



EVANGELICAL FREE CHURCH of LETHBRIDGE



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of LETHBRIDGE

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Let Us Pray

Study Guide

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INTRODUCTION

The Agony and Ecstasy of Prayer

“To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.” (Martin Luther, as quoted in Paul Cedar, *A Life of Prayer*, 1998, 15)

A few minutes of Bible reading will bear out the validity of Luther’s assertion. The *New International Version* (1984) uses the words *pray*, *prayed*, *prayer*, *prayers*, *praying* and *prays* 375 times, which doesn’t take into account the many times prayer is spoken of without such words.

Few Christians would challenge the notion that prayer is essential to faith and its practice. To be a follower of Jesus Christ without prayer is like being married without ever talking to one’s spouse. It can’t and shouldn’t be done. Yet most of us in our most vulnerable moments will admit to a agony/ecstasy relationship with prayer.

The Ecstasy

Those moments of “presence”, that we sometimes experience when we are hearing and being heard by the Lord of all that is, are unforgettable. There are too few of them, but the ones we have keep us coming back for more.

It’s like the average person who plays a round of golf. There’s not much to brag about and too many shots have to be taken, but in the midst of all those forgettable ones are one or two “great” shots that bring you back to play another eighteen holes.

The ecstasy of prayer happens when we take **Hebrews 4:16** seriously and “approach the throne of grace with confidence.” We come and talk. God listens and helps. We listen and live.

The Agony

As good as prayer can be there’s still disappointment, first of all in us. We think we should pray more and better than we do. Sometimes we are disappointed in prayer itself. Sin still is a barrier between us and God, and prayer doesn’t fully undo that relationship breach. Other times the

disappointment is focused on God. He doesn't seem to hear and then doesn't respond like we think he should.

So how do we make sure that the agony doesn't cancel out or make the ecstasy unattainable? The following eight lessons are designed to help you better understand prayer so that you might more fully experience it.

Your Reality

"Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep; if I should die before I wake; I pray the Lord my soul to take."

"Thank you God for our food. Amen!"

"Help me!"

There's more to prayer than the above prayers that you perhaps have prayed. Whether you are working through these lessons in a small group or as an individual and whether they are helping you revisit something you already know or introducing you to something totally new, may you be challenged to grow in your prayer life to experience more of the ecstasy and less of the agony.

You will find a "Prayer Training Exercise" at the end of most of these lessons. Please don't ignore them in the midst of your busy life. They will help you put into practice some of what you are learning.

Before proceeding to Lesson One, ask and answer these two self-assessment questions.

How satisfied are you with your prayer life? On a scale of one (totally unsatisfied) to ten (totally satisfied), where would you rate yourself? Why?

What would you like God to do as you work through these lessons? Write out a short prayer asking him to do that.

LESSON ONE

Conversational Prayer

Praying Alone

Before the tabernacle came into being and perhaps even afterwards, Moses would set up a tent outside the Israelite camp in which he and others could meet alone with God. Read **Exodus 33:7-11**.

What purpose would send people to the tent?

What did God and Moses do in this tent? See also **Numbers 12:8**.

What was the relationship between God and Moses? See **John 15:13-15**. In what ways do we share this relationship?

For us, prayer is like what the tent of meeting was for Moses. It is a place to meet and talk with God.

Prayer Is the Expression of a Relationship

Definitions are not often glamorous but can be foundational. Perhaps you have lots of experience with prayer, only some, or next to none at all. Whatever your situation, in this early stage of our study, what definition would you put to prayer?

Now, think through the following attempts to define prayer. What reoccurring themes do you see? Circle or underline key words or phrases.

“Prayer isn’t just asking for things we want. Prayer is for every moment of our lives, not just for times of suffering or joy. Prayer is really a place, a place where you meet God in genuine conversation.”
(Billy Graham, *Nearing Home*, 2011, 157)

“Prayer is the conversational part of the most important love relationship in our lives, our love relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”
(Alvin Vandergrind, *Love to Pray*, 2007, 12)

“Prayer has become for me much more than a shopping list of requests to present to God. It has become a realignment of everything. I pray to restore the truth of the universe, to gain a glimpse of the world, and of me, through the eyes of God . . . Prayer is the act of seeing reality from God’s point of view.” (Philip Yancey, *Prayer*, 2006, 29)

“Prayer is a dialog between two friends who love each other.”
(Rosalind Rinker, *Prayer: Conversing with God*, 1959, 23)

Did you notice these themes in the definitions?

1. Prayer is not just about asking God for things;
2. Prayer is the enjoyment of a relationship;
3. Prayer is a conversation between two persons with God being one of them.

So prayer is a give and take happening. We both speak and listen as we pray. Don’t expect an audible voice from God but for those indwelled by his Spirit, his whisperings can be sensed.

Read through **Luke 5:16; 6:12; Acts 10:9; Matthew 5:5-6**. What do you learn about prayer from these incidents?

Prayer Is a Recognition of God as God

What then makes prayer different from any other conversation we have in other relationships? The difference is that in prayer our conversation partner is God and in coming to him we are recognizing him, not us, as God.

“Helplessness is unquestionably the first and the surest indication of a praying heart. As far as I can see, prayer has been ordained only for the helpless. It is the last resort of the helpless. Indeed, the very last way out. We try everything before we finally resort to prayer . . . Prayer and helplessness are inseparable. Only he who is helpless can truly pray.” (O. Hallesby, *Prayer*, 1931, 16-17)

Read through **Psalm 46, noting especially verses 1-3, 10**. In **verse 10**, what two commands are given?

In your life, which of these two commands (maybe both?) do you find hardest to fulfill? Why?

“Be still and know that I am God’: the Latin imperative for ‘be still’ is *vacate*. As Simon Tugwell explains, ‘God invites us to take a holiday [*vacation*], to stop being God for a while, and let him be God.’” (Yancey, 26)

That’s hard for us to do. We like to be and think we are controlling things. Prayer recognizes how untrue that is. Prayer unseats us and places God where he belongs, on the throne and willing to talk and listen.

