

A close-up photograph of several hands clasped together in prayer. The hands are of different skin tones and are wearing various styles of knitted sleeves. A teal rectangular text box is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the title in a purple cursive font. The background is dark and out of focus.

*Praying with my
Muslim Friends*

“We have depression”, Fatema said. “I am worried about my husband. He is depression. We are waiting to hear about a job. He has sent many CVs but is told no. We are waiting for a friend to ring us.”

Fatema and Ahmed arrived here 3 years ago, seeking asylum. They have no family here. No financial support. They have been learning English and are now waiting for work.

We spoke for a while and then I said “Can I pray for you?” She smiled, “Oh yes!”

“I pray in Jesus name”, I said, “because Jesus told us to pray in His name... and because I follow him it’s as if Jesus himself is praying and God always hears his prayers.”

The smile remained and she nodded.

“Heavenly Father”, I prayed, “Thank you that you are powerful and wise. Thank you that you are good... ..”

I seem to have many opportunities like this as I move through the community and meet Muslim women. Some are in desperate need, some have deeply personal struggles while others want prayer for less critical aspects of life.

Privacy in prayer doesn’t seem to be an issue for many either.

In the midst of a crowded hall women and men (mostly women) gather for the regular food bank. They come early to get the best available but this suits us well. We spend an hour or two moving around, talking with our friends, discovering what is on their hearts, sharing Jesus’ perspective with them through story and discussion and prayer. I am always amazed that no one has ever refused prayer – even in a crowded room, even when surrounded by Muslim men and women, some they know and most they don’t.

All of these experiences have caused me to think more deeply about prayer. How do Muslim people view Christian prayer since they seem to welcome it so readily?

How should we think about these prayers? What is our purpose in praying for our Muslim friends? How bold ought we be in these prayers? What ought we pray? What happens after we pray?

1. How do our Muslim friends view Christian prayer?

I asked a few Muslim friends ... “What do you understand about Christian prayer?”

“When I pray for you in the name of Jesus, what do you think I am doing? What is happening?”

“you are performing dua – just as we do.” “you perform salat on Sundays in church and dua when you pray for me.”

“Why do you think I pray in the name of Jesus? That’s different from your prayers isn’t it?”

“yes... it’s a blessing. It’s like [she motioned signing the cross on her chest] ... it’s protection, a blessing”

Syeda had moved into a new house and was not sleeping well. *“I keep seeing a man from my country walking around outside but I know he isn’t here. I hear noises in the night inside the house but no one else is here. I need protection from spirits...will you bless my house? Will you pray for me?”*

Mary thinks that Christian prayer is a powerful thing to ask for when nothing else works.

She had back pain and nightmares. Nothing brought her relief. She asked her brother who was in her home country what to do. He said *“ask your Christian friend to do something with a cross and pray.”* Despite his and Mary’s piety they had no hesitation in using Christian prayer as a spiritual weapon and even the cross as some sort of talisman, a tool to use against evil much like amulets or the hand of Fatima.

Perhaps it is a case of “whatever works, I’ll give anything a try”. Perhaps this is desperation despite a belief system that would question if not reject outright the power of Jesus Christ in their lives today.

It is clear that while our Muslim friend agrees to, welcomes and even asks for Christian prayer, it doesn’t mean that she believes in the one we pray to or through. So, ought we pray in these situations? Are we not just perpetuating their occultic beliefs?

Does God answer prayers for those who reject Jesus? Are we supporting the lie that they don’t need to follow Jesus to be heard by God? I suppose this depends on our purpose in praying for them.

2. What is Christian Prayer and what is our purpose in praying in the presence of our Muslim friends?

What is Christian prayer?

As I write about these things I am aware of the complex nature of our prayer. It is far more than simply asking God for things although this is commonly what our Muslim friends ask us to do for them. And while we may well intercede for them in prayer, our prayers for them and in their presence are so much more...they are also part of our daily worship.

