

PRAYING WITH EYES  
**WIDE  
OPEN**

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A Life-Changing Way  
to Talk with God

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**Sherry Harney**

WITH KEVIN G. HARNEY



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Sherry Harney with Kevin G. Harney, *Praying With Eyes Wide Open*  
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*In the pages of this book you will meet many of my prayer mentors and heroes. Some are biblical characters, like Hannah and the apostle Paul. Others are great prayer warriors from the history of the church, like Brother Lawrence, Andrew Murray, and R. A. Torrey. Some of these people are friends and church members who have invested in my prayer life and modeled a passion for communicating with the Living God.*

*Among these great giants of prayer, two stand out in my life because they have spent time on their knees praying for me from the time I was in my mother's womb. Sherwin and Joan Vliem are my parents by birth and also my spiritual parents. Their authentic faith has shaped me, their trust in the Word of God has inspired me, their humility has formed me, and their prayers have covered me.*

*I can confidently say that my father and mother have prayed for me faithfully all the days of my life. My father has the gift of intercession. I have told my dad about needs of people he has never met and discovered decades later that he still prays for them daily. My mother has a pure faith in Jesus that trusts and believes without wavering. The two of them together have fortified me in prayer and taught me what a life guided by faith-filled prayer looks like.*

*I dedicate this book to Sherwin and Joan Vliem. So much of who I am, what I know, the way I love, and how I live for Jesus came from watching the two of them follow Jesus.*



# Contents

Acknowledgments 9

Introduction 11

## Section One **PRAYING WITH EYES WIDE OPEN**

1. Limitless Prayer 15
2. Pray Continually 26
3. Relationship Matters 36
4. Power in Prayer 49

## Section Two **PRAYING WITH EARS WIDE OPEN**

5. God Is Speaking 59
6. Are You Listening? 73
7. God Is Listening, Are You Speaking? 88
8. Holy Conversations 98

## Section Three **PRAYING WITH HEARTS WIDE OPEN**

9. The Father Is Fond of You 111
10. Honest to God 124

*Contents*

- 11. Warfare Prayers 137
- 12. Replace Worry with Prayer 152

Section Four **PRAYING WITH LIVES WIDE OPEN**

- 13. Praying for Others 167
- 14. Praying with Others 180
- 15. Praying for the Little and Big Things of Life 192
- 16. Something Happens Every Time You Pray 207

Notes 219

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The prayers of God's people ascend to the God of heaven like sweet incense. Thank you all for joining me in the privilege and delight of exalting the God who loves us and hears all we pray, with eyes closed and with eyes wide open.

## Introduction

On a snowy and blustery winter day in Michigan, I took a walk with my dad. He has a daily routine of walking four to five miles each morning, rain or shine, sleet or snow. He does this right after his morning time in the Word of God and prayer. When I travel to visit my parents, I stay with them and enter into the routine and rhythm of their life. It is an absolute joy. As we neared the end of our walk on this particular winter day, knowing I would soon be heading back to my home in California, I asked if we could pray as we walked. My father gladly agreed.

As we began to pray, I was shocked when my dad bumped me into the snowbank on the edge of the road. As I fell, almost as if in slow motion, I instinctively knew what must be happening and looked back to see the vehicle I knew my dad must be saving me from. To my surprise, there were no cars on the road.

I hit the snowbank with a gentle thud, looked up at my dad, and realized what had happened. He was not saving me from a renegade car sliding toward me on the icy roads. It was something very different. Somehow, in the natural response of hearing someone say, “Let’s pray,” my father went into automatic prayer mode. As we began praying, he reflexively closed his eyes. This

caused him to veer toward me and accidentally knock me into the snowbank.

We both laughed as he helped me up and brushed the snow off me. My dad and I ended up having a rich conversation about how, though it is appropriate to close our eyes in some situations, there are also many occasions when we are wise to keep our eyes wide open.

