

Lectio Divina BIBLE STUDY

LEARNING TO PRAY
in Scripture



STEPHEN J. BINZ

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ENDORSEMENTS FOR *LECTIO DIVINA BIBLE STUDY: LEARNING TO PRAY IN SCRIPTURE*, BY STEPHEN J. BINZ ■

I recommend this book for anyone who wishes to put in practice the vision articulated by Pope Benedict XVI's Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*. Whether alone or in groups, the reader will find this "how-to" book on lectio divina to be a gem. Not only does Stephen Binz give solid grounding in the steps of lectio divina and the proper attitudes or dispositions as we pray, but his step-by-step reflections on the prayer of Jesus and all who preceded Him in Sacred Scripture are done in a very simple and inviting fashion.

— Most Reverend Joseph E. Kurtz, Archbishop of Louisville

Stephen Binz offers us a feast of prayer in the Bible as seen from the prayerful experiences of a host of old scriptural friends that include among many others: Abraham, Isaiah, Daniel, Job, Judith, the Psalms, and best of all, the prayer lives of Mary and Jesus. The author leads us through a journey that begins with listening and proceeds to understanding, reflecting, personal prayer, and action. It's the best application of lectio divina I have ever come across. Stephen Binz invites us to hear the sounds of silence and feel the rhythm and depth that flows into us from God's Word and presence.

— Rev. Alfred McBride, O.Praem.

For so many of us who want to pray effectively with Scripture, the prospect can be overwhelming. In *Learning to Pray in Scripture*, Stephen Binz gives us a spiritual road map to guide the way. Set against the backdrop of lectio divina, this beautiful and necessary book provides readers with the practical tools and inspiring words they need to use the Bible as the basis of regular prayer.

— **Mary DeTurris Poust, author of *The Essential Guide to Catholic Prayer and the Mass***

For more than a millennium Christians have practiced lectio divina in order to allow the Sacred Scriptures to draw them into deeper union with God. Sadly, this ancient practice is unknown to many Christians today. In *Learning to Pray in Scripture*, Stephen Binz masterfully guides readers into the practice of lectio divina so that their words of prayer might be shaped by the very Word of God. Anyone seeking a richer prayer life — and a deeper understanding of the Bible — would do well to read this book.

— **Eric Sammons, Director of Evangelization, Diocese of Venice in Florida, and author of *Who Is Jesus Christ, Unlocking the Mystery in the Gospel of Matthew***

ENDORSEMENTS FOR *LECTIO DIVINA BIBLE STUDY: THE SACRAMENTS IN SCRIPTURE*, BY STEPHEN J. BINZ ■

Catholics feel a special love for the seven sacraments, such a distinctive feature of our Church. For those who want to meditate on their meaning, touch their foundations in the Bible, and forge deeper relationships with their faith community — and with God — this book is an enriching guide.

— Rev. Paul Turner, Pastor of St. Munchin Church, Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Facilitator for the International Commission on English in the Liturgy

Stephen Binz has given us a wonderful pastoral tool for exploring the sacraments and their scriptural foundation. Through the use of *lectio divina*, a process of reading, reflecting, praying, and acting on Scripture, he has provided an approach to the sacraments that includes guided reflection on their roots in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures as well as a way to prayerfully integrate this material with the Christian life. Well-grounded in biblical and liturgical theology, his work is thoroughly accessible and should be welcomed in any adult faith formation program.

— Catherine Vincie, RSHM, PhD, Professor of Sacramental and Liturgical Theology, Aquinas Institute of Theology, St. Louis, MO

The Sacraments in Scripture is a practical, pastoral tool for exploring the biblical roots of the sacred mysteries of our faith. By using a five-fold pattern of listening, understanding, reflecting, praying, and acting, Stephen Binz gives readers both a solid grounding in the teaching of the church and an achievable action plan for living out those teachings. This book is well-suited for individuals seeking a deeper exploration of their faith. It is also designed for small communities that wish to study

and grow together in faith. This clear, engaging guide to the sacraments will enrich and inspire all who read it.

— Nick Wagner, Founder and director of TeamRCIA.com and author of *The Heart of Faith: A Field Guide for Catechumens and Candidates*

ENDORSEMENTS FOR *LECTIO DIVINA BIBLE STUDY: THE MASS IN SCRIPTURE*, BY STEPHEN J. BINZ ■

Stephen Binz' *The Mass in Scripture* provides every reader with an opportunity to learn how to pray the parts of the Mass with devotion and understanding. Binz' straightforward writing allows readers of all levels to learn what the Council set out as one of the great goals of its liturgical reform: the increased participation of the faithful at every Mass.

— Most Reverend Timothy M. Dolan, Archbishop of New York

The Mass in Scripture is an insightful resource for individual and group study by Catholics who wish to further their understanding of the biblical roots of the Mass and the meaning of the coming changes in the Mass prayers. Stephen Binz has provided a well-organized and clearly written guide that can only heighten appreciation for the inexhaustible riches of our Catholic Mass.

**— His Eminence Donald Cardinal Wuerl, Archbishop of
Washington**

In his book, *The Mass in Scripture*, Stephen J. Binz does a brilliant job in using lectio divina to help Catholics grow in a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the Mass. His writing is strongly based in Scripture and draws readers into a deeper celebration of the Mass and a commitment to live out their lives as a eucharistic people.

**— Most Rev. Gregory M. Aymond, Archbishop of New Orleans,
Chair of the USCCB Committee on Divine Worship**

Stephen Binz invites us to move beyond the surface words we say to the meaning of what we do. He has provided a remarkable tool for just such reflection. Using an ancient pattern of reflection, prayer, and action, and grounding his work in the historical and theological

underpinnings of what we celebrate today, he provides a unique exploration of the various parts of the eucharistic liturgy, at once solid and accessible. Individuals and groups alike will profit immensely from this book.

— Kathleen Hughes, R.S.C.J., former Professor of Word and Worship at the Catholic Theological Union, Mission Consultant in the Network of Sacred Heart Schools

Every Catholic would like to get more out of the Mass, and the revised translation is encouraging everyone to think more deeply about the words we hear and say. Stephen Binz provides a very helpful guide for those who wish to enter this process prayerfully, in community, and with the Bible in hand. This book will give the reader an experience of Christ and the church that will enrich every celebration of the Mass.

— Rev. Paul Turner, Pastor of St. Munchin Church, Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Facilitator for the International Commission on English in the Liturgy

A very serious yet “user friendly” prayerful appreciation of the Eucharist based on the Scriptures. Readers who apply themselves to the guided prayer and group discussions outlined here will have their experience of the celebration of the Eucharist enriched beyond words. Particularly helpful is the author’s familiarity with the Old Testament basis for Christian worship. This initial offering in the “Lifelong Mystagogy in the Catholic Way” series augurs well for what promises to be a series that has the potential to change minds, hearts, and souls.

— Rev. Msgr. Kevin Irwin, Dean of the School of Theology and Religious studies, The Catholic University of America

The Mass in Scripture yokes solid biblical scholarship, liturgical history and theology, and pastoral insight into a wonderful resource for individuals and groups wishing to deepen their appreciation for the celebration of the Eucharist in the Roman Rite. Adapting the monastic

meditative savoring of Scripture to the texts and ceremonies of the Mass, Stephen Binz both instructs and models how eucharistic mystagogy might be fruitfully engaged. It is one of those rare books that could be used with profit by clergy and religious professionals, cradle Catholics, and new initiates.

— **Rev. Jan Michael Joncas, liturgical theologian and composer,
Associate Professor of Catholic Studies, University of St.
Thomas**

This book, the first in the *Lectio Divina Bible Study* series, is a timely gift to the People of God who worship in English. The lectio divina framework, as Stephen Binz applies it, is a marvelously apt guide for preparing individuals and worshiping communities for the new translation of the *Roman Missal* and for a more profound participation in the liturgy. The biblical and liturgical scholarship is solid yet accessible. Binz' approach is creative, non-polemical, and traditional in the best sense of the word.

— **Judith M. Kubicki, C.S.S.F., liturgical theologian, Associate
Professor of Theology, Fordham University**

Stephen Binz' timely book provides an integrated approach into the experience of worship, employing the Scriptures as a pathway to unfold the mysteries which engage the worshiper. Utilizing a creative method based on lectio divina to uncover the biblical roots of worship, Binz invites the reader to reflect on both the Tradition of the Church and personal memory, illuminating the experience of each part of the Mass. As a result, readers are led to discover the implications worship has for their lives in the world.

— **Rev. Thomas Ranzino, Pastor of St. Jean Vianney Church,
Director of the Office of Worship, Diocese of Baton Rouge**



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Welcome to Lectio Divina Bible Study

LIFELONG MYSTAGOGY IN THE CATHOLIC WAY ■

Lectio Divina Bible Study is designed to assist Catholic Christians in the lifelong process of understanding the faith and living it more intentionally. Through an immersion in sacred Scripture, disciples of Jesus will grow and mature in their calling, continually deepening their appreciation and practice of the Christian mysteries. Ongoing volumes will focus on worship, prayer, spiritual practices, and active commitment, helping participants make the Catholic Christian way of life more fully their own.