Prayer is an expression of our relationship with Almighty God. His people are communicating with God as a child communicates with her father, a father who is good, trustworthy, kind; a father who loves his daughter and wants what is best for her; a father who makes promises; a father who always does what he promises to do. His daughters and sons know this and therefore depend on him alone for all things.

We pray as part of our daily worship. To acknowledge his power and unchanging character we praise him; he provides for us so we thank him; we need his forgiveness

and mercy and so we confess our sins and ask for that forgiveness; and we depend on him for everything so we ask for what we need boldly, confidently, freely, frequently. Nothing is too big or too small. Nothing is too shameful that we cannot bring it to our Heavenly Father. In fact, his daughters (and sons) MUST come to him in their shame because its then that he will restore their honour. His daughters and sons must come to him repentant, dependent and expectant that he will restore their honour and status.

He is the creator of all the world and his children trust that he will accept them, comfort them, rebuke them if necessary, forgive them, teach them and include them in his family.

These are promises God has made to those who trust in Jesus Christ, people who know that Jesus Christ died and rose again for their justification and sanctification. God's people have the seal of God's Spirit affirming to them God's faithfulness and so they seek to live to the honour of Jesus Christ.

Prayer of thanks and praise and confession and supplication is a logical activity for God's purified and beloved people.

Our friends do not enjoy this confidence in God because they do not believe in God as a good Father. In a discussion group where we were talking about the Sermon on the Mount, Sanaa leaned over to another Muslim lady and whispered loudly "*they think they are God's children... they don't realise they are his slaves*".

Our Muslim friends do not believe that Jesus' death purifies them so that they can pray boldly before God. Mariam even told me "*we can't tell God if we are sad or angry or depressed. That dishonours him. We must simply say Alhumdulallah and carry on.*"

They are not taught that God restores their honour, even in their shame and uncleanness, when they come to him repentantly and ask for his forgiveness in Christ.

Islam denies the very foundation of our prayer namely Jesus' death, resurrection and its power. Our Muslim friends then are robbed of the subsequent confidence we have to pray and the expectation that God hears, delights in and answers our prayer.

And so, what is our purpose as we pray for our Muslim friends?

Primarily we are crying out to *our* good Father to have mercy on them. We are the daughters of Almighty God, the creator of heaven and earth asking our Father to answer our requests for our friends. He is not bound to our Muslim friends as he is to us. He has made no covenant with them nor has he promised them anything. They don't have a relationship with God that gives them the privilege of praying to Almighty God as 'our Father'.⁸⁵ More than this they reject the possibility of it. However, when we pray for them, we are calling on our Father's generosity to have mercy on those who reject Jesus; to provide for the outsider. Our Muslim friends probably won't recognise this as an extreme act of grace but that's exactly what it is. His grace has been poured out on us, his children, and we know that as his children, we can approach him boldly and confidently with such requests for others. Our God causes rain to fall on the just and unjust. He provides for his creation. And so, we pray for our Muslim friends.

Secondly, we want our friends to witness our worship. We praise him for his unchanging character declaring the awe with which we esteem him. We call on a God who has made promises and who keeps promises. We therefore thank him before our friends for what he has provided. We recall our unworthiness and yet God's willingness

⁸⁵ Matt 6:5-15; also Luke 11:1-4. In the context of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus is teaching his followers, he instructs them in what life with him is like, how to live be a light in the world; how to treat others; and how to relate to God. This is the privilege of followers of Jesus – to call God 'Father'.

to hear and answer us. We depend totally on his grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. And, we pray boldly, specifically and with confidence for the needs of our Muslim friend.

Thirdly, we want our friends to witness the supernatural and intimate nature of prayer, to see how we relate to him as honoured daughters. We want them to be curious, intrigued, even jealous. We want them to ask us questions.