“Prayer honors God; it dishonors self. It is man’s plea of weakness, ignorance, want; a plea which heaven cannot disregard. God delights to have us pray.” (E. M. Bounds, *The Complete Works of E. M. Bounds on Prayer*, 1990, 319)

A Prayer Training Exercise

For you, like many other Christians, being alone with God and talking to him may not be easy to do. It takes time and intent for it to happen regularly and it only tends to take place when we need something. Otherwise, what would you say to God?

Here are some suggestions for helping your conversations become more regular and meaningful. Try to keep in mind the two foundational concepts for personal prayer that we just looked at: prayer is an expression of special relationship; prayer is recognizing God as God.

1. Embrace the following biblical visual as motivation for prayer.

Read **Revelation 3:14-20**. This is a letter from Jesus Christ to a church in Asia Minor in the city of Laodicea. This church is a lot like we can be today. While it had a high opinion of itself, Jesus was trying to help the church take its self-imposed blinders off.

What problem did Christ have with the church? How were they treating Jesus?

Focus on **verse 20**. They were keeping Jesus Christ on the outer fringes of their lives. We sometimes do that too. Picture Christ knocking at the door of your life wanting to come in to eat and talk. Prayer opens the door. Are you willing to have an open-door policy with Jesus?

2. Determine the best time and place for this to happen.

Though prayer can happen at any time, any place, setting aside a specific time and place helps us grow in this activity. It should be a place where you can be alone, quiet and free from as much distraction as possible. Whenever and wherever you do it, make it a regular happening for the next few weeks. Don’t worry about how much time to take; whether short or long, it will be worth it.

3. Follow the ACTS acronym (some prefer to rearrange the order into a CATS acronym). Sometimes, even if we get there, we are at a loss for words. Here’s a practice many have used to help know what to say.

A – Adoration. Offer praise and worship to God. What impresses you about him? Why not tell him how much you love him? (**Psalm 100**)

C – Confession. Admit and agree with God about the current state of your life. Confess and repent of any sin. (**1 John 1:9-10**)

T – Thanksgiving. Offer to God specific gratitude for blessings received. (**1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**)

S – Supplication. Take whatever specific prayer requests you have for yourself and others to him. (**Philippians 4:6-7**)

Recognize that any exercise like this is artificial, but it can help you start what you haven’t yet had or begin anew what you left behind. The goal is for prayer to become not just something you do but a way of life, expressing the love relationship you have with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and acknowledging his almighty power.

LESSON TWO

Corporate Prayer

Praying with Others

The Bible makes it clear that disciples of Jesus Christ not only speak alone with God but also pray with one another. Faith was not meant to be lived out in isolation nor was prayer intended to just be experienced alone.

“Much of our praying is solo work – direct conversation between each of us and God. But in the church we unite our hearts and voices in what we may call *joined* praying. Scripture repeatedly emphasizes that God places great value on these prayers from godly people whose hearts unite with each other in seeking common goals.” (J. I. Packer and Carol Nystrom, *Praying*, 2006, 239)

A glimpse into the early days of the church reveals how important corporate prayer should be.

Group Prayer: A Priority for Ministry

Consider **Acts 1:12-15, 23-26; 2:42-47; 6:1-4**, taking particular note of **1:14; 2:42; 6:4**. In each incident what is taking place? Is this a reference to group prayer? If yes, what sizes were the groups?

In the three verses of particular interest, the Greek word *proskartere* is used. That word means “to be devoted to; to occupy oneself diligently with; to persist in.” The activity associated with *proskartere* was then something considered to be of the highest importance.

The Apostle Paul uses the same word in relationship to prayer. See **Romans 12:12; Ephesians 6:18; Colossians 4:2**. What is the context with each reference? Is the focus on solo or group praying?

Group Prayer: A Response to God’s Work

Read the following passages and answer these questions for each: What drove them to pray together? What did they ask God to do? What happened as a result of their praying?

Acts 4:23-31

Acts 12:1-17

Acts 13:1-4

Group Prayer: A Celebration of Unity

In **Acts 1:14; 4:24** Christ’s disciples are said to “join together” and to “raise their voices together” in prayer. The idea being that they were of one accord, that they were agreeing together while blending their many voices into one.

God was hearing a unified prayer through multiple voices. God responded to their prayers.

This coming together in the name of Jesus and asking has incredible potential. How did agreeing in prayer help the disciples and the early church?

Think about churches today; think about your church. List as many places as you can in your church where group prayer happens. Where are you personally involved in group prayer?

A Prayer Training Exercise

1. The first part of this exercise has to do with **church worship**.

“Most of what happens in Christian worship is a form of prayer. Hymns, songs, prayers from a prayer book, extemporaneous prayers of the pastor and the people, guided prayers, many Scriptures recited, invocations, confessions, intercessions, benedictions – all address God. As the people of God at worship together we join our hearts and often our voices in all of these, with God as our target audience.” (Packer and Nystrom, 239)

This being true, are you active or passive in the worship services of your church? We should be active, shouldn't we? In your upcoming worship experiences try doing some of the following.

- Think about the words of the songs you sing and the songs others sing. What is being said to God? Can you add your heartfelt agreement to what is being sung?
- Identify the emotions the songs are calling out from you causing you to respond in dialogue back to God (e.g. joy, awe, peace, guilt, etc.).
- Listen to the words of the prayers offered to God. Zero in on something in the prayer to which you can offer a genuine “Amen”.
- As you hear the preaching of the Word of God what prayer to God do you offer in response?

2. Next, think about your **personal involvement in group praying**. Such prayer can happen between friends, between spouses, within families and in small groups. It's easier for some than for others to pray with another person since it asks for vulnerability that some find difficult to offer. Fears of saying the wrong thing and of what others will think loom large.

- If you currently aren't praying with anyone even though you don't find it difficult to do, why aren't you? What a blessing you and others are missing! Isn't it time to start afresh? Ask a friend or a spouse to pray with you, or get involved in a small group that prays together.
- If you've never prayed with someone else before, it's not too late to begin. If married, start with your spouse. If single, ask a friend. Don't let fear hold you back.
- If you are part of a small group and have always remained a listener in the group times of prayer, why not take that leap and begin to pray out loud with the others? They are missing out on the prayer blessing you could add to the group.