Mystagogy is a Greek word, meaning “education in the mysteries.” Initiation into the Easter mysteries should lead Christians into a lifelong process of ongoing conversion and growth in understanding. Though the early church adopted this term to refer to the formal process of leading new Christians into a deeper grasp of the sacraments they experienced at Easter, the process of mystagogy does not end after the fifty days of the Easter season. This education in the paschal mystery of Christ continues throughout life’s pilgrimage and is the task of every member of the church.

Lectio Divina Bible Study utilizes inspired Scripture, along with the tradition and scholarship of the church, to lead maturing Catholic Christians into an ever deeper relationship with Jesus Christ and an appreciation of the gospel’s challenges. These books are guides for life’s journey, helping users to place the paschal mystery at the heart of life and live more fully in Christ.

Each work in this series employs the tradition of lectio divina, the church’s most ancient way of reading Scripture. The lessons lead the reader through five movements: listening, understanding, reflecting, praying, and acting. Contained within each of these lessons are

Scripture texts, commentary on the texts, suggestions for personal reflection, ideas for prayer, and suggestions for actualizing the text in the context of daily life.

These books are designed for use by individuals studying on their own or within faith communities. They are self-contained, with all the information necessary to be used for an individual or group process. All follow the same methodology, beginning with a general overview of the topic and a short practice of the study's method, and followed by five main sections, each of which contain six biblical lessons.

THE ANCIENT ART OF LECTIO DIVINA ■

This time-tested way of reading Scripture was nurtured through the centuries of Christianity, and is today experiencing a worldwide revival among all the people of God. Through the movements of lectio divina, we are led to an encounter with God who speaks to us through the pages of the inspired text, inviting from us a personal response and a gradual transformation of life.

The heart of this practice is an understanding of the Bible's inspiration, the belief that God is the Author or source of Scripture. Though written by human writers in various periods of history, God's Spirit moved within the writers so that the biblical words speak God's word to his people. But inspiration does not just refer to the work of God's Spirit at the time the texts were written. It is an ongoing reality within the sacred pages. The Scriptures remain inspired, and when read in faith today, they are filled with the Spirit of God.

The ancient art of lectio divina is not a rigid system or a set of required steps for reading the Bible. It is, rather, a way of approaching the sacred text with faith, openheartedness, reverence, and expectation. The reader trusts that God is present and speaks to his people through the inspired word, working profoundly within our minds and hearts.

Throughout history this practice of sacred reading has taken many forms through the writings of the saints and spiritual masters. Words like *lectio*, *cogitatio*, *meditatio*, *compassio*, *oratio*, *contemplatio*, *consolatio*, *discretio*, *deliberatio*, and *operatio* have filled books of spiritual literature to express aspects of this ancient practice. Lectio Divina Bible Study utilizes five terms to describe these movements and lead readers into a transforming experience: listening, understanding, reflecting, praying, and acting.

LISTENING

Reading a sacred text in this tradition means reading with expectancy, trusting that God will speak his word to us through the page. St. Benedict in his monastic *Rule* described this kind of reading as hearing “with the ear of our heart.” God speaks and we listen.

The key to this deep listening is reading the biblical text with as little prejudgment as possible, as if we were hearing it for the first time. We can’t listen fully to God if we think we already know what the text is going to tell us. Rather, this expectant reading requires that we create a space within ourselves for the new insight and wisdom God wants to give us through the sacred page.

This deep listening requires careful, fully attentive reading, engaging our mind, our imagination, our emotions, and our will. It can be helpful to read aloud, so that we see the words with our eyes, form them with our lips, and hear them with our ears. We savor the words of the sacred literature, appreciating the images, envisioning the scene, feeling the sentiments, allowing the words to move from our heads to our hearts.

UNDERSTANDING

Seeking to comprehend the meaning of a text is an important part of encountering God there and being changed by that encounter. The

church's early theologians show us that there is no clear distinction between studying Scripture and reading it prayerfully. The more we come to understand the text with our minds, the more we are capable of being changed by the text.

We will be able to probe the fullest meaning of the text the more we comprehend something of its original context — historical, cultural, literary, and religious. When, where, and why was the author writing? Most importantly, how did the writer's faith manifest itself in the text and what kind of faith response does the writer expect from the reader? Seeking to understand the faith dimension of the text helps us transcend the original circumstances in which it was written and allows us to see the lasting significance and validity it has for all of us.

Bible studies and biblical commentaries can be a great help to understanding. Listening to the text with the understanding of the church and with some basic insights of biblical scholarship can assure us that our comprehension is true and faithful. This listening to the text for understanding, with its multiple layers of meaning and rich history of interpretation, forms the foundation on which we can begin to experience its transforming potential.

REFLECTING

Even though the Bible was written ages ago, its pages always have meanings and messages for us today. Our challenge is to find connections between the text of yesterday and the today of our lives. By reflecting on the sacred texts, we link the biblical truth of scriptural passages to the experience of faith in the world in which we live.

Because the biblical literature is the word of God, it has a richness of meaning that can be discovered by individuals in every age and in every culture. Its personal message can be received by every reader who listens to the word in the context of his or her daily experiences. We should read the text until it becomes like a mirror, reflecting some of our own thoughts, questions, challenges, and experiences.

Mary of Nazareth is the best model for this type of reflecting on God's word: "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). To "ponder" suggests that the word has enough gravity to shape and expand the understanding of the heart. The word of God can form our hearts when we allow it to rest within us and gradually mold our desires, insights, and judgments.

PRAYING

After listening carefully and reflectively to God's word in Scripture, we naturally reach a point in which we want to respond. Prayer is our heartfelt response to God's word. In this way, *lectio divina* becomes fundamentally a dialogue with God: we listen to God, then we respond to God in prayer.

Our prayerful response to God flows directly from our reading, understanding, and reflecting. In this way our prayer is enriched through the vocabulary, images, and sentiments of the biblical text as it is joined with the thoughts, needs, and desires arising within us. As a grace-filled and Spirit-led response to God, our prayer becomes increasingly personal and intimate.

After responding to God with word-filled prayer, words gradually become less helpful and unnecessary. We are then often led by God into a wordless silence, an effortless resting in God's presence. This type of prayer is traditionally called contemplation. We simply end our prayer by receiving and accepting the transforming embrace of the One who has led us to the quiet moment.

ACTING

Every biblical passage offers a call or challenge to those who listen to its sacred words. After prayerfully listening to God through a passage of Scripture, we should be impacted in a way that makes a difference in

the way we live. In addition to drawing us inward to reflection and prayer, the word of God impels us outward to those people and situations in need of God's light and compassionate presence. By acting on Scripture we become, as James says, "doers of the word, and not merely hearers" (James 1:22).

These active changes in our lives are the fruit of *lectio divina*. Occasionally the changes are remarkable; more often they are subtle. We gradually become aware that the fruit of studying the Bible is the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). When we begin to notice this fruit in the way we live each day, we will know that the word of God is working within us. We become more effective members of the body of Christ in the world and witnesses to God's kingdom.

Personal Use of Lectio Divina Bible Study

- Try to make this practice a regular part of your life. Study one lesson each day, or as often as you can according to the circumstances of your life.
- Find a regular time during the day that can become a pattern for you. Choose a quiet and comfortable place where you will be undisturbed.
- Make your time for study a sacred time. Set it apart by calling on the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- Study slowly and carefully. Don't hesitate to mark up this book with notes, highlights, underlining, circles, or whatever will help you pay attention and remember the text and commentary.
- Follow the movements of lectio divina outlined in each lesson. Realize that this is only a tentative guide for the more important movements of God's Spirit within you.
- Write out your responses as suggested in the lesson. The act of writing will help you clarify your thoughts, deepen your understanding, and bring new insights.
- Approach your study with expectancy, trusting that God will indeed work deeply within you through his word.
- Decide to be accountable to at least one other person for your regular practice of lectio divina. Tell a friend, spouse, spiritual director, or pastor about your experience in order to receive encouragement and affirmation.

Lectio Divina Bible Study for Communities of Faith

Churches and other faith communities may choose to adopt Lectio Divina Bible Study and support its use in a variety of ways. Since this study is ideally suited both for personal use by individuals and for group use, communities are able to respect the many ways people desire to make this Bible study a personal priority. By encouraging an array of options for participation, communities will be able to encourage this form of ongoing faith formation by many people in the community.

OFFERING A VARIETY OF OPTIONS TO ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION ■

- Facilitate the formation of small groups that meet regularly at church facilities or in homes. These groups may meet at different times throughout the week to offer convenient options for people in different circumstances.
- Provide groups for people with similar connections: young adults, retired seniors, parents with young children, etc. These groupings may encourage a deeper level of personal reflection among members.
- Offer this study to people who want to participate alone. Respect the fact that many don't have the time or desire to join a group. Include these people in the invitation and prayerful encouragement of the whole community.
- Consider other creative ways of establishing communities for study. Support the establishment of online communities or internet social networks for this study. Participants might want to commit

themselves to sending a text message or email to the group offering their insights after reflecting on each lesson.