My friend Sadia was about to have an interview. She was very nervous and so I asked if I could pray for her. “*yes please*” she said. And so, I prayed... “Heavenly Father, Amen”

She asked me, “*who were you talking to?*” “God”, I answered, “only he can do what I asked of him!” “*So why did you call him Father?*”

Khadijah always asks me to pray for her after any conversation. She explained to me once “*when you pray it’s like you know God.*”

At the same time, we want to show that we honour God. Ala used to come to our Sunday night gathering where extempore prayer was a major feature. She often remarked on the intimacy of our prayers but also kept saying “*its dua, you only pray dua*”. Without diminishing the intimacy of extempore Christian prayer, to preface or end our prayers with a recitation from Scripture such as Psalm 23 or the Lord’s Prayer or prayers from Paul’s letters or a direct blessing from Scripture may connect with friends who are used to more formal recitation in their prayers yet would provide Christian content.⁸⁶ We are praying God’s words to honour the exalted creator and judge of all things.

⁸⁶ E.g. Pauls prayers Numbers 6:24-26. Using Scriptural prayers and Psalms when we pray before our Muslim friends may show them the holiness of our prayers; as we use God’s words we can demonstrate that we are praying prayers that connect with God, are real and worthy of God hearing.

Fourthly, we want them to see that as we pray in Jesus' name, God can be trusted with our deepest needs and most shameful secrets. In fact, he wants us to come to him with these needs. This is what the work of Jesus Christ has accomplished. God is not only the God who hears us and sees us as he did Hagar⁸⁷. He welcomes us into his throne room. We stand before him in union with Jesus Christ. He hears us just as he heard the prayers of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. And so, our confidence is in a Heavenly Father who answers the prayers we pray because we stand with Jesus Christ. We want them to see that God answers prayer in Jesus name.

How bold can we be in our prayers for our friends? I've found myself being cautious in praying big prayers for my friends for fear that God won't give them the job or the visa or heal their mother. I fear that this will 'prove' to them that prayer in Jesus name doesn't work and is without foundation. However, I have found that this is not their response when prayers aren't answered as they want. As followers of Jesus in similar situations, we conclude that God is wise and he answering these prayers as is best for us, according to need not desire; according to his honour and kingdom rather than our personal wishes. And we will praise him for that and ask him to help us pray according to his will. In a similar way, Muslim people believe God will do what he will do. If it's not answered as they expect, their prayer (even one in Jesus' name prayed by a Christian) just wasn't according to the will of Allah. It doesn't provide a barrier to their accepting Christian prayer again.

⁸⁷ Gen 16:13

3. What Happens After We Pray?

So, we pray for our friend in Jesus' name; she observes how we worship God; she witnesses our relationship with our heavenly Father; she waits on his answer. What do we do next?

I met Khadijah when she first arrived here. She had run away from her family and from an abusive marriage. She had never met a follower of Jesus before but ended up living with me on and off for several years. I prayed for her often and she'd say, "*I love it when you pray*". I'd focus on a different aspect of God's character in my prayers and I'd use relevant parts of Scripture. I was able to talk with her about it after praying because in this context, she was listening. Khadijah is a young woman who had been abused by men most of her life. Slowly, so slowly, she is starting to walk towards God. She has started to see that despite God being father, he is a Good Father.

Not everyone is as attentive to the prayers we pray as Khadijah. The children are playing around us, perhaps the woman we are praying for is chastising them during our prayer or occasionally, she is honouring this time and space. Nevertheless, there is more we can do in the wake of praying for our Muslim friends.

We can read or tell them Bible stories to explain the basis of our prayer. We know God is Father because Jesus teaches us to call him Father⁸⁸; we know Jesus can and does heal because he is full of compassion and healed many including Simon's mother-in-law; the paralytic; lepers; and the woman with the withered hand⁸⁹; we know Jesus

⁸⁸ E.g. Lords Prayer in Matt 6:5-15; also Luke 11:1-4.