The next morning I received this email from him:

Dear Sherry, I thought about you this morning while I was walking. I prayed with my eyes open. I even prayed out loud. I learned from you that if I pray with my eyes open, my time with God is limitless.

The goal of this book is to help you discover the wonder, beauty, and joy of praying through the flow of life. My passion is to see ordinary followers of Jesus grow into natural prayers who talk to God, listen to God, and interact with God at all times, in all places, through all circumstances. To do this, we will all need to learn how to pray with our eyes wide open.

Throughout this book I will use the phrase “praying with eyes wide open” in two distinct ways. Sometimes it will mean literally opening our eyes as we pray, just like I did with my father on that snowy day. When we do this, we become more aware of creation, people, beauty, and the needs around us. As we pray this way, our opportunities for prayer multiply.

“Praying with eyes wide open” is also used in a figurative sense. It encompasses praying with greater awareness of God’s presence, power, and work in the world. Our eyes might be physically closed, but our awareness of God’s will and desires opens us up to pray with greater passion and clarity.

Having our eyes open in both of these ways—physically and figuratively—will make our prayer life richer and more powerful.



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Section One

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PRAYING WITH **EYES**  
**WIDE**  
**OPEN**

Sherry Harney with Kevin G. Harney, *Praying With Eyes Wide Open*  
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Praying with eyes wide open can become a lifestyle. This means shifting our thinking about prayer and at times literally keeping our eyes open when we pray. By making this small shift, we discover that we can pray at all times and in all places. When we do this, we will find ourselves praying more.

Praying with our eyes open also allows us to see what is happening around us and engage in prayer in new ways. Rather than closing our eyes to block out the world, we open our eyes, like Jesus did. We see the need and pain as well as the beauty and joy all around us. What we see shapes our prayers.

When we pray this way, our time with God is limitless and the power of God is unleashed in surprising new ways.

# One

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## Limitless Prayer

If I pray with my eyes wide open, my time with God is limitless.

SHERWIN VLIEM (MY DAD)

I was speaking at a women's conference in the charming coastal city of Adelaide, Australia. Just as I was about to head up to speak at the final session of this four-day event, a lovely woman came walking toward me. She seemed happy and serious at the same time. I glanced quickly at her name tag to catch her first name.

She politely asked if we could spend a few minutes talking. I was heading out to catch a plane shortly after the session and knew there could be a chance I would not have time to talk at the end of the session. My dilemma was that I normally don't engage with people's personal requests right before heading up to speak.

I quickly lifted up a brief and silent prayer with eyes wide open: "Lord, would you have me spend a few minutes with her right now, because I don't know if I will actually have time after

I speak?” I felt a gentle nudge in my heart and knew I needed to connect with her right then and there.

My natural thought was that these few precious moments were intended to serve her. To my surprise and delight, God’s plan was to speak to me and encourage me through this dear woman.

She began by telling me she had had no intention of coming to the conference. A friend had invited her persistently and kindly. Over and over her friend kept challenging her to make the time to come to the conference. She found herself struggling with this decision. After going to sleep one evening, she woke up in the middle of the night and could not get back to sleep. She knew her uneasiness was about attending the conference, so she got on her computer and googled the name of the speaker: Sherry Harney. One of the things she found was a link to a message I brought to the student body of Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California. She clicked the link and watched the whole chapel message.

At that moment, she looked at me and said, “Little did I know that what I would hear in that video would change my life!”

During the message, I had spent only a few minutes talking about this idea of praying with your eyes wide open, but God had used this simple and profound idea to begin a transformation in her personal spiritual life and the lives of her children.

As she listened to the Westmont chapel message, the Holy Spirit mercifully pierced her heart. She understood, at a level deeper than she ever had before, that God is truly with her always. Her eyes were opened to the reality that she could talk with, commune with, and connect with God at any time . . . all the time. She came to see that praying with her eyes open would be necessary if she were to increase her time communing with God.