- Personally invite people to participate, encourage them through pastoral leadership, offer a public sign-up after the Sunday liturgy, and make the study a priority within the faith community.

FORMING SMALL GROUPS FOR WEEKLY SESSIONS ■

The personal use of Lectio Divina Bible Study may be integrated into a process of faith formation for small groups. Through the thoughts, reflections, prayers, and experiences of the other members of the group, each individual comes to understand the lessons more profoundly. By sharing wisdom and experience in a faith-filled group of people, individuals enrich the lives of one another.

Small groups are best formed when people are encouraged and supported by a church's pastoral leadership and personally welcomed into these small communities. Personally directed invitations are most effective for convincing people to add another activity to their busy lives. Groups composed of no more than a dozen people are best for this experience. It is preferable to give people with various needs a variety of days and times from which to choose.

The group process should never take the place of one's own individual study and reflection. Rather, a weekly communal practice is an ideal extension and continuation of personal, daily listening, understanding, reflecting, praying, and acting. As a member of a group, each person takes responsibility for studying the material for six days on their own and meeting with the group once a week for six weeks.

GROUP DISCUSSION IN SIX SESSIONS ■

- Begin each group session with hospitality and welcome. Name tags are helpful if group members don't know one another. Offer

any announcements or instructions before entering the spirit of focused discussion and listening to others.

- The first group session is based on the material of [section I](#), the Overview. Group members read each section and discuss the questions that follow. The last section of the Overview offers group members an experience of the five movements: listening, understanding, reflecting, praying, and acting. Simply follow each step as a group.
- The group sessions for the following weeks are based on the material of [sections II](#) through [VI](#) that individuals will have completed during the week.
- After [sections II](#) through [VI](#), you will find a “Group Session Guide” for discussing the six lessons prepared individually during the week. Don’t linger too long on any single question, so that the full range of questions are covered from all six lessons.
- An alternate way of spending the group time is to ask the following question for each of the six lessons: “What is most significant for you from this lesson?” Members may discuss an insight from the Scripture or commentary, their response from one of the reflections, or the prayer or action that was particularly helpful or provocative.
- Conclude the session with a form of prayer that is agreed upon by the group. Suggest that members first offer prayers of thanksgiving aloud to God for the insights and particular ways they were moved by the lessons of the week. This may be followed by prayers of petition in which members may pray for their own needs and those of others as well as for the grace to act upon any decisions or resolutions that the lessons have moved them to make.
- Before departing each week, encourage group members to complete each of the next six lessons during the week ahead.
- At the end of the final session, members may want to celebrate their completion in some way and then decide to work together on

another Lectio Divina Bible Study or another type of study for faith formation.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARTICIPATING IN THE GROUP ■

- Always try to complete your individual study of each lesson before the group meeting. This will give you more to contribute to the group. Don't worry if you have not completed each lesson. Come anyway and learn from others.
- The spirit of the group session should be that of a conversation, with each member sharing their learning and offering a supportive ear to one another.
- When participating in the group, you should freely offer thoughts, insights, and feelings about your learning. Avoid distractions by focusing on the movements of each lesson.
- When sharing the group time, offer everyone in the group an opportunity to share their insights. When discussing personal thoughts, try to use "I" language and be cautious about giving advice to others.
- Listen attentively to the other members of the group so as to learn from their insights. Encourage others by following up on comments with supportive statements.
- Avoid dispute, debate, and doctrinaire hairsplitting. Opposition, division, and self-assertion destroy the supportive bond of the group.
- When disagreements arise, it is often wise to "agree to disagree." An inflexible, pedantic attitude blocks the way to a vital and fulfilling understanding of the lesson.
- It is usually helpful to have someone guide the process of the group. This facilitator directs the discussion, helping the group keep the discussion on time and on track. The facilitator need not

be an expert, but simply a person with the human skills necessary to guide a group. This role may be rotated among members of the group, if desired.

Section I

Overview of *Learning to Pray in Scripture*

Prayer is the human reach toward the Absolute, the holy mystery of God. It is communication — through thought, word, or gesture — with the Source and Creator of all. Forms of this human address to God are found throughout the literature of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. Usually we think of the Bible as God's word to us, but a significant part of the Bible is words spoken to God. All of the great characters of Scripture prayed to God, each of them showing us some distinctive way of addressing God. So we can understand the Bible not just as God's revelation to humankind, but as the record of communication between God and his people.

It was the eastern Father of the church, St. John Damascene, who gave us the often-quoted classic definition, "Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God" (*De fide orth.* 3,24: PG 94, 1089C). The movement of the mind and heart to God indicates that prayer involves our intellect as well as our will. In biblical language, the "heart" of a person is that hidden center where we encounter God in a relationship of love and devotion; it is the core of our inner life, the source of our deepest motivations, decisions, memories, and desires. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux describes her experience of prayer: "For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy" (*Manuscripts*

autobiographiques, C 25r). We respond to trials with prayers of petition or intercession, for ourselves and for others; and to joys with prayers of adoration, praise, and thanksgiving.

Human beings have a natural inclination toward the divine, an inborn desire to reach out to God. Since primeval times, humans have sought to encounter higher powers with worship and sacrifice. And human cultures through the ages have characteristically practiced prayer. This most rudimentary form of prayer is demonstrated by the enslaved Hebrews at the beginning of Exodus: “The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God” (Exod 2:23). The hard-pressed slaves went beyond their silent seething and gave voice to their desperation. But before God had revealed himself to these Israelites, their cry was not addressed to any higher power in particular; rather, their prayer was a raw articulation aimed at an open sky, reaching out to whomever may be “beyond” and capable of listening. Yet, remarkably, “God heard their groaning.” Their risky but hopeful prayer was heard and “God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them” (2:24–25).

Though it seems from this passage of Exodus that prayer consists of a human appeal followed by God’s response, the history of salvation demonstrates that the opposite is true. In prayer, God’s initiative always comes first. Our own initial step at giving voice to our heart is always a response. Divine grace is at work within us, calling every person to that mysterious encounter called prayer, giving all people the inclination and desire to reach out to God. In this way, prayer grows out of a person’s relationship with God, where God is both the ultimate source of prayer and also the object of prayer.

In essence, prayer is simply talking to God, expressing the relationship with God to which he has called us. In the Old Testament this relationship is exemplified by Moses, to whom God spoke “as one speaks to a friend” (Exod 33:11). Yet, in the New Testament, Jesus invites all people into friendship with himself. He was called the “friend of sinners,” and the night before his death, he acknowledged his disciples as “friends” (John 15:15). Even more, he taught us that we

are God's children, calling us into the intimacy of family life with God. While Jesus calls us his friends, he invites us to call God "Father." It was for this reason that we were made: to know God, to be with him, to enjoy friendship with him, to share in the community of love that is the Trinity. Prayer is an expression of the very heart of God's plan of salvation: to know us and to be known by us. Prayer, then, is conversation with God. But about what do we speak with God? About himself, about ourselves: joys, sorrows, successes, failures, noble ambitions, daily worries. When we pray, we get to know God, and in getting to know our God, we get to know ourselves, the meaning of our existence, and the purpose of our lives.

- What is my definition of prayer? In what ways does it describe my experience of prayer?
- Why is prayer characteristic of all human cultures? What more does the Bible reveal about God's desire to communicate with us?

Forms of Prayer in the Bible and for Today ■

The Scriptures are filled with prayers from beginning to end. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes a variety prayer forms found in Scripture: prayers of blessing and worship, petition, intercession, thanksgiving, and praise (CCC 2626–2643). The Holy Spirit, who inspired Scripture, continues to guide the church in new expressions of these basic biblical forms.

- **Prayer of Blessing and Adoration.** A blessing invokes the power and favor of God for our safety and well-being: "May the LORD, maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion" (Ps 134:3). The

prayer of blessing is also our response to God's gifts. Because God blesses, our heart can in return bless God, the source of every blessing: "Bless the LORD, O my soul" (Ps 104:1). The prayer of adoration is marked by humility before God, acknowledging that God is the Creator and we are his creatures: "O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker" (Ps 95:6).