⁸⁹ Mark 1:29-34, 2:1-12, 1:40-45; Luke 17:11-19, 13:10-17

has power over evil because he sent the Legion of evil spirits away⁹⁰; we know he restores honour when we are covered in shame because Jesus restored outcast and sinful women⁹¹; we know God forgives because Jesus made that possible⁹²; and we know God wants us to ask him for whatever we might need because this is what Jesus taught us.⁹³

We can ask them about the answers to our prayers. Together we can praise God and celebrate his faithfulness. We can speak of God's willingness to hear us as we speak from our hearts and comfort us. We can tell stories of answered prayer from our own life or those from Scripture like Hagar or Hannah; stories of Jesus' mercy and compassion on the shameful and needy like the Samaritan woman or the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet.⁹⁴

We can continue to talk of the nature of our worship in prayer and speak of Jesus' call to us to pray without ceasing, and to throw ourselves onto God's mercy despite the shame.⁹⁵

4. Discipling in Prayer

Christian prayer is a foreign concept to our Muslim friends. As we talk about prayer and pray in their presence it forms part of their discipleship process towards Christ. As well, it's vital that we specifically teach Believers from a Muslim Background how to

⁹⁰ Luke 8:26-39; Mark 5:1-20; Matt 8:28-34; also Mark 1:21-28, 9:14-32.

⁹¹ E.g. the woman with an issue of blood in Luke 8:40-56 and sinful woman anointing Jesus feet in Luke 7:36-50

⁹² Mark 2:1-12; Matt 9:2-8; Luke 5:17-26, 24:36-49; Mark 16:15-20.

⁹³ Matt 6:5-15; Luke 11:1-13, 18:1-8.

⁹⁴ Genesis 16, 21:1-20; John 4; Luke 7:36-50

⁹⁵ 1 Thess 5:17; the parable of the persistent widow / the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:1-14 or Jesus' encounter with woman who had been bleeding for 12 years in Luke 8:40-56.

pray. It is not helpful for them to say “just talk to God” and then expect them to pick it up. We must teach our new sisters and brothers that our prayerful worship of God includes praise, thanks, confession and intercession.⁹⁶

One Iranian brother told me how he loved spending time in praise and thanks as we gathered together. *“Imams don’t pray thanks because this will make people think they have everything and people won’t give them anything”*.

We must continue to demonstrate our dependence on God; that he is good; and that we thank him in good times and in times of need. Similarly, we always spend time praising God simply for who he is because he never changes.

Our Muslim friends perform *wudu* in an effort cleanse themselves before *salat*. Rather than dismiss this as unnecessary before we pray, consider why it is that we can pray with such boldness. Cleansing is necessary - but we are cleansed by Jesus’ work on the cross. We must demonstrate and teach this clearly, confessing our unworthiness (in whatever way is appropriate to the context) along with thanking God for our forgiveness and purification in Christ. We are not only modelling prayer, we are helping our friends grasp the nature of sin (believers as well as Muslim). We must always remember the seriousness of our sin and the necessity to be forgiven and cleansed by God.

And of course, we come in prayer to God to request those things we need. The greater our friends’ understanding of God’s character, the more confident they become in asking God for anything. We want to not only teach but also model what it is to keep asking God with shameless persistence for those things we need because he is

⁹⁶ Psalm 34:1; 48:1; 89:5; 100; 105:2; 145:21; 146; 150; 1Thess 5:17; Phil 4:4-6; Heb 13:15; Jas 5:13.

our Heavenly Father. He wants us to keep depending on him not at a distance, not pretending to be OK but authentically, realistically, intimately.

God has given us, those united with Christ and in Christ the privilege of prayer. What a gift it is to pray for our Muslim friends - that they will come to know Jesus Christ as we do. And what a gift it is to pray for them, in their presence. We join with them as they cry out to Allah, crying to our Heavenly Father that he will have mercy on them in every way.