With sober eyes, this lovely woman looked at me and confessed that she was serious about her Christian faith, but she had not been communicating with God throughout her day. She had missed this great gift. Then, with an even deeper sadness, she admitted she had failed to teach her children how to pray throughout their day. Prayer had become a thing to do a certain way at a certain time, but not a spontaneous and Holy Spirit-breathed part of each moment of life. With steely-eyed conviction, she looked at me and said, “This reality broke my heart, but I determined at that moment, this will change, and I would attend the conference.”

The morning after she had watched the chapel video, she got in her car to take her children to school. As they drove, this precious mom taught her children the simple lesson she had learned in the middle of the night. She explained that they could pray anytime, with their eyes open. She declared the truth that God is with them at all times and in all places. After a brief time of speaking this truth to her children, she did the wisest thing possible. She invited them to keep their eyes open, look around, and begin praying together as they traveled to school. Mother and children began to pray. They talked to God, eyes wide open, hearts engaged with their loving Creator. It felt natural and good. In the following days she continued to invite her children into this sacred rhythm of natural conversation with God.

My new friend looked at me as tears began to flow freely down her cheeks. With pure joy she told me, “Now, when we get in the car before heading off to school, my children ask, ‘Mom, what are we going to pray about today?’”

She thanked me for helping her see what had eluded her for so many years. Her faith was real, she loved Jesus, she prayed often, but she had never embraced the invitation to limitless

prayer. I thanked her for inspiring me and helping me see that the simple biblical truths I feel called to share with people can be radically transformational.

I asked her if I could have her name tag from the conference. I let her know that I would put it on my desk where I would be working on this book. I wanted her to know that the experience she had with her children would be an inspiration to me as I wrote . . . and that name tag has been on my desk ever since.

More than ever, I believe that lives, homes, and communities can be transformed if God's people will learn to enter into limitless prayer. When we push the walls out, break from routine repetition, and pray without ceasing, God's presence and power are released.

### **With Our Hands Folded and Our Eyes Closed**

Think about it. When someone says, "Let's pray," what do you do? Picture it in your mind right now. Many of us will close our eyes and fold our hands. If we do open our eyes and look around during a prayer, we might even feel a little anxiety that someone will see us with our eyes open. If we lock eyes with another person who is also "peeking" during prayer, we might feel guilty and quickly close our eyes. For some reason, there is a general consensus that the proper posture of prayer is eyes closed and, more often than not, hands folded.

Here is the shocking truth. There are many and varied postures for prayer taught and modeled in the Bible. Closing our eyes is not one of them. And, just for the record, neither is folding our hands.

If we look back at practices in the ancient world, people would often avert their eyes in the presence of a king or sovereign. This might be part of the reason people have closed

their eyes while praying through history. I also believe that the pattern of eyes closed and hands folded in our modern culture comes primarily from parents teaching their children to pray. If our hands are folded, we can't poke our neighbor or grab food off a dinner plate. If our eyes are closed, we can focus better and avoid the many distractions around us. These are just my personal musings, but I think, in many cases, these could be the driving forces behind this posture when we pray.

These might be helpful ideas for a child learning to pray, but we should not feel bound and compelled to always fold our hands and close our eyes when we pray. Instead, we need to learn to pray with our eyes wide open and our hands open to God and those around us.

For the sake of full disclosure, even though I have written this book titled *Praying with Eyes Wide Open*, there are times I love to pray with my eyes closed, usually early in the morning when I have to work to keep the distractions of the day's to-do list from catching my racing mind. There are times I focus better with my eyes closed. I am just offering a new paradigm, a new way to understand this amazing privilege we have all throughout our days to pray continually. Praying with eyes closed is certainly not wrong, but never praying with eyes open may keep you from living out the scriptural exhortation—and resulting blessings—of praying continually.