- **Prayer of Petition.** Prayers of supplication acknowledge our weaknesses and express our deep need for God. Our first request for God's help should be asking forgiveness: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (Ps 51:1–2). This humility and trust in God's mercy brings us back into communion with God where we can confidently beseech God in our needs. There is a hierarchy in these petitions: we pray first for the kingdom of God, then for what is necessary to welcome it and cooperate with its coming. As Jesus taught, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt 6:33). Paul demonstrates how we collaborate with the mission of Christ through his church by praying for one another (Eph 1:17–19; Phil 1:9–11). Throughout the Bible, people are urged to pray, convinced that God hears and answers prayers. For this reason, we pray with the expectation that God will answer our prayers.
- **Prayer of Intercession.** By intercession, we invoke God's help for the needs of others. Throughout the Scriptures, we find people being requested to pray for others in need. Some of the great leaders of God's people are shown to be great intercessors for their people. In the age of the church, Christian intercession participates in Christ's intercession with the Father, as an expression of the communion of saints. Paul was not only a great intercessor for the churches, but he repeatedly asked his friends to pray for him (Eph 6:19; Col 4:3). The Christian prayer of intercession recognizes no boundaries: for kings and all in high positions, for enemies and persecutors, for the salvation of those who reject the gospel, and for all people.

- **Prayer of Thanksgiving.** Thanksgiving names the gifts of God and expresses gratitude for God's acts of love, grace, and power. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel thanked God in regular worship and in annual festivals for his great acts of salvation and for the gifts of land and its regular harvests. A number of the Psalms are simply grateful recitals of the past acts of God on behalf of his people. The words that echo throughout the Psalter are "O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever" (Ps 136:1). The gospels demonstrate the gratitude of Jesus to his Father and highlight his practice of partaking in daily food with thanksgiving (Matt 15:36). Paul's letters often begin and end with thanksgiving, and he urges his communities to have a thankful spirit: "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus to you" (1 Thess 5:18).
- **Prayer of Praise.** In the prayer of praise, or doxology, we speak of God and glorify God for who he is in his very nature, not just for what he offers to us. Genuine praise is totally God-centered, and thus lifts us out of our natural self-centeredness. Often the prayers of the Bible call God's people to give him praise: "Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts" (Ps 96:7-8). Many prayers are pure praise, and the conclusion of the book of Psalms invites praise with all the instruments of music and all living things: "Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!" (Ps 150:6). Though much of Israel's worship is focused on the temple, the Scriptures demonstrate that every time and place, even the most unlikely, is the right time and place to praise God, as we see Paul and Silas praising God in prison (Acts 16:25). "From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is to be praised" (Ps 113:3).
- Which type of prayer seems to mark the life of Jesus most frequently in the gospels? What can I learn from his example of prayer?

- Which of these many forms of prayer do I find myself praying most often? Which form would I like to learn to pray more?

Dispositions to Cultivate for Prayer ■

Prayer is both a gift of God's grace and a resolute response on our part. It requires that we develop within ourselves a receptivity to God's gift and also the necessary virtues that enable prayer to flourish. If we do not want prayer to be simply an intermittent emotional response, we must work at prayer by cultivating the dispositions that enable the gift of prayer to develop within us.

Prayer is not a stratagem for occasional use, a refuge to resort to now and then. It is rather like an established residence for the innermost self. All things have a home: the bird has a nest, the fox has a hole, the bee has a hive. A soul without prayer is a soul without a home. (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays* [Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997, p. 258])

Here are some of the vital dispositions to nurture within ourselves so that prayer may become a home for our souls:

- **Repentance.** Though we are made in God's image to share in divine life, we are alienated from God and wounded by the effects of sin. Because of our fallen nature, we are self-centered and our hearts are not oriented to God. In order to pray, we need a Copernican revolution in our lives, a turning from seeing self as the center of life to seeing God as the center. This repentance is a prerequisite for genuine prayer. St. Augustine expressed this need for the reorientation of our heart in his own prayer: "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you" (*The Confessions*, Book 1, [chapter 1](#)).

In repentance we find our true selves and rediscover the origin and goal of our being. The prophets told the people that prayer will go unanswered if there is no acknowledgment of sin and turning from it: “See, the LORD’S hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear” (Isa 59:1–2).

- **Humility.** If repentance involves the acknowledgment of our sinfulness beside God’s holiness, humility involves the acknowledgment of our smallness beside God’s greatness. A realistic assessment of our situation in the universe is the admission that we are creatures of God, utterly dependent on him. There can be no hypocrisy or pretense in a true relationship with God, and for this reason, humility is the indispensable foundation for prayer.

All the biblical heroes of Israel, at their best moments, humbled themselves before God and prayed. Abraham, praying for God’s mercy on Sodom and Gomorrah, acknowledged that he was but “dust and ashes” before God (Gen 18:27). Israel’s wisdom implores God’s people not to be rash when approaching God in prayer or to be quick to speak for “God is in heaven, and you are on earth; so let your words be few” (Eccles 5:2). Yet, for those who acknowledge their need for God, “the prayer of the humble pierces the clouds” (Sir 35:21).

Jesus himself warns about the temptation to pride when prayer is offered in public, rebuking those who pray publicly so as to receive the commendation of others. When teaching his disciple to live in him as branches on a vine, he said, “Apart from me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Prayer cannot be effective because of our words are eloquent or many, but only when our hearts are lowly and united to the heart of Christ.

- **Confident Trust.** Our prayer is rooted in faith, and our faith is rooted in our relationship with God. Faith means trusting in God as a wise and loving Father. The knowledge of what God has done in

the past for those who have trusted him is the basis on which we should be able to trust him. "Trust in the LORD forever," Isaiah urges, "for in the LORD GOD you have an everlasting rock" (Isa 26:4). Jesus commends to us the trust of a little child as the disposition he looks for in us. To the Canaanite woman who pleads for her daughter, Jesus says, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish" (Matt 15:28). He promises his disciples, "Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive" (Matt 21:22).

Hebrews 11 is full of examples of those who approached God in faith and lived their lives in confident trust. Our appreciation of the greatness and love of God and the assurance of his will and purpose for us enables faith to replace anxiety. Faith rather than doubt becomes the natural attitude we show toward our powerful and merciful God. With this confidence comes patience, because trust involves the willingness to let God answer our prayers in his own time and his own way. The psalms often urge us to "wait for the Lord," and Lamentations assure us that "the LORD is good to those who wait for him" (Lam 3:25).

When we feel dryness in our attempts at prayer, when our heart seems separated from God, we must cling faithfully to Jesus in his agony, on the cross, and in the tomb. When our petitions and intercession seems fruitless, we must trust that Jesus himself is praying in us and with us. He never ceases interceding for us with the Father (Heb 7:25).

- **Perseverance.** Vigilance and persistence belong together in the life of Christian discipleship and in the life of prayer. We must have the will, the steadfast intention, the quiet determination to live according to the way of God as best we understand it. In practice this means making a regular habit of prayer. Our communication with God cannot be an easygoing or sporadic request, but must be a deep and strong search for God. As God says in the words of his prophet, "When you call upon me, and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me

with all your heart” (Jer 29:12–13). Jesus’ insistence that his disciples should continually “ask,” “seek,” and “knock” stresses this necessity of persistence in prayer (Matt 7:7).

Yet, when we set ourselves to pray, a host of distractions and fleeting attachments can divert our efforts if we are not vigilant. Jesus urges his disciples to “keep awake and pray” during the time of trial (Mark 14:38). Paul insists: “Keep alert and always persevere in supplication” (Eph 6:18). If we are alert and vigilant, we will keep our hope set on God with constancy and determination.

Finally, Paul urges Christians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17); meaning, of course, not that we should do nothing but pray, but that we should relate prayer to every activity of life and constantly acknowledge God. Just as some of the problems of life are solved not by thinking them out, but by living them out, so we learn to pray, and overcome its difficulties, by persisting in prayer.

- **Sincere Integrity.** Nothing can be hidden from God who sees and knows all about us; therefore, we can be free to be completely transparent before God, speaking with honesty and frankness about the situations we face. Moses spoke candidly with God about the reasons he thought he should not lead the Israelites, and later he bluntly expressed his impatience with them. Jeremiah lamented his prophetic calling and complained to God about the struggles and rejection he faced.

Such integrity in prayer is appreciated in the Bible, though the one who speaks with such honesty to God must be prepared for an honest answer. We can too easily mistake our own desires for what God wants to give us, distorting prayer by asking God to bless our self-chosen ways. Through his prophet God tells us what he desires: humble obedience to his laws, working against injustice and oppression, caring for the hungry and needy. When we live in this way, God says, “Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am” (Isa 58:9).

Those who pray best, Jesus teaches, are those who have their heart in the right place: the merciful, the pure in heart, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. As James teaches, “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). Genuine prayer and obedient action belong together, as both involve the seeking of the will of God, what he desires us to do. John teaches, “We receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him” (1 John 3:22). This does not mean that we earn the answer to our prayers or that our obedience merits God’s response. But Christian life and prayer belong intimately together; both seek to please God and respond to his will for our lives and in the lives of others.

- Which of these dispositions do I wish to cultivate within myself so that prayer may become a home for my soul?
- What would I like to understand better about prayer in the course of this study?

“To You, O LORD, I Lift Up My Soul” ■

In this first session of lectio divina, we choose a prayer from the psalms of Israel. Notice how the psalm expresses the understanding of prayer we have studied so far. Through this psalm, we will allow the ancient art of lectio divina to guide us as we listen, understand, reflect, pray, and act.

LISTENING

Prepare yourself to encounter God's word by focusing your attention and asking God's Spirit to guide you. Listen as the ancient psalmist prays to God.

Psalm 25

- ¹To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
²O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
³Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
⁴Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.
⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.
⁶Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
⁷Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

UNDERSTANDING

After reading this prayer of Scripture, continue exploring the form and dispositions exemplified in this prayer.

The opening line of the psalm is a wonderful description of prayer: "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul." In ancient Israel, lifting up one's hands, a gesture of entreaty and receptivity, was the most common gesture used in prayer. Lifting up the soul to God expresses the placing of one's life in hands outstretched to God, a way of saying that one's life depends completely on the help of God. The psalmist places his life before God in prayer, completely open and ready for what God desires.

In parallel to the opening line, the second line states, “O my God, in you I trust.” The life lifted up to God must trust confidently and completely in God. The psalmist’s trust in God’s loving care enables faith to overcome doubt and anxiety. With this confidence comes the ability to wait for God, “for you I wait all day long” (v. 5), to let God answer prayers in his own time and his own way.

As the psalmist asserts his confident trust in God, he asks to be taught by God: “Make me know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths” (v. 4). The knowledge the psalmist seeks is not gained through human teachers, information, and reason. This understanding can come only from God, because what this instruction does for human life only God can do. The life of prayer must always include petitions that God let us know his ways, teach us his paths, lead us in his truth.

The knowledge of what God has done in the past for those who have trusted him is the basis on which the psalmist is able to trust. Though the prayer is offered by an individual to God, it is rooted in God’s covenant with his people. It is God’s covenant fidelity, God’s “mercy” and “steadfast love,” which he has shown “from of old,” that enables the psalmist to pray in a spirit of repentance, humility, and trust (vv. 6–7). What God requires of us, he has already given to us.

REFLECTING

Consider what you are learning from the psalm, and consider what you can learn for your own growth in prayer.

- In what ways do lifted hands express the essence of prayer, a soul lifted up to God?

- What are some of the dispositions this psalmist seems to have cultivated for prayer?

PRAYING

Continue voicing your own prayer to God, confident that God knows your needs and listens to your prayers.

- Lord my God, I lift up my soul and entrust myself to you. Do not recall the sins of my past, but help me remember your constant and steadfast love. As I learn to pray from Scripture, send me your Spirit to teach me and guide me in your path.

In silent prayer, lift your heart in praise to God for the mercy and goodness he has shown to you.

ACTING

Take away from this study one thought or idea that you wish to carry with you in your daily life.

- Which line from this psalm would you like to memorize to be repeated throughout your week? Remember to pray these words several times each day.

Section II

Prayer in the Lives of Israel's Heroes

Prayer seems to be a universal human instinct — with all sorts of prayers being offered by all sorts of people to all sorts of gods from time immemorial. But the Old Testament presents prayer as the expression of covenant, the unique relationship of a chosen people with the one God of all people. The prayer of ancient Israel is not just humanity's effort to reach God from below by crying out to him. Rather, it is a response to God's having made himself known. Prayer for the heroes of ancient Israel means discourse with the one Lord whose presence they have experienced as a people.

A unique characteristic of the prayers in ancient Israel is their personal nature. Since God has revealed his name and his personality to his people, they can address God personally. Biblical prayer is not just ritual spells and incantational magic; rather it resembles interpersonal communication. Nothing happens automatically in biblical prayer; God is free and his people are free, to act or not act, to respond or not to respond. Through prayer, the relationship continues and deepens between God and his people.

The prayers that we find in the Old Testament are the response of God's people to the God they have come to know as the Creator and the Redeemer. They praise and thank God as the source of all that exists and the liberator who frees his people from bondage. The

prayers of each individual in some way flow from this primary understanding of God as the Creator and Redeemer, the God of life and freedom. God bestows these gifts on those who turn to him and place their trust in him.

The prayers of ancient Israel are found in the midst of narrative texts. Since the story of Israel is essentially the account of the people's interaction with God, the narrative must include prayer. So prayer, as Israel's response to God, is an integral part of its national story and hence central to the development of the Scriptures. A study of Old Testament prayers, then, looks at patterns of speech, vocabulary, and terms of address, in order to understand the interaction of God and his people. Yet, despite the similarity and regularity of these prayers, each one is unique. Studying these prayers, we see clearly that each one is the prayer of a particular person in a particular time and place. Each prayer flows from the unique circumstances, challenges, insights, and experiences of the one offering the prayer to God.

In this section, we will study the prayers of Abraham, Moses, Hannah, David, Solomon, and Nehemiah. Understanding these prayers shows us how each flows out of the unique relationship of these heroes of Israel with God. Yet, each of these prayers was included by the author of these Hebrew Scriptures to show the listeners and readers of these texts how they too can be in relationship with God. Each prayer highlights a particular dimension of communication with God. Each demonstrates that just as God was attentive, available, faithful, and generous in the past, God continues to respond in similar ways to every person in every age. We too can praise, thank, and petition the God we discover in the Bible, for God continues to offer life and freedom for all who call on his name. As biblical story, these prayers are the prayers of Israel's heroes; as inspired Scripture, these are our prayers, the prayers of Israel and the prayers of the church.

- In what ways are the prayers of ancient Israel different from the generic and instinctual prayers of other ancient cultures?

- In what sense are all the prayers of the Old Testament similar? In what ways are they each unique and different from one another?
- In what ways might it be helpful for contemporary readers to study these ancient prayers of Israel's heroes?



LESSON 1

Abraham's Intercessory Prayer for Sodom

LISTENING

In establishing the covenant, God had promised to make Abraham a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. This bold prayer of intercession teaches us what it means to pray humbly but confidently in the context of a covenantal relationship with God. We have the same opportunity to intercede before God for the people of the world.

Genesis 18:16–33

¹⁶Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. ¹⁷The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after

him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” ²⁰Then the LORD said, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.”

²²So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. ²³Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” ²⁶And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” ²⁷Abraham answered, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. ²⁸Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?” And he said, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.” ²⁹Again he spoke to him, “Suppose forty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of forty I will not do it.” ³⁰Then he said, “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.” He answered, “I will not do it, if I find thirty there.” ³¹He said, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.” ³²Then he said, “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.” ³³And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

UNDERSTANDING

Continue seeking to understand this text and its significance through the tradition of Israel and the wisdom of the church. Highlight or underline the phrases that seem most significant to you.

Abraham's previous conversations with God had concerned his own family and personal welfare. This dialogue, however, involves concern for the welfare of others, even total strangers. As the father of all believers, Abraham exemplifies the just and compassionate person, qualities that God desires Abraham to teach his descendants (vv. 18–19). Those qualities of Abraham are, in a sense, put to the test here. Since "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him," Abraham must be involved in the destiny of humanity at large. He stores within himself those qualities of justice and mercy, the qualities that constitute "the way of the LORD."

Because God has made Abraham his partner in covenant, he decides to speak with Abraham concerning the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. In doing this God highlights Abraham's role as the bearer of God's promises in relationship to other nations. Abraham's intimate relationship with God indicates that God desires his people to be engaged with him. And God wants them to intercede for other people, especially those under the threat of judgment. The righteousness of Abraham stands in sharp contrast to those who do wickedness. God exclaims: "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin!" (v. 20). An "outcry" in the Bible is a plea by those suffering from oppression, a cry to heaven with hope that God will rescue them. It seems that the sin of these cities is social corruption and an arrogant disregard for the agonizing plea of the victims (Ezek 16:49). God and his messengers are going to Sodom to see if the volume of the outcry corresponds with the reality of the oppression (v. 21).

God's careful decision to reveal the matter to Abraham invites a response. Later revelation in Israel's history indicates that God longs for faithful people who will plead the cause of those who are sinful, displaced, or under the threat of judgment. Furthermore, God demonstrates an openness to be moved by intercessory prayer. God

desires to work with his people in covenant to achieve his designs. So, with humble boldness, Abraham approaches God and enters into an audacious dialogue as he pleads for Sodom.

Abraham asks, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” (v. 23). Will the righteous and the wicked be treated the same? Will the righteous die because of the wicked, or is there a possibility that the wicked might be saved because of the righteous? Thinking that God must be a harsh and calculating judge like the gods of the surrounding nations, Abraham prepares to plead and bargain with God. Abraham first chooses the number fifty as his bartering figure: save the city on behalf of fifty righteous people (v. 24). He purposely chose a low number, thinking that in the typical haggling style of the ancient Middle East, God would choose a much higher number, and then they would eventually meet somewhere in the middle. But Abraham’s strategy is undone by God’s immediate acceptance of his offer. Lowering the offer to forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, and finally ten, Abraham discovers that God is far more merciful than he had imagined.

Although Sodom is destroyed, apparently because not even ten righteous people could be found there, God does save Abraham’s nephew Lot and his family. Through his intercessory prayer, Abraham learned the way of the Lord — the way of justice and mercy, of righteousness and compassion — that characterizes God’s actions among his creatures. God does not judge by the usual moralism, in which people simply receive their due. God is not a scorekeeper, always ready to pounce and punish; rather, God is far more ready to forgive and to celebrate the goodness of a few. God wants his people to boldly appeal to him, to plead for others who are hurting or in sin. When God is approached with genuine concern and pure motives, he is moved by intercessory prayer.

REFLECTING

Consider the prayer of Abraham in the context of your own relationship with God. Let it challenge your assumptions about God and his ways in the world.

- The Jewish Talmud states: “Whoever is merciful to his fellow beings is without doubt of the children of our father Abraham; whoever is unmerciful to his fellow beings certainly cannot be of the children of Abraham our father” (Betsah 32b). What does Abraham’s intercessory prayer and the dialogue between Abraham and God tell me about the kind of prayer God desires?
- Much of our heartfelt prayer anguishes over the reality that the good suffer with the wicked and often at the hands of the wicked. Genuine prayer grapples with the purposes of God and the tensions between God’s justice and mercy. How does Abraham’s experience challenge me to question my routine ways of thinking about God and responding to God?
- As Abraham discovers the depths of God’s mercy, he moves from fifty to ten righteous people, but then the conversation abruptly stops. We want to keep going. What about five? Three? The questions of Abraham are left open until God redeems a sinful world through the righteousness of One. How does God finally answer the questions of Abraham (1 Peter 3:18)?

The prayer of Abraham convinces us that the Bible is not monologue but dialogue. God's revelation includes the human response of faith and prayer. Continue the prayer of Abraham by pleading with God for the sake of the world.

- Lord our God, you are the Judge of all the earth and you do what is right. Yet, you are also a God of merciful love for all who look to you. Teach me how to be an intercessor for your people near and far.

Continue praying in intercession for our sinful and suffering world.

ACTING

Realizing that God's word and our response in prayer changes us, consider the ways God is calling you to act on the word you have heard.

- Abraham's courageous intercession for the people of Sodom teaches me not to be a passive spectator in the face of the world's challenges but to intercede with active compassion. In what ways could I intercede for other people before God?



LESSON 2

Moses' Prayer for the Forgiveness of God's People

LISTENING

As mediator between God and the Hebrew people, Moses intercedes for the people and presents his bold prayer to God. Listen as Moses implores God on behalf of the people and receives pardon from God.

Numbers 14:10-23

¹⁰Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites. ¹¹And the LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? ¹²I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they."

¹³But Moses said to the LORD, “Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for in your might you brought up this people from among them, ¹⁴and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O LORD, are in the midst of this people; for you, O LORD, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go in front of them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. ¹⁵Now if you kill this people all at one time, then the nations who have heard about you will say, ¹⁶‘It is because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them that he has slaughtered them in the wilderness.’ ¹⁷And now, therefore, let the power of the LORD be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying,

¹⁸“The LORD is slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love,
forgiving iniquity and transgression,
but by no means clearing the guilty,
visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
to the third and the fourth generation.’

¹⁹Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now.”

²⁰Then the LORD said, “I do forgive, just as you have asked;
²¹nevertheless — as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD — ²²none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, ²³shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it.”

UNDERSTANDING

Explore the meaning and full significance of this dialogue between God and Moses. Mark up the text as you make discoveries and find new insights.

The Torah of Israel presents Moses as the great mediator. He was first called to mediate between God and the Egyptian Pharaoh in the process of liberating the Hebrew people from slavery. After the escape of God's people into the wilderness, Moses mediated between God and the people in their arduous journey to the promised land. Along the way, the Israelites frequently grumbled against Moses and looked back on their slavery with fondness. They forgot all the wondrous signs God had worked among them. Many times Moses had to intervene vigorously with God on behalf of the wayward people. Now they want to escape the wilderness, revoke the exodus, choose a new leader, and return to Egyptian slavery.

Israel's complaining has provoked God to anger, and God addresses his frustration with Moses. The "tent of meeting" is the place of intimate dialogue between God and Moses, the place where "the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Exod 33:11). God is now exasperated with the people's complaining and rebellion: "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?" (v. 11). With his patience exhausted, God threatens to strike his recalcitrant people with a pestilence and disinherit them. God threatens to reverse the exodus. Then God will raise up a new people from Moses and make of them a great nation (v. 12).

In the face of this peril, Moses addresses God in one of the great prayers of the Bible. First, he appeals to God's reputation among the other peoples of the earth (vv. 13–16). Word has spread among the nations about the exodus and God's presence with the Hebrew people. If the Egyptians hear about the destruction of the Israelites, they will perceive that God is a failure. And Pharaoh will have the final victory. Worse yet, the Egyptians will tell the inhabitants of Canaan and the other nations who have heard of God's commitment to the Israelites. They will conclude that God's power is unreliable. They will believe that

he lacks the resolve to follow through on his promises. They presume that God is like the gods of the other nations, operating only in terms of controlling power. Little do these other nations realize that God works among his people in terms of a covenant, requiring and expecting their cooperation and responsiveness. Moses then appeals to God's own self-description. He prays back to God the words God proclaimed before him at Mount Sinai after the people broke the covenant by worshipping the golden calf (v. 18; Exod 34:6–7). God is slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and forgiving of his people's sins. Moses reminds God of who God has resolved to be, and he summons God back to his own self-description, his own true self. It is characteristic of God's relationship with Moses that God welcomes the pleas of the one to whom he speaks face to face. It is as though God awaits a better idea, better than disastrous anger. Moses' better idea, offered in bold but humble prayer, proposes that God exhibit once again the constructive power of fidelity and the great positive power of forgiveness (v. 19).

Moses does not imply in any way that God's people deserve forgiveness or that God is obliged to offer them pardon. Moses appeals only to God's generous and gracious love. He relies on God's core identity that binds the Israelites to God in spite of all their transgressions and rejections. God's response, then, is generous: "I do forgive, just as you have asked" (v. 20). However, despite pardon, the temporal effects of sin remain. The sins of one generation affect that of three or four other generations. For this reason, God declares that the faithless generation, who witnessed God's signs in the exodus from Egypt and in the wilderness, will not complete the journey to the land of promise (vv. 22–23).

While prayer does not eliminate the consequences of human sin, it does bind people to the faithful love of God. Through the prayer of Moses, God pardoned his people of their sin and renewed his faithful covenant with them. Because Moses took the initiative in prayer and mediated between God and his people, God responded to his intercession with merciful forgiveness and renewed commitment.

REFLECTING

Spend some time considering the implications of this biblical text for your understanding of God's relationship with his people, then write out your responses to these questions.

- In plotting to reject Moses, God's chosen leader, and return to Egypt, the people are rejecting God's plan for them and the covenant he established with them. Why is God depicted in this account expressing the human emotions of anger and exasperation?
- In his prayerful plea that God not abandon his people, Moses appeals to God's reputation before the peoples of the earth, God's promises to Israel, and the consistent character of his steadfast love. Which part of Moses' prayer might have been most effective in the presence of God? What words do I use to magnify God and praise his glory?
- Consider the self-description of God in Exodus 34:6–7. In what way does this revelation include both the justice and the mercy of God? In what sense are God's forgiveness and his punishment shown to be aspects of God's "steadfast love for the thousandth generation"?

PRAYING

Having been taught by Moses how to pray, continue his prayer by responding to God with your own prayer.

- Lord, you are merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Enrich my prayer with the prayer of Moses and forgive my sins and iniquities. Show me how to be a mediator for your people and to trust in your desire to always listen to my prayer.

Continue praying with trust and confidence in God who has called you to this moment. When words no longer seem necessary, just rest in the presence of our faithful God.

ACTING

Consider how you might imitate the trusting confidence of Moses in your intercessory prayer for others.

- In what ways might Moses be a model for my prayer? How can I pray like Moses today?



LESSON 3

Hannah's Prayer of Praise to God

LISTENING

This prayer of praise expresses Hannah's joy and gratitude to God for the gift of her son, Samuel. She prays about the new future God has given to his people through the birth of her child. Listen to her prayer with the ear of your heart.

1 Samuel 2:1-10

¹Hannah prayed and said,
"My heart exults in the LORD;
my strength is exalted in my God.
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in my victory.

²"There is no Holy One like the LORD,

no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.

³Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the LORD is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.

⁴The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.

⁵Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.

The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.

⁶The LORD kills and brings to life;
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

⁷The LORD makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.

⁸He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor.

For the pillars of the earth are the LORD'S,
and on them he has set the world.

⁹"He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;
for not by might does one prevail.

¹⁰The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered;
the Most High will thunder in heaven.

The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;
he will give strength to his king,
and exalt the power of his anointed."

UNDERSTANDING

Continue searching for the fuller implications of Hannah's prayer in the context of Israel's history and God's saving plan.

The story of Hannah begins the two books of Samuel and the two books of Kings, the national history of Israel. This history moves from the oppressed and powerless people seen at the end of the book of Judges and culminates in the royal kingdom of David and the splendor of Solomon's reign. This royal story begins where the saving history of God's people often begins, with a barren mother who has no son and thus a people who have no future. The books begin as Hannah goes to the temple at Shiloh. There she pours out her soul in grief and anguish before God. She prays not in passive resignation, but she implores the Lord for a son. Because of her prayerful petitions, Hannah conceives and gives birth to a son, whom she names Samuel. When the child is weaned, Hannah brings the child to the temple and dedicates him to God while chanting the beautiful words of this joyful prayer.

When God answers Israel's petitions and our requests, those prayers turn to praise and thanksgiving. Astonished by God's gifts, his people respond with joyful exuberance. The writer of the books of Samuel took a liturgical piece celebrating Israel's king and used it to express the praise of Hannah and Israel's celebration at the birth of Samuel, the one who would establish the monarchy. Hannah embodies the people of God and gives voice to their grateful delight. Her own movement from grief to joy expresses the greater movement that God is achieving through his plan for Israel.

In prayer, Hannah expresses her own emotional experiences: "My heart exults," "my strength is exalted," and every part of her being rejoices. Yet, she recognizes that her experience is a response to what "the LORD" has done in bringing deliverance and victory for his people (v. 1). God is the "Holy One," there is none like him; God is the "Rock," a source of dependability and strength beyond compare (v. 2). Pride and arrogance have no place in God's presence, for Israel's Lord is the all-knowing, all-judging God of creation (v. 3). Belief in God as Creator and Savior relativizes all human assertions of power, a claim that makes Hannah's prayer socially subversive.

Rescuing the needy and exalting the humble are essential aspects of God's character. God's actions turn positions in society upside down (vv. 4–9). The mighty and the feeble switch places, while those who are full become hungry and those who are hungry are satisfied. Social inequity and the exploitation that results from such injustice cannot stand under God's rule. All of these situations that the world accepts so readily are contrary to the active will of God. Not only can God bring new life out of barren wombs, but he brings new life to Israel, and eventually raises up all who are in the shadows of death. God's actions do not follow human expectations. Those who are poor and powerless, seated in the ash heap, are lifted up to seats of honor. God's reign is a kingdom of reversals, in which the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

The ancient world pictured the earth as being built on pillars so the world does not sink back into chaos (v. 8). Israel knew that the One who created the world has also set the earth on its pillars, sustaining it in existence. God holds all of life and death in his hands and wills this alternative, upside-down arrangement of the world which Hannah's prayer proclaims. Though we only see glimpses of these reversals now, we can still praise our God with joyful gratitude. While we do not deny the present reality of the world, we counter it with God's promise of a new reality. God's king is empowered to do this subversive work. The prayer of Hannah trusts that God's divine action will be accomplished through his chosen king.

REFLECTING

Spend some time reflecting on Hannah's joyful prayer in light of your own understanding of God's reign and the hopes you hold for the future.

- We were made to enjoy the presence of God, and prayer gives voice to our delight in God and our joy in his goodness. What

aspects of Hannah's prayer do I want to recall in order to enrich my own prayer?

- The more we know of God, the more our hearts are tuned to praise him. What are some of the truths of God's character that evoke praise in Hannah? What are some additional characteristics of God for which I can praise him?
- As the writer of Israel's royal history begins with a woman giving birth to a child, Luke begins his gospel of the Messiah with a woman giving birth to a child. Compare Hannah's prayer with Mary's song of praise (Luke 1:46–55). What are some of the similarities? What do these tell me about the way God works in the world?

PRAYING

Continue praying in the spirit of Hannah as you respond to God's word in Scripture.

- My heart exults and my spirit rejoices in you, my God. You are my Lord, my Rock, and my salvation. I trust in you and in your promises to bring about a new reality in the world through your anointed king. Help me to live a life that reflects the hope that is within me.

Continue praying with trusting confidence. Rest in the comfort and strength that God has offered to you in his promises.

ACTING

The most effective action arises from prayerful contemplation. Let the prayer of Hannah change the way you pray and act in the world.

- Like the people in ancient times, we are tempted to trust in military and economic power. But Hannah's prayer assures us that "not by might does one prevail" (v. 9). What is my source of hope for the world today? What one simple action might I take to express hope to the people closest to me?



LESSON 4

David's Prayer of Grateful Praise

LISTENING

David entered the tent housing the ark of the covenant to offer this prayer to God. His bold prayer of praise and petition corresponds to the incredible assurances given to him by God. In a quiet place, speak this prayer of David aloud. Feel the gratitude and humility of David's words as you read them.

2 Samuel 7:18-29

¹⁸Then King David went in and sat before the LORD, and said, "Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? ¹⁹And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord GOD; you have spoken also of your servant's house for a great while to come. May this be instruction for the people, O Lord GOD! ²⁰And what more can David say to you? For you know your servant,

O Lord GOD! ²¹Because of your promise, and according to your own heart, you have wrought all this greatness, so that your servant may know it. ²²Therefore you are great, O LORD God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears. ²³Who is like your people, like Israel? Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, and to make a name for himself, doing great and awesome things for them, by driving out before his people nations and their gods? ²⁴And you established your people Israel for yourself to be your people forever; and you, O LORD, became their God. ²⁵And now, O LORD God, as for the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, confirm it forever; do as you have promised. ²⁶Thus your name will be magnified forever in the saying, 'The LORD of hosts is God over Israel'; and the house of your servant David will be established before you. ²⁷For you, O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, have made this revelation to your servant, saying, 'I will build you a house'; therefore your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to you. ²⁸And now, O Lord GOD, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant; ²⁹now therefore may it please you to bless the house of your servant, so that it may continue forever before you; for you, O Lord GOD, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed forever."

UNDERSTANDING

After listening to David's prayer with your heart, read these remarks in order to better understand its significance for your own life and for the saving history of God's people.

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel anticipate and embrace the reign of David. He is the anointed king for whom the prayer of Hannah hoped. As a young shepherd, he was anointed by Samuel and the empowering Spirit of God came upon him (1 Sam 16:13). When he became king over all Israel, he conquered Jerusalem and made it his royal city. After

King David brought the ancient ark of the covenant into the city, he desired to build a temple for God. However, in a remarkable oracle spoken to the prophet Nathan, the Lord stated that David would not build a “house” for God, but God would build a “house” for David, a great dynasty that would last forever. This covenant with David assured the king and the people that God’s promises would not be revoked under any circumstances and that they could count on God’s fidelity: “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam 7:16).

After hearing God’s astounding promises, David does not respond with showy display, but rather withdraws to spend time in prayer. He sits before the Lord and ponders what he has heard through the prophet’s oracle. With awesome wonder, David expresses his amazement at the way God has led him and protected him up to this moment. And now David is astounded by the honor God has shown him by the assurance of an everlasting dynasty. Continually referring to himself as God’s “servant,” he acknowledges that he has not earned or deserved God’s gracious promises, but that God has freely bestowed them upon him.

David’s reverence before God does not lead him to passivity, guilt, or resignation; it rouses him to worship. His maturing relationship with God issues forth in praise as he acknowledges the unrivaled greatness of God: “You are great, O LORD God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you” (v. 22). He recognizes God as the Lord of history, the one who has redeemed Israel (vv. 23–24). He knows that there is a historical continuity between God’s covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai and God’s covenant with himself in Jerusalem. Because God is so incomparable, God’s people are also unparalleled among the nations. Because this great God delivered Israel, this same God can be trusted to establish David and his reign forever.

The final section of David’s prayer is a confident and daring petition. Since God has given his word concerning David and his “house,” David now urges God, “Confirm it forever; do as you have promised” (v. 25). Because of David’s humble trust in God, he is able to make such a bold

prayer. He will hold God to his promises, knowing that God will keep them. Four times he repeats the word “forever” (vv. 25, 26, 29), insisting that all future generations have a claim to the promises.

The words of God’s promise to David and David’s prayer to God continued to sound in the ears of God’s people from generation to generation after the reign of David. We can be sure that these words continued to be prayed with intensity in the liturgy of Israel. Many centuries later, during the exile in Babylon and the destruction of Jerusalem, Israel’s plight seemed to contradict God’s promise of everlasting favor toward David’s reign. But God’s people continued to hold up God’s promises to David as a sign of hope. They trusted that the flickering lamp of David would one day become a bright light for all the nations.

REFLECTING

While reflecting on this prayer of David, consider which characteristics of the prayer you might use in your own prayer.

- David’s passage from shepherd boy to king of an everlasting dynasty is a great thing for David; yet David acknowledges that it is a “small thing” for God. What difference does it make in prayer when I am able to recognize that all I have received in life is an undeserved gift from God’s unconditional love?
- Notice the variety of names for God that David uses in his prayer. What are some of the names I use when I call on God in prayer?

- David sought to pray appropriately in response to the marvelous gifts and promises God had given him. What specific practice of prayer is required for those who are uniquely privileged, entitled, and gifted? What aspects of my life call for faithful prayer?

PRAYING

Pray to God with reverence from a heart that has been changed through your reflection on David's prayer.

- Who am I, O Lord God, that you have brought me thus far and done such marvelous things for me? O Lord God, there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you. Let me experience the blessings you have promised me, and let me magnify your name forever.

Contemplate God's astounding goodness and generosity to you. Let that awareness lead you to gratitude and confidence.

ACTING

Let your prayer to God lead you outward into the family, church, and community in which God has placed your life.

- What is the relationship between God's sovereignty over my life and my responsibility? How am I serving my community with the promises and gifts that God has given me?



LESSON 5

Solomon's Prayer for Wisdom

LISTENING

The blessings God gave to King David continue to flow over into the reign of his son Solomon. Listen with an open heart to the prayerful conversation between God and Solomon.

1 Kings 3:5-15

⁵At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." ⁶And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. ⁷And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a

little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. ⁹Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?”

¹⁰It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, ¹²I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. ¹³I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. ¹⁴If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.” ¹⁵Then Solomon awoke; it had been a dream. He came to Jerusalem where he stood before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. He offered up burnt offerings and offerings of well-being, and provided a feast for all his servants.

UNDERSTANDING

After carefully reading this encounter of God by Solomon in his dream, continue searching for the significance of the text in your understanding of God’s plan for the monarchy of Israel and the kingdom of God.

This excerpt from Solomon’s reign portrays him as a young king who is overwhelmed by the fact that he sits on the throne of Israel. While the new king is in the process of offering sacrifice, God appears to him in a dream and enters into conversation with him. In the biblical stories, a dream is an encounter in which the sharp distinction between heaven and earth, God and humanity, is dissolved. And so God begins the

conversation by saying, “Ask what I should give you” (v. 5). In this moment of prayer, Solomon is able to suspend his royal power and control, becoming receptive and yielding to God. God’s invitation to Solomon is open-ended and without limit.

Though invited by God to “ask,” to pray with a petition, Solomon first responds with praise and gratitude. He acknowledges the covenant between God and his father, David. God has shown “steadfast love,” the divine quality of constancy and fidelity in relationship to Israel. In response, David has lived “in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart” toward God (v. 6). Solomon realizes that his own role as the new king is a powerful sign of this covenant fidelity between God and David. The king presents himself in humility, lacking the maturity needed for kingly rule, in a position of dependence and need (v. 7).

After Solomon’s expressions of praise and deference to God, he responds to God’s invitation to “ask.” He asks for only one thing, and that one thing is not for himself but for his people. He petitions God: “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people” (v. 9). He desires the ability to be attentive to the needs of God’s people and the wisdom to make good decisions as their king.

God responds to Solomon’s petition by commending him both for what he asked and for what he did not ask. He asked only for the wisdom to discern rightly, not for the things a king might wish for himself, like a long life, riches, and the defeat of his enemies (v. 11). In response to Solomon’s remarkable restraint, God gives more than what he petitioned. Solomon is endowed with “a wise and discerning mind,” as he asked, and also “riches and honor” throughout his life, for which he has not asked (vv. 12–13). For those who pray, God wills an abundance of well-being that can only come as his gift.

However, Solomon’s generous God adds a crucial condition: God’s abundance will be experienced only within the covenant. This relationship with God implies Solomon’s obedience to the commandments of the Torah. In this way, the prayer of Solomon holds

together both aspects of the covenant with God: divine generosity and human obedience.

All genuine prayer is situated within an active and mutual relationship. It expresses a relationship between divine and human covenant partners, a bond of mutual commitment and responsibility. In prayer, God both gives to us and summons from us. The two cannot be separated. If we take only the generosity of God, we eliminate the context for a real relationship. If we take only the divine commands, we fail to see God's readiness to give us far more than we can ask or imagine.

REFLECTING

Imaginatively enter into the situation of Solomon in prayer before God. Consider what Solomon's prayer teaches you about a relationship with God.

- How would I respond if God offered me the same invitation he gave to Solomon: "Ask what I should give you" (v. 5)? How does my petition compare to that of Solomon?
- Why would God use a dream to communicate with Solomon? Does God use my dreams to communicate with me? In what other ways should I look for God to "appear" to me?
- God's double gift to Solomon of what he asked and what he did not ask anticipates the double promise of Jesus in the Sermon on the

Mount (Matt 6:33). What does Jesus ask his disciples to focus on first, before God gives them all the other necessities of life?

PRAYING

Let your listening and understanding now flow over into prayer.

- Lord God, you have shown great and steadfast love to me, and you have given me more than I can ask or imagine. As I seek to walk in your way, keep me attentive to your will and help me always seek first your kingdom.

Continue praying to God, asking for what you desire to receive from him.

ACTING

When we come before God with an eye for his kingdom and a desire to serve, we can expect that God will give us what we need to live abundantly.

- What new insights about prayer do I want to take from this lesson? How will this study of Solomon's prayer alter the way I pray this week?



LESSON 6

Nehemiah's Prayer for His People

LISTENING

Though exiled in Babylon and working as an official for the Persian king, Nehemiah's heart was still rooted in Jerusalem. Listen to this prayer of Nehemiah as he laments the condition of his beloved Jerusalem and petitions God for mercy upon the people and success upon his mission.

Nehemiah 1:1-11

¹The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, ²one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. ³They replied, "The survivors there in the province who

escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.”

⁴When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. ⁵I said, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments; ⁶let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. ⁷We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses.

⁸Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; ⁹but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.’ ¹⁰They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. ¹¹O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!”

At the time, I was cupbearer to the king.

UNDERSTANDING

In reading this commentary, seek to understand the context of Nehemiah’s prayer and the passion that fills his heart for Jerusalem as he begins his efforts to restore the city.

The narrative that precedes the prayer identifies Nehemiah and sets the context for his mission to rebuild Jerusalem, which is the subject of the entire book. Nehemiah’s family had lived in Jerusalem before the

destruction of the city by the Babylonians in 587 BC. They were taken captive by their conquerors and exiled in Babylon. Now, several generations later, the Persians have conquered the Babylonians. Nehemiah is living in Susa, the Persian capital, where he has risen to the important position of “cupbearer” to the Persian king, Artaxerxes. Though Nehemiah is a competent official of the Persian empire, his loyalty is ultimately directed to Jerusalem and his own people.

The narrative begins as Nehemiah receives a report from Judah about the Jews still living there and about the city of Jerusalem. The “great trouble and shame” of the Jewish people reflects the devastation caused by the war and the destitute circumstances still experienced by the people.. The walls and gates of the city have been destroyed, leaving the people vulnerable to invaders from all directions (v. 3). Hearing the news of Jerusalem’s plight evokes grief in Nehemiah, and he mourns for days in fasting and prayer (v. 4). His response, “I sat down and wept,” evokes the opening words of Psalm 137, the song of lament prayed by the exiled Jews as they longed for Jerusalem: “By the rivers of Babylon — there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.” Nehemiah’s abiding passion, like that of so many of his fellow Jews, was for the well-being of Jerusalem.

The prayer begins by addressing God and invoking his attentive presence. He is called “God of heaven,” expressing God’s transcendent majesty, “the great and awesome God” who governs all the earth (v. 5). Yet, Nehemiah also calls upon this God as the one “who keeps covenant and steadfast love” with Israel. The double designation highlights both God’s divine power and his divine fidelity. He is the awesome God with divine power over creation, even over the empire of Persia. He is also the covenant God who is deeply committed to his people Israel.

Nehemiah continues with a confession of sins (vv. 6–7). Much of his penitential language is liturgical and is derived from sacred texts, especially Deuteronomy. God’s people have failed to keep the covenant that God made with Moses, and they have neglected to live in obedience to God. His confession, on behalf of himself, his family, and

his people, acknowledges their fault and the justified consequences of their failure to keep the covenant.

Nehemiah's plea calls upon God to "remember" his promises to Moses (vv. 8–9). God has promised to receive his people again if they repent and make a fresh commitment to him and the covenant. After the scattering of Israel to the nations comes the gathering of God's people and their homecoming to Jerusalem. Nehemiah's hope in God's promises and his trust in God's forgiveness forms the heart of his prayer. Destruction and exile among the nations is not the end of the relationship of God with Israel. He is confident that God will act again and create a new future for his people.

Nehemiah's climactic appeal petitions God to "give him success" and to "grant him mercy" (v. 11). He implores God's help for his project of rebuilding the ruined city of Jerusalem. For this great undertaking, he needs the authorization, financial backing, and resources of "this man," whom the reader will discover is Artaxerxes, the emperor over the Persian realm.

Nehemiah, this man of prayer, is also the resourceful cupbearer for the Persian emperor. This Jew, who has a heart for Jerusalem, is also an urban planner with the worldly capacity to rