKING DEFINITION

Probably, when most of us think of prayer, we think of asking God for something. Indeed, the word *prayer* means the act of asking for something from God. Most of us will agree with a richer definition of prayer than simply asking for things, though.

Luis of Granada, a sixteenth-century Christian spiritual writer from Spain, wrote, “Prayer, properly speaking, is a petition which we make to God for the things which pertain to our salvation; but it is also taken in another, broader sense to mean any raising of the heart to God.”<sup>1</sup> He makes a good point. While we often think of prayer as *asking*, and we most often *ask* when we pray, prayer is actually any time we converse with God—so we may be thanking him, praising him, pouring out our hearts to him, or even sitting in silence before him.

The apostle Paul, in two letters—Philippians 4:6 and 1 Thessalonians 5:17—told us to pray always. Because we do a lot more than think about how much we want things and need things as we go about our days, Paul must have meant that we should be in constant contact with God about what’s going on in our lives, our minds, and our souls.

While you’re reading this book, we’ll consider this to be our working definition of prayer:

*Prayer is the act of conversing with God.*

Whenever we're in conversation with God, we're at prayer, whether we're in church reciting the Lord's Prayer, going around the circle in youth group, driving in our cars, or standing at the top of a black-diamond ski run. We can pray any place or time we're awake. (And as we will see, God has often spoken to his followers in dreams as well. Maybe the only time some of us are quiet enough to listen to God's part of the conversation is when we're asleep!)

## **BUT HOW DO I HEAR HIM?**

Hearing from God during our conversations is one of the trickier aspects to grasp. You and I are physical, flesh-and-blood human beings. We use vocal cords and eardrums or hands and eyes to communicate with one another. Although some people claim to have extrasensory perception, for most human beings to receive our messages we usually need to compose our thoughts into words by speaking or writing them.

God, on the other hand, *can* read our minds and hear our thoughts. (Some people who are experienced at prayer say that we don't even have to form words in our minds to pray—

God can hear and respond to our feelings and emotions. What a wild concept! I admit I'm not there yet.) We don't need to speak our prayers out loud for God to hear them, although *we* may benefit from that.

Hearing God in return is even trickier because God rarely chooses to speak to us in an audible voice. If you tell some people you've heard God speaking to you, they'll try to get you locked up; yet when you listen to some people, they're constantly saying, "The Lord told me to . . ." What do we make of this difference of opinion?

The overwhelming teachings of the Bible are that God does answer prayer and that he's a full partner in our prayer-conversations. He does not, however, talk like you and I do. God responds through our prayers by using the Holy Spirit to convict us of sin and to move us to action; God answers prayer by speaking through the body of Christ, our fellow Christians; and God surely speaks to us through his holy Word, the Bible, his ultimate offering to the conversation.

## **PRAYER IN THE EARLY YEARS**

Prayer is a part of every religion known to humankind. In one form or another, all people who believe in a supreme being desire to communicate with that being. Most religions teach that we're

dependent upon a higher power. Out of that dependence, we make our needs known to our god—or gods.

Ancient civilizations such as Greece and Rome abounded with gods, most of which had human attributes and appetites. Conversations between deities and humans went like this: Humans communicated with their gods by offering sacrifices to appease the gods' tempestuous wrath (and consequently avoid storms, war, pestilence, illness, fire, and hardships of every sort) and to earn good fortune (and consequently receive proper weather, bountiful harvests, good health, plenty of wealth, victory in battle, and blessings of every other kind). The gods communicated to humans via augurs, Roman religious officials who read the future in the clouds, in the flights of birds, in animal entrails, and so forth. The augurs' announcements were known as auguries. This process doesn't seem like prayer to us, but that was how god-to-human communication was practiced at the time Jesus introduced the world to a much more intimate communication with God.

The Israelites didn't pray like everyone else in the ancient world, of course. The Old Testament records dozens of prayers by men and women, prophets and poets, kings and shepherds. In coming chapters, we'll see how the prayers of God's chosen people transpired over the centuries. As his people better

understood God and their relationship to him, their prayer lives reflected those newfound understandings.

Then Jesus arrived, introducing a whole new type of relationship between God and his people. The first-century Christians built on the prayer foundation laid by their Hebrew ancestors. With this two thousand–year history, Christian prayer was substantially different from the other religions of the first century. Let's take a look at three key points about first-century Christian prayer.

## **THERE IS ONE GOD, NOT MANY.**

Like the Jews before them, Christians prayed only to one God. Israel's neighbors believed that a male god and a female god created the world by conceiving and giving birth to the universe, including other gods. Instead of dividing their time to pray to two or more gods or trying to figure out which god might be most interested in their current predicaments, Christians were able to offer their prayers exclusively to one God, knowing that, as Lord of all creation, he was the God to pray to.

## **PRAY TO WHOM?**

In Jesus' day, Palestine was under the rule of the Roman Empire. The period of the first century AD was known as the

*Pax Romana* (the Roman Peace). The empire was kept peaceful by two principles: force and cultural pluralism. As long as people prayed to the emperor once a year and paid their taxes, they could enjoy the benefits of the empire while continuing daily life as they preferred and worshipping any god they chose. During the 150 years of the *Pax Romana*, many strange cults, sects, and religions popped up. In this mix, Christianity seemed like just another insignificant cult. Few in Rome even took note—that is, until Christians refused to pray to the emperor. That’s when the persecution of the first followers of Christ began.

## **HE CARES ABOUT YOU.**

Christians understood God, as the Jews did, to be a personal Being who took interest in the prayers of his people. People who worshipped pagan gods believed they were callous toward humans. These people continually offered sacrifices to keep the gods happy so they wouldn’t turn their wrath on humans. Roman gods were up to mischief with one another constantly, and when they took on human form, it was to mock, tease, and belittle humans. In contrast, Christians believed that the Lord was invested in the lives of his people. Old Testament writings told of Yahweh, a God so concerned with the fate of his chosen people that he sent his Son to become a human:

*[Christ Jesus] had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion. (Philippians 2:6-8)*

## **SO, THAT'S THE DIFFERENCE.**

You can see how different the God of the Christians is from the pagan gods. Jupiter, Juno, Neptune, Apollo, and even the emperor (who was human though he pretended he wasn't) were aloof from the human experience. The God of Christians actually walked in our sandals for thirty-three years. I, for one, find this extremely comforting. The fact is, I'd much rather pray to a God who is humble enough to leave his heavenly perch to experience the joys and trials I experience. I join the Christians who through the centuries have found God so approachable because he met us at our point of need.

## THE GOD OF MARS HILL

Just a few years after Jesus' death and resurrection Paul was in Athens, the one-time capital of the Western world, and still a hotbed of religious and philosophical thought. "The city," Luke wrote, "was a junkyard of idols" (Acts 17:16). Paul walked the streets of Athens, talking with anyone who would listen, until he aroused enough interest to be asked to speak on Mars Hill, a hangout for philosophers.

*It is plain to see that you Athenians take your religions seriously. When I arrived here the other day, I was fascinated with all the shrines I came across. And then I found one inscribed, TO THE GOD NOBODY KNOWS. I'm here to introduce you to this God so you can worship intelligently, know who you're dealing with. (Acts 17:22-23)*

Paul goes on to contrast the one true God with the gods and idols the Athenians had been worshipping. God purposefully made the earth livable for humans, he argued, and God remains close at hand, interested in our daily affairs. This sets the Christian God apart from the Greek and Roman gods and confirms the uniqueness of the Lord: *He cares for us, which gives prayer its purpose. We worship and pray to the One who created*

the universe—including each one of us. He has a special interest in our lives, and he desires that we stay in close contact with him.

*God wants to bear our prayers*—the profound nature of this concept can hardly be overstated. Never in the history of humankind has any other religion believed in a God so personally connected with his people. We can pray with great confidence because the true God, the living God, Yahweh, the Creator of the universe, hears our prayers.