## **The Bible and Our Eyes**

As I worked on this book, I read and reflected on passages throughout the Bible that speak directly or indirectly to the topic of prayer. I could not find one single passage where God calls someone to close their eyes when they pray. I did not even find a single place where the passage stated that someone closed

their eyes when they prayed. I am not saying that people in the Bible or in the ancient world never closed their eyes when they prayed; what I am saying is that the Bible does not command it or even direct us to pray this way.

What we do find in the biblical text are examples of people praying with their eyes wide open. A quick survey shows this was the case in the Old and New Testaments. When Abraham's servant went to Abraham's hometown seeking a wife for Isaac, we find him standing by a spring, praying for God to make his journey successful. As he prayed, he saw Rebekah come out with a water jar on her shoulder. The passage is clear that he was praying with his eyes open, and during that prayer he saw the patriarch Isaac's future wife (Gen. 24).

When God's people were in the middle of a battle, God helped them be victorious. We read that God delivered them "because they cried out to him during the battle" (1 Chron. 5:20). It is clear that they did not fold their hands and close their eyes while in fierce hand-to-hand combat.

When Jesus lifted up what has been called his "High Priestly Prayer" in John 17, we read that "after Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed" (v. 1). The Savior's eyes were wide open when he lifted up his longest prayer in all of the four Gospels.

There is never a call or command to close our eyes when we pray, but there are examples of people who prayed with their eyes open . . . and God heard and answered these prayers.

## **The Bible and Our Hands**

The Bible never tells us to fold our hands when we pray. But we do see people with their hands engaged, active, and lifted up in prayer. This does not mean that we must always lift our hands,

but there are times this is wholly appropriate and there are many examples of this practice. Moses lifted his hands in prayer as he cried out on behalf of God's people (Exod. 9:29–33). Solomon spread out his hands toward heaven as he prayed (2 Chron. 6:12–13). David asked God that “the lifting up of [his] hands be like the evening sacrifice” (Ps. 141:2). The apostle Paul exhorted that people pray with holy hands lifted, without anger or disputing (1 Tim. 2:8). In addition, the apostles laid their hands on people as they prayed for them (Acts 6:6).

There is nothing wrong with folding our hands when we pray, but we can also lift our hands, lay them on others, and extend them to the God who loves us and rules the universe.

### **Sit, Stand, or Kneel**

Our outward posture should reflect what is happening in our inner person as we pray. The Bible does not prescribe a set body position but a variety of physical expressions that are appropriate. Since we are called to pray at all times, it makes sense that there would not be one body position but many. King David, in a time of humbly seeking God, “*sat* before the LORD, and he said: ‘Who am I, Sovereign LORD, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?’” (2 Sam. 7:18, emphasis added). Solomon, David’s son, “*stood* before the altar of the LORD in front of the whole assembly of Israel, [and] spread out his hands toward heaven” (1 Kings 8:22, emphasis added). Just a short time later we read that “when Solomon had finished all these prayers and supplications to the LORD, he rose from before the altar of the LORD, where he had been *kneeling* with his hands spread out toward heaven” (1 Kings 8:54, emphasis added). Daniel, Paul, and Jesus all knelt in prayer (Dan. 6:10; Acts 20:36; Luke 22:41). When Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane, in

the shadow of the coming crucifixion, he was on his knees in prayer, a fitting posture in a time of agony and surrender.

A life of limitless prayer will mean learning to seek the face of God and engage in conversation with our Maker as we stand, sit, kneel, run, lie down—as we are in any and every position. It is not a right posture but a right attitude that says I am always ready to pray.

### **Looking and Longing**

One unique refrain that arose in the time of King Solomon was the call to the Israelites to turn their faces toward the temple in Jerusalem as they prayed. They were to pray toward the great city and this place where the very presence of God was said to dwell (1 Kings 8:30, 35, 38, 42, 44). They were called to look to the city and the temple as their hearts and eyes strained to see God. There is a sense that their eyes were open and looking for God.