There's something encouraging and powerful in praying together with other followers of Jesus Christ. Your faith will be strengthened, others will be helped and God's work will be released.

“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.” **Hebrews 10:25**

Meeting together includes praying together!

LESSON THREE

Intercessory Prayer

Praying for Others

“The purpose of prayer is not to get man’s will done in heaven but to get God’s will done on earth.” (Phillips Brooks)

Prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance; it is laying hold of his highest willingness.” (Richard Trench)

[Both quotes from Paul Cedar, *A Life of Prayer*, 1998, 13-96]

There’s a tension in these quotes that isn’t easy for us to harmonize. When it comes to our personal neediness and the needs of others, one seems to say, “Don’t ask” while the other says, “Do”. Which is it? Or, is there an in-between path to walk?

The Apostle Paul knew that sometimes we face troubles and problems in life that can bring with them seemingly insurmountable challenges. Fear, worry, anxiety, and depression can become characteristic of us instead of joy, peace and confidence in some circumstances.

Prayer helps.

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (**Philippians 4:6-7**)

Prayer leads to peace.

Likewise, that same overwhelming feeling we experience in the midst of trouble is experienced by others in their need. We take our petitions to God but need others to pray for us. They take their petitions to God and need others to pray for them. This prayer for others is intercession.

“If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer. Intercession is a way of loving others. When we move from petition to intercession we are shifting our center of gravity from our own needs to the needs and concerns of others.

Intercessory prayer is selfless prayer, even self-giving prayer . . . Intercessory prayer is a priestly ministry, and one of the most challenging teachings in the New Testament is the universal priesthood of all Christians. As priests, appointed and anointed by God, we have the honor of going before the Most High on behalf of others.” (Richard J. Foster, *Prayer*, 1992, 191)

Paul Prayed for Others

Paul gives a summary of his prayers in several of the letters he wrote to the churches. Focus on two of those. How did Paul pray and what did he pray for? How does that compare with your prayer for others?

Philippians 1:3-11

1 Thessalonians 1:2-8

Others Prayed for Paul

See **2 Corinthians 1:8-11**. What was Paul’s need? What do you think they prayed for? What was the result?

Paul Asked Others to Pray for Him

In the two instances below, for what did Paul ask prayer? Do his requests surprise you or are they what you would have expected?

Ephesians 6:18-20

Colossians 4:2-4

Jesus Prays for You

Maybe you know this already but has the enormity of it sunk in? Jesus, the Son of God, prays for those who are his disciples, for those who trust him and follow him.

All of **John 17** is a prayer of intercession prayed by Jesus for his disciples. According to **verse 20** he prayed not just for his disciples who followed him then but also “for those who will believe in me through their message.” Paying attention to **verses 13-23**, what did he pray for his disciples? As you read that now, how should we respond?

Read and think through **Romans 8:31-39; Hebrews 7:25-27; 9:24; 1 John 2:1-2**. What do you learn about Jesus’ praying for you?

The Holy Spirit Prays for You

See **Romans 8:26-27**. What does the Spirit do in relation to our prayer? What is his goal in this regard? What can the activity of the Spirit do for our praying for ourselves? For others?

A Prayer Training Exercise

- 1. First, enter into some **personal evaluation**. Think about the many times you pray for others, intercede for them. What do you find you most often pray for in praying for others? Comparing how you pray with the sample intercessory prayers in the Bible, are you satisfied with your praying? What do you like about what you pray for? What would you change?

- 2. Thinking about Jesus praying for you, knowing what you know about him and his desires for us, if you were talking with him now, what **would you ask him to pray for?**

3. Consider the following three suggestions for incorporation into your intercessory praying.
- **“On-the-spot” Prayer** – Instead of waiting until later to pray for someone, when a need has arisen or when they have asked you to pray, do it right away. Go off to the side wherever you are and pray with them for them. If on the phone pray over the phone. If texting, text a prayer.
 - **“God-directed Prayer”** – When you claim some quiet time alone to pray, why not just simply ask God to bring to mind who and what you should pray for? Then, be quiet, listen and pray as the Spirit directs.
 - **“Prayer-list Prayer”** – Why not keep a mini-journal? Write out who you are praying for, when you began to pray for them, and what you have seen in answer to your prayer.

LESSON FOUR

Discipleship Prayer

Praying with Jesus

The word “disciple” is often used when speaking of a relationship with Jesus Christ. It’s a biblical word but not always clearly understood. As you think about it, what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

In recent years, Dallas Willard (pastor/philosopher/theologian) has helped the Church understand discipleship.

“A disciple is a learner, a student, an apprentice – a *practitioner*, even if only a beginner. . . . In the heart of a disciple there is a *desire*, and then there is a *decision* or settled intent. Having come to some understanding of what it means and thus having ‘counted up the costs,’ the disciple of Christ desires above all else to be like him. . . . Given this desire, usually produced by the lives and words of those already on the Way, there is still a decision to be

made: the decision to devote oneself to becoming like Christ. The disciple is one who, intent upon becoming Christ-like and so dwelling in *his* ‘faith and practice,’ systematically and progressively rearranges his affairs to that end.”
(The Great Omission, 2006, xi-7)

When it comes to praying, a disciple of Jesus Christ takes note of the role prayer played in his life, learns about prayer from him, and seeks to be like Jesus in prayer. What follows is illustrative not exhaustive since space won’t allow otherwise. Sometime in the future you should slowly and meditatively do a complete study of Jesus and prayer from the Gospels.

The Prayer Life of Jesus

In the following three collections of scripture, what do you learn about prayer from the life experience of Jesus? Each collective has a theme. What is it? Identify in each grouping at least one lesson about prayer you would like to incorporate into your praying.

Matthew 14:23; Mark 1:35; 6:41, 46; 8:6; Luke 5:16; 6:12-13; 9:18

Theme(s): _____

Lesson: _____

Luke 22:31-32; 23:34; John 11:41-42; John 17

Theme: _____

Lesson: _____

Mark 15:33-34; Luke 22:39-46; 23:46; John 12:27-28; Hebrews 5:7-10

Theme: _____

Lesson: _____

The Prayer Teaching of Jesus

Read through these teachings of Jesus on prayer. What is the main teaching of each?

Matthew 6:5-8; 7:7-11

Luke 11:5-9; 18:1-8

Luke 9:36-38

Mark 11:15-19

Luke 18:10-13

A Prayer Model from Jesus

See **Luke 11:1-4; Matthew 6:9-13**. His disciples found it impossible to ignore Jesus and his life of prayer. They remembered that John the Baptist taught his disciples about prayer and knew they too needed some teaching. So they asked Jesus to instruct them in prayer. Jesus gave them a prayer pattern or model that we have come to call, The Lord’s Prayer. The word “say” in **Luke 11:2** can include the idea of reciting something.

What are the two main sections of the prayer (i.e., Matthew 6:9-10; 11-13)? Who is the subject and object of each section?

Each main section has three requests. Give a one-word summary title to each of the six requests.

How is this prayer connected to the Great Commandment in **Mark 12:38-31**?

Praying in Jesus' Name

You have probably heard others pray ending their prayer with a phrase like, "in Jesus' name, Amen." What does it mean to pray in Jesus' name? Is there more to it than making sure we add a certain phrase to our prayer? Should we even do that?

"To pray in the name of Christ means to pray in the awareness that our prayers have no worthiness or efficacy apart from his atoning sacrifice and redemptive mediation. It means to appeal to the blood of Christ as the source of power for the life of prayer. It means to acknowledge our complete helplessness apart from his mediation and intercession. To pray in his name means that we recognize that our prayers cannot penetrate the tribunal of God unless they are presented to the Father by the Son, our one Savior and Redeemer." (Donald Bloesch as quoted by Richard Foster in *Prayer*, 1992, 194)

That's the theological explanation. Christ is our only authority and hope in praying. Foster goes on to say:

"This is the objective, forensic side of prayer in Jesus' name. But there is also the subjective, experiential side. To pray in the name of Jesus means that we are praying in accord with the way and nature of Christ. It means that we are making the kinds of intercessions he would make if he were among us in the flesh." (Foster, 194)

A Prayer Training Exercise

1. Read and consider **John 14:12-14**. What is the promise attached to praying in the name of Jesus?

In the coming days, think about your prayers. Would Jesus pray this prayer? Will he present it to the Father on your behalf?

2. Spend some time with the "**Lord's Prayer**."

- Memorize it if you haven't done so before. Remember that it came from Jesus' lips so can be prayed in Jesus' name.
- Jesus seems to have meant for it to be recited. Why not begin to do so on a regular basis? After your first time through, pray it a second time with your personal life context and requests in mind.

LESSON FIVE

Liturgical Prayer

Praying with the Church

Talking about liturgy elicits a wide range of response in those who presently have no such practice in their Christian life. Among those who have practiced liturgy but no longer do, some may be nostalgic missing its stability while others are still running away from what had become empty repetition. Among those who have never experienced liturgy the range of response might move from not caring about what they know nothing about to curiosity for what they might have missed out on.

When you hear and think about liturgy, what is your response? What has been your past experience?

"We are all liturgical in that we all have formularies that organize our lives around certain beliefs and practices. As I look back at the low-church worship patterns that I experienced, I can see that they had their own 'informal' liturgies. Doing the same things, at the same time, in prescribed, regular, and set ways was just as liturgical as the explicit liturgies of my local Anglican church . . . Many of us in low-church traditions are now acknowledging that liturgy and ritual have always been a part of our church life, no matter how we have tried to avoid it or think otherwise." (Jason Clark, "The Renewal of Liturgy in the Emerging Church" in *Church in the Present Tense*, edited by Kevin Corcoran, 2011, 77)

Liturgical praying - whether praying alone but along with others at the same time, or physically together with others - is praying with the Church.

“We pray *with* the Church whenever we read or recite the Psalms, whenever we utter the Lord’s Prayer ([in liturgical terms called] the Our Father) aloud, and whenever we learn to use the prayer books of the Church. That is, we pray *with* the Church when we pray at fixed times with the Church.” (Scot McKnight, *Praying with the Church*, 2006, 12)

Noticing the Past

See **Psalm 55:16-17; Daniel 6:10; Acts 3:1; 10:30**. What do you notice about prayer from these Bible characters?

What about Jesus? Would he have entered into this three times a day prayer rhythm? It’s likely, given the Jewish practice of the day, that he would have participated: praying the Psalms, reciting the *Shema* (“Hear, O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is One”), and later reciting the Lord’s Prayer.

“It would have been nearly impossible for Jesus to have been a Jew in the first century, at least a pious Jew, and not have participated in Israel’s sacred prayer rhythm of praying *with* the community of faith.” (McKnight, 32)

What then about the infant church shortly after New Testament times?

The *Didache* was an early manual on the Christian life from the turn of the first century. It “tells us that the Christians prayed the Lord’s Prayer three times a day. The text doesn’t tell us what the times were, but history suggests it was morning, afternoon and evening prayers that included the Lord’s Prayer.” (McKnight, 35)

Crafting a Present

Liturgical prayer, praying with the Church, has at least two benefits.

- First, it moves us away from intense individualism in our praying to prayer with community in mind. It’s not just about me and my needs but about us and the needs of others.
- Also, it helps us establish prayer habits that bring prayer into ordinary life. Wherever you are in the living out of your life you pray at certain times along with others in the Church.

Are there other benefits?

What negatives can you think of?

If you were to begin to pray in a three-times-a-day rhythm, **what might you pray?**

1. The Jews prayed the *Shema*. So probably did Jesus, but he changed it. See **Mark 12:28-33**.

“‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ [So far, so good; this is Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Here Jesus adds a verse from Leviticus 19:18.] “The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

Jesus makes it clear that you love God by following him. Scot McKnight calls this The Jesus Creed. (*The Jesus Creed*, 2004, pages 8-13)

2. There is evidence that the Jews prayed through the Ten Commandments together with the *Shema*. (McKnight, *Praying with the Church*, page 46)

3. Jesus then gave them and us something new for a prayer liturgy: The Lord's Prayer.

"From experience in his Jewish world (where liturgical prayers had a long history), Jesus knows that his liturgical prayer will *provide a framework for prayer . . . provide a structured conversation with God . . . remind his followers of his priorities . . . prevent his disciples from lapsing into self-saturated prayer . . . establish a new tradition.*" (*The Jesus Creed*, 18)

A Prayer Training Exercise

1. **Consider making liturgical prayer three times a day a normal part of your life.** Try it out for two weeks. It will mean memorizing (or having written out for reading) the Jesus Creed, the Ten Commandments (in abbreviated form), and the Lord's Prayer. As you recite these, picture yourself praying with others who make up the Church. In the morning and evening, you may want to add your personal requests.

McKnight suggests a pattern like this: Morning – Jesus Creed, Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer; Afternoon – Lord's Prayer; Evening – Jesus Creed, Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer. (*Praying with the Church*, page 65)

2. Or you may want to **create your own liturgy.** Here is a sample of one I developed and use regularly to begin my day. It takes about ten minutes to work through.

My Personal Liturgy to Start the Day

Sing: "I Love You Lord and I Lift My Voice"

Good Morning Heavenly Father, Lord Jesus, and Holy Spirit!

Sing: "This is the Day"

Heavenly Father, I worship you as Creator and Sustainer of all there is.

Lord Jesus, I worship you as Savior and Lord of all there is.

Holy Spirit, I worship you as the Sanctifier of the people of God.

Sing: "Glory Be To the Father"

Recite: The Lord's Prayer

Heavenly Father, I pray that this day I will live in your presence and please you more and more.

Recite: Psalm 86:11-13

Lord Jesus, I pray that this day I will take up my cross and follow you.

Recite: Psalm 23

Holy Spirit, I pray that this day you will fill me with yourself and cause your fruit to ripen in my life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Recite: Psalm 100

Holy, blessed and glorious Trinity, three persons in one God, have mercy on me a sinner saved by grace.

Sign of the Cross: "In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen!"

Sing: Doxology

3. **Prayer books** available from different denominations such as *The Book of Common Prayer*; or *The Divine Hours* (by Phyllis Tickle); or *The Valley of Vision* (edited by Arthur Bennett) can all help you along your journey to regularly pray with the Church.

LESSON SIX

Fasting and Prayer

Praying without Eating

The North American Church has a love affair with food. That's not totally true, of course, but we do joke about the drawing power of eating together. If you want a crowd, feed them. Not that Jesus didn't know the importance of a meal; he did, and understood the acceptance and encouragement it offered. He ate with both saints and sinners and often suffered criticism from the religious right for eating too much with sinners.

People in Bible times knew, however, there was a time to eat and a time not to eat, not feast or famine but feast or fast. We have kept a tight grip on feast but have for the most part lost our grip on fasting.

Have you ever fasted, if so, why, If not why? If you don't fast, is there anything that would bring you to do so?

You may ask why fasting comes up in a series on prayer: because you always find the two together. "Fasting is the perfect environment for prayer and seeking the Lord. With fasting we detach ourselves from the earth, and with prayer we attach ourselves to heaven." (Ron Dunn in Alvin Vandergriend, *The Joy of Prayer*, 2007, page 70)

The Practice of Fasting and Prayer

Work through these examples of fasting and prayer. Why were they praying and fasting?

Acts 13:2-3; 14:23

2 Chronicles 20:2-12; Ezra 8:21-23

Jonah 3:6-10

Joel 1:14; 2:12-17

Psalm 35:13-14

Why Fast and Pray?

"In fasting we abstain from our ordinary food to some significant degree and for some significant length of time . . . It is not done to impress God or merit favor, nor because there is anything wrong with food . . . It is done that we may consciously experience the direct sustenance of God to our body and our whole person." (Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*, 2006, 37)

"Self-indulgence is the enemy of gratitude, and self-discipline usually its friend and generator. That is why gluttony is a deadly sin. The early desert fathers believed that a person's appetites are linked: full stomachs and jaded palates take the edge from our hunger and thirst for righteousness. They spoil the appetite for God." (Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. as quoted in Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Spiritual Life*, 1991, 151)

Whitney (pages 157-167) suggests ten purposes for fasting and prayer. Read and think through the scripture references to help put each purpose into context.

1. To strengthen prayer (**Ezra 8:23; Nehemiah 1:4; Daniel 9:3**)
2. To seek God's guidance (**Judges 20:26-28**)
3. To express grief (**1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 1:11-12**)
4. To seek deliverance or protection (**Esther 4:16; Psalm 109:21-25**)
5. To express repentance and return to God (**1 Samuel 7:6**)

6. To humble oneself before God (**1 Kings 21:27-29**)
7. To express concern for the work of God (**Nehemiah 1:3-4; Daniel 9:3**)
8. To minister to the needs of others (**Isaiah 58:3-7**)
9. To overcome temptation (**Matthew 4:1-11**)
10. To express love and worship to God (**Luke 2:37**)

The Pitfalls of Fasting and Prayer

1. Fasting takes place in different degrees. You do without food either for a short period or for a substantial length of time. Some in extreme situations also stop drinking. You should consider your body and its possible limitations. Be careful not to stress your body beyond its capabilities. You can still pray whether you fast or not.
2. Jesus voices a concern about fasting in **Matthew 6:16-18**. Take note that Jesus expected fasting would be happening. What was he concerned about? What is the main point of his teaching? Was he suggesting that all prayer and fasting should be done in private?

3. Sometimes there can be a misguided intent behind fasting.

“Fasting is the natural, inevitable response of a person to a grievous sacred moment in life . . . people fasted in the Bible *in response* to some grievous event in life – like death or the realization of sin or when the nation was threatened . . . Does it bring results? Yes, but that’s not the point of fasting. Those who fasted in response to grievous sacred moments frequently – *but not always!* – received results, like answered prayer. But focusing on the results causes us to misunderstand fasting entirely . . . *fasting isn’t a manipulative tool that guarantees results.*” (Scot McKnight, *Fasting*, 2009, xx-xxiii)

So when you fast and pray, the “why” of your fasting is more important than how you do it. It is not to help others see how spiritual you are or to try and coerce God into doing something for you. **It’s to seek and be with God when life is demanding.**

A Prayer Training Exercise

1. If fasting is a regular part of your prayer experience, now is a good time to ask the “Why?” question. Are your motivations for fasting what they should be? Thinking back over your fasting history, why did you fast at the times you did?

2. If you have never fasted or seldom do, is it time to allow fasting into your prayer life? Living in North America makes that difficult to do. The few who fast in our culture do so for health or religious reasons. Your church heritage perhaps didn’t see fasting as a present possibility or if it did, you have let go of that practice. Seeing how much fasting was part of the experience of the people of scripture, would you like to see it become part of your life?

- First of all, in regards to “grievous events” of life, you obviously aren’t going to go out and manufacture one so that you can fast and pray! However, before the next crisis touches your life (some inevitably will), plan in advance to bring fasting into that experience. Looking back in this lesson at the examples and purposes of fasting and prayer, what might some of those “grievous moments” be?

- Second, consider bringing fasting into your prayer life as a spiritual discipline. Fasting and praying in some regular pattern can give you the opportunity to experience God feeding your body and soul instead of food, and to mark out your serious desire to meet with God. Maybe that’s a day or two a month or a certain day each week, whatever you decide, give it a trial run. Try it this week (e.g., skip one meal on purpose and spend that time in prayerful worship; let the hunger pangs that occur even after your focused time of prayer be a signal to offer another prayer until your next meal).

LESSON SEVEN

Biblical Prayers Praying the Scriptures

Have you ever prayed someone else’s prayer or have you, instead of voicing a prayer, written it out? What would you feel if another person prayed that written prayer of yours? Which prayer better catches God’s ear, an extemporaneous, at-the-moment prayer or a previously written one made your own?

Why do we ask the question if one is more effective than the other? If prayers from another, or your personal prayers, both express the thoughts and words of your soul, does it matter where they come from? Does it really matter to God?

Which is a better prayer for starting a new day, a short prayer of thanks in your own words or this prayer from *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Autumn and Wintertime* (Phyllis Tickle, 2000, 5)?

“Lord God, almighty and everlasting Father, you have brought me in safety to this new day: Preserve me with your mighty power, that I may not fall into sin,

nor be overcome by adversity; and in all I do, direct me to the fulfilling of your purpose; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!”

Neither is inherently better. The one that expresses your heart’s conversation with God is best for that moment.

The Bible not only teaches us about prayer but provides sample prayers of God’s people throughout the ages. Does God intend us to just learn about prayer from them or might he hear these prayers as our own if we pray them? That is the premise of this lesson:

We Can Pray the Prayers of the Bible as Our Own not just learn about prayer from them!

(Treat this entire lesson as a “**prayer training exercise**”!)

The Lord’s Prayer

This prayer is meant to be prayed. In fact, Jesus instructs us to do so. Since we previously spent time with it, consider just this reminder. You can pray it two ways: first, with all the others who make up the Church, but also, personalized as an individual who is part of the Church standing before the Father.

The Psalms

This collection of poems is often referred to as the songbook or hymnal of Israel. Poetry often is able to find creative ways of expressing deeply held convictions. As C.S. Lewis writes, “It seems to me appropriate, almost inevitable, that when that great Imagination which in the beginning, for its own delight and for the delight of men and angels ... had invented and formed the whole world of Nature, submitted to express itself in human speech, that speech should sometimes be poetry, For poetry too is a little incarnation, giving body to what had been before invisible and inaudible.” (*Reflections on the Psalms*, 12) How glorious it *would* be to be able to hear the music that provided the setting for the words.

Psalms, however, could also be called the prayer book of Israel, meant not just to be sung but to be prayed as group and individual prayer. Bonhoeffer writes, “The Psalter is the great school of prayer ... Here we learn, first, what prayer means ... Second, we learn from the prayer of the psalms what we should pray ... Third, the psalms teach us to pray as a fellowship.” (*Life Together*, 47-48)

Jesus Christ probably prayed the psalms.

“The book of Psalms offers a practicum in how to pray. ‘It is my custom to call this book *An Anatomy of All Parts of the Soul*,’ wrote John Calvin, ‘since there is no emotion anyone will experience whose image is not reflected in this mirror.’ Fear, praise, anxiety, anger, love, sorrow, despair, gratitude, grief, doubt, suffering, joy, vengeance, repentance – every human emotion and experience surges to the surface in the prayer-poems of Psalms.” (Philip Yancey, *Prayer*, 2006, 172)

When you pray a psalm, first read it through a couple of times to understand the flow of its movement. Then read it as your prayer, inserting yourself into the pronouns of the text. As you do this, recollections from your personal context may come to mind to be inserted into the prayer. Eventually, if this psalm takes on significant value as a prayer of yours, memorize it to be prayed many times as appropriate in the future.

Pray through the following four psalms as practice. What is the theme of the psalm? Does it touch your current life context in any way? In what life circumstances might this psalm most often be prayed?

Psalm 23

Psalm 27

Psalm 51

Psalm 100

The Prayers of Paul

All of Paul’s letters, except Titus, have at least one prayer in them. You have already explored some of his prayers in lesson three.

“I have found it useful to work through these prayers too, because they help me move beyond my egocentric requests. Paul raises my sights to a cosmic level. . . . Often Paul opens with a prayer of thanksgiving for the growth he has observed in his intended readers. He prays as if it matters, truly *matters*, whether they are maturing in the faith. I get the sense, reading Paul’s prayers, that he cares more for others’ well-being than for his own From Paul’s prayers I learn to dethrone myself by first considering a cosmic point of view and then looking at my friends and family, my life, the church, and indeed all history from that vantage.” (Yancey, 177)

In the following prayers of Paul, what is the theme? Who might you pray this prayer for? Pray it for them. Pray it for yourself. In what way does it touch your life context?

Colossians 1:3-14

Ephesians 3:14-20

Other Bible Prayers

There are many other prayers in the Bible to be read and prayed in appropriate situations: Abraham in **Genesis 18:23-33**; Moses in **Exodus 15:1-18**; **33:12-23**; David in **2 Samuel 7:18-29**; Solomon in **1 Kings 8:23-53**; Ezra in **Ezra 9:5-15**; Nebuchadnezzar in **Daniel 4:34-37**; Daniel in **Daniel 9:4-19**; Habakkuk in **Habakkuk 3:1-19**; Jesus Christ in **John 17:6-26**. That's not an exhaustive list. When you come across a prayer in your Bible reading add it to your own listing of prayers to be prayed.

For some more practice, read and pray through **Jonah 2:1-9**. What is the theme? Has Jonah's prayer ever been applicable to your life context? Is there someone you could pray this prayer for?

As you bring this lesson to a close, consider the merits of memorizing scripture, whether some of these prayers or other ones.

"Others recommend taking a further step beyond simply reading the Bible's prayers: memorize them, so that they can be recalled at any moment. Debra Rienstra calls the process 'stocking up' on the words of the Bible, 'giving the Spirit a bigger repertoire to work with in speaking to you – more Post-its on the bulletin board.'" (Yancey, 178)

"Memorization can be to our hunger for God what practicing a musical instrument is for performance. It can be the singing of the scales of the soul."
(Ben Patterson in Yancey, 179)

To get started, choose one prayer of the Bible that matches your current life situation and reflects the words you would speak to God. Memorize it and pray it often.

LESSON EIGHT

Questions about Prayer

Praying with Confidence

We never run short of questions for God. "How is this working, Lord? I don't understand. What are you doing? Why are you doing it like this? Wouldn't this way be better?" The questions roll off our lips and we aren't even sure if we are asking the right ones or not.

Take some time and jot down some of your questions for God that relate to prayer.

See **John 9:1-5**. Jesus and his disciples come upon a blind man. The disciples ask Jesus: "Did this man's or his parents' sin cause the blindness?" Yes, the question reflected some of the theological thinking of the day, but you might think a better question would have been, "Why is this man blind?" Or an even better question would be, "Lord, will you heal this man's blindness?" since they had witnessed Jesus' healings of others. No, they wanted to ask questions about the process before entering into the process.

We do this with prayer. We have questions about the process. Now, there's nothing wrong with questions and asking them as long as the questions don't hold us back from entering into the practice. Remember that there will always be a measure of mystery and the unknown about prayer. After all, we are talking to and dealing with the Sovereign Lord of all there is! He has the final word not us.

Following are three sample questions out of the many that we sometimes ask. This brief lesson can't go deeply into a search for answers but can hopefully get you started.

Why pray? Does it make any difference?

What do **Matthew 6:7-8, 31-32; Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29; Isaiah 46:9-11** tell you about God?

See **Exodus 33:3, 12-17; 2 Kings 20:1-6**. What do you learn about God and prayer from these incidents from the lives of Moses and Hezekiah?

See also **Luke 11:5-12; John 14:12-14**. What more do you learn about God and prayer in these verses?

Does prayer matter when we can't tell God anything he doesn't already know or get him to do anything he hasn't already planned to do? Why bother to pray? Is it true that God doesn't change his mind when sometimes in the Bible it looks like he does? Do our prayers really make a difference?

Yes, our prayers do make a difference. That's the short answer. Somehow in ways in which we don't fully understand he draws our prayers and requests into the outworking of what he has planned to do. We should bother to pray because he asks us and tells us to and he is a loving father generous to his children in ways we don't fully comprehend.

"A person prays, said Augustine, 'That he himself may be constructed, not that God may be instructed.'" (Philip Yancey, *Prayer*, 2006, 154)

Is God always listening? What about my unanswered prayers?

Bill Hybels suggests a simple formula for dealing with this question. (Bill Hybels, *Too Busy Not to Pray*, Second Edition, 1998, 88)

- If the request is wrong, God says "No."
- If the timing is wrong, God says "Slow."
- If you are wrong, God says "Grow."
- But if your request is right, the timing is right, and you are right, God says "Go!"

Sometimes we ask for the wrong thing, while other times we must learn to wait for something else to happen before our request can be met. Or we must grow in character before God acts. In any of these cases it might seem as if God isn't listening, but it's really us not listening!

Hybels goes on to suggest five "prayer-busters" that hinder our prayers. Read the passages and describe the problem.

James 4:2

Isaiah 59:2

Matthew 5:23-24; 1 Peter 3:7

James 4:3

Proverbs 21:13; Isaiah 58:3-9

Does God always heal when we pray for healing?

What do these two scripture passages teach about healing and prayer?

James 5:13-18

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

There are quick and obvious answers to the question but they really don't remove all the mystery or make known all the unknowns. All healing on earth is temporary. Everyone eventually dies. Yes, God does heal in answer to prayer, but only sometimes. Yancey (pages 169, 259-266) provides other help in answering this question.

First he reminds us there can be benefit to sickness. He tells the story of Ben Patterson. When flat on his back with a ruptured disc he noticed his prayer life increased and sweetened with the extra time available to pray. In bemoaning the future loss of that as he got back on his feet, he sensed God saying this to him.

"Ben, you have just as much time when you're well as when you're sick. It's the same twenty-four hours in either case. The trouble with you is that when you're well, you think you're in charge. When you're sick, you know you're not."

Yancey then suggests this checklist of four questions when praying for healing.

- Am I expecting a miracle as an entitlement? Do I think God owes it to me?
- Am I using the benefits of God's "common grace" – the healing built into our own bodies and the medical knowledge we have gained?
- Do I wrongly blame God for causing the suffering?
- Am I prepared for the possibility that physical healing may not take place?

That's only three out of the multitude of questions we sometimes have about prayer. Questions are inevitable; some answers are available. Great mystery will always remain. So don't let the questions keep you from praying!

Whatever shape your praying takes, pray. Whether alone or with others, pray; whether for yourself or others, pray; whether following the example of Jesus or praying with the Church, pray; whether fasting or not, pray; whether with your own words or the words of scripture, pray; whether you understand it all or not, pray.

Listen to God invitation, not all the other voices. Open the door and let him in for fellowship and conversation. Take **Hebrews 4:16** seriously. Go boldly (with confidence) into the throne room of God, *dare to draw near*, and ASK!

A Prayer Training Exercise

The questions we harbor about prayer can keep us from growing in our prayer life especially if these questions are not given voice. Sometimes we even find that there are some requests that we have just dropped because the burden of our question has begun to outweigh the burden of the request.

As we noted earlier in this study guide, prayer entails a certain mystery. This mystery reminds us that we are praying to a person, not a force. A force can be manipulated whereas a person has distinct reason, volition and emotion. In this case God, to whom we pray, has a complexity to his planning and its outworking that there is more our interaction than just us and God.

As we have seen in our study, Scripture offers some degree of insight into this relationship and how it relates to prayer. We will conclude with a look at one more passage of Scripture to gain a little more insight into prayer.

Read **Luke 18: 1-8** and recall Jesus' reminder to us that we should not give up in our prayers.

List requests that you have given up on and in spite of your questions about prayer, recommit them to the Lord.

APPENDIX

Tips for Small Group Leaders

How to Make the Most of this Study Guide

Pray (Phil 4.6-7)

This is vital. Taking the time to pray in anticipation of the meeting will help to focus you on the task of building disciples. The act of prayer helps to remind us that we are God's servants and that this entire project of leading a study is vitally dependent on God's presence and power. Do not take this activity lightly. Try to remember to pray throughout the week for each member by name that they would be open to God's work in their life and that they would be willing to let God make them more and more like Christ. Also, pray for yourself that you would have boldness to lead the study, confidence in the message and sensitivity to God's Spirit at work.

Preview the Material (1 Pet 4.10)

No study guide is perfect (unless of course, you write it). It was written by someone else who is most likely not part of your group and so does not know what you like when you lead, nor does the author know all the details of your group. That is your business. As a result, you have the opportunity to make this study your own. If you want to use this study effectively however, you need to become familiar with it. You will only get frustrated if you review it an hour before people arrive and expect that everything will slide into place. Rather, read the entire thing as soon as you can. Use it as your own private devotional. Then think about your group and ask God to help you to interpret the guide for them. Determine which questions are helpful, which need more follow-up and which ones to avoid altogether. If you feel like you have to say something like, "I'm not sure what he meant by that question." then don't ask it. Ask a better question. You'll only know what a better question looks like if you have an idea of the entire study. Figuring out how to use this study guide is a service to the members of your group. Furthermore, if you are using this guide as a part of E Free Lethbridge then you have the opportunity to interact

directly with the author. Call the church office and find out how you can contact Dave Acree.

Promote Discussion (*Jas 1.19*)

As you know, sometimes we need to spend some time talking about a concept before we are able to begin to apply its truth. Discussion can be an important catalyst for this to take place. As you may also know, discussion can be easier introduced that actually achieved. There are some things that are out of your control that can make discussions difficult to get going (e.g., some people are naturally quiet; people might not have done the assigned preparation). Some things, however, are within your control when it comes to promoting good, healthy discussion. Here are a few:

1. Ask good questions

“Yes” or “No” questions can be good to test for a certain level of comprehension but they are not good at promoting discussion. “Why” questions tend to act better at evoking discussion. Other good sorts of questions include:

- a. Explain what you mean.
- b. Can you give us an example?
- c. How does work in your life?
- d. What do the rest of you think?

2. Be open and listen

Don't keep your head buried in the study guide jumping from question to question. Listen to the answers offered because there might be opportunity for follow-up questions to get at the heart of the matter. Listening also offers the opportunity for you as a leader to see if the Holy Spirit is guiding the meeting in a different direction. If a person brings up an issue or a heart-ache that seems to be significant, you are free to explore that as a group. Others in the group will pick up on a “heart” answer, don't be left out because you are trying to find your spot in the guide and rehearsing the next question in your head already. Being

familiar with the guide also helps free you to ask follow-up questions without losing sight of the main point.

3. Allow for silence

Don't be quick to assume that just because nobody answers right away it means nobody *wants* to answer. It could be that someone is just digging deep for the courage to speak. If your group knows that you will jump in if nobody answers right away, they will rarely take advantage of the positive pressure that silence sometimes contains to offer their ideas. The discernment to know when to expand the silence becomes sharper the more you get to know your group.

4. Affirm (be an encourager)

Be ready with thanks for whenever anyone speaks up but be careful with endorsements. Determine how you will respond to statements made by group member that may or may not be true. In other words, do just jump to a casual comment like, “good” or “that's right” unless you sincerely agree. There can be a tendency for leaders to overreact when someone speaks just because they are happy someone finally said something. We still need to make sure that we are responsible with our comments and our perspective. Regardless, always express gratitude for comments. One way to bridge a comment like this would be:

“Thanks so much for your comment. Does anyone have a different perspective on this matter?”

5. Hold your opinion

Don't be too quick to state your position because in some groups, it can be interpreted as the final word on the matter. This is especially true for newer groups. You are the leader and they expect that you have answers and it is easier for some if the leader just tells them what they should think. Of course, easier is not always better. In fact, if you find your group looking to you too often, don't give an answer at all for some questions. Let your strategic silence elicit some curiosity in the minds of the group.

6. Manage when necessary

You might find some extremes in your group. You might have someone that just loves to talk and is able to find something to say on almost every topic. On the other hand, you might have people in your group that will sit the entire time and not say a thing. As a leader you are there to serve your group members and sometimes you might have to set parameters during a meeting if you find someone talking too much. You can say something like, “Thanks for your thoughts, but I’m really interested in what the rest have to say.” Or if it is the other case, “We haven’t heard from everyone tonight. [name], what thoughts have been going through your head tonight?” If things get too difficult (e.g., someone just talks too much), you might have to find the time away from the group time to ask them for help. Say something like, “I really appreciate your willingness to talk but I really want time for everyone to share so that each person can grow. Can you help me encourage others to share?”

Here is a great summary of the purpose of trying hard to promote discussion in the context of the purpose of small group ministry:

“... your primary role is that of a friend and a servant. It is not the leader’s job to judge someone else’s status ... It is the leader’s job to provide a safe place where participants can honestly explore their relationship with Jesus. It is the leader’s job to model Jesus by being genuinely concerned about the thoughts, questions and struggles of the group members” (Idelman, *Not a Fan*, 10).