At the same time, Solomon prayed that God's eyes would be riveted on the temple and the people who were praying. He cried out,

May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, "My Name shall be there," so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive. (1 Kings 8:29–30)

Finally, in a massive crescendo of spiritual engagement, God appeared and spoke. He made a promise that expressed where his eyes will be:

When Solomon had finished building the temple of the LORD and the royal palace, and had achieved all he had desired to do,

the LORD appeared to him a second time, as he had appeared to him at Gibeon. The LORD said to him: “I have heard the prayer and plea you have made before me; I have consecrated this temple, which you have built, by putting my Name there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.” (1 Kings 9:1–3)

As the people looked toward Jerusalem, the temple, and ultimately toward God, God promised to look toward them. Not only are our eyes wide open, but God’s eyes are wide open too.

### **When Eyes Meet**

Picture your eyes meeting the eyes of God and then realizing he’s always been protectively, lovingly watching you. Does this elicit a powerful sense of relationship? God’s eyes are on you. In the book of Hebrews we read, “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (4:13). God sees us at all times. He never looks away. That is one side of the relational equation. God’s eyes are on us.

We are invited and encouraged to keep our eyes on God. In Psalm 123:2 we read, “As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a female slave look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he shows us his mercy.” Our eyes should be locked on God, straining to see him in the normal flow of life. In the book of Hebrews we are challenged to “[fix] our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Heb. 12:2). When our eyes are on God, and we recognize that his eyes are on us, we can communicate with him, we can talk with him—we can pray.

## Praying on the Water

As I am learning to pray in all places and at all times, I have people ask me to teach them what I mean by “praying with eyes wide open.” This happened with a very sweet couple named Bob and Sherry. They took Kevin and me out boating one summer evening on Lake Michigan. It was peaceful and beautiful. As we were going slowly along the lakeshore, we began talking about this book and how praying with our eyes closed is normative and almost reflexive for most Christians. They both admitted that they had never really prayed with other people with their eyes open.

As I often do, I invited them to just begin praying as we were boating, but to keep their eyes open—especially Bob since he was driving the boat! As is almost always the case, they both started out feeling a little awkward. But as they quickly began noticing the beauty of the lake, God’s creation, and the magnificent setting around us, their prayers turned to thanksgiving for God’s artistic beauty. Praise began to fill the air as we drank in God’s glory all around us. Kevin prayed, thanking God for both Bob and Sherry, and as he prayed, he looked at each of them and made eye contact. They both made a point of not looking away. This was all new, but I could see this was strange but glorious prayer territory.

After we declared a heartfelt “Amen!” we talked about the experience. Both of them expressed delight in this new vista of prayer. It was like they had opened a window after a long winter and the fresh spring air came blowing in. I was able to encourage them to pray this way as a couple and with friends. We had experienced a sweetness of the Holy Spirit as we prayed together, with eyes wide open, making the boat ride and our time with them more special and memorable.

If you have never prayed out loud with other believers with your eyes open, I encourage you to try it. If you allow your eyes to meet another person's eyes as you pray for them, the Holy Spirit shows up and moves in a unique way. It is hard to put into words, but I have seen it happen over and over again. Praying with eyes wide open is not just about the reality that we can pray at all times. It also deepens our prayer and connects us with God and with other people on a level we might have never experienced before.

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***Your Prayer Journey***

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Over the coming week, try praying with your eyes open in another way. When you are in a group of people and someone says, "Let's pray" (it could be at a meal, at church, with friends, or some other setting), don't close your eyes. Be sure to engage fully in your heart, and join in with prayers out loud if appropriate, making a point of keeping your eyes open as you pray. Look at the person who is praying and seek to enter into prayer in a fresh, new way. If someone happens to look at you during the prayer, don't feel guilty, just smile at them and keep praying.

One little warning. You might find yourself feeling a little awkward and even guilty if your eyes are open while praying at church or over a meal with family. Just press through and notice how your prayers take on fresh, new meaning when your eyes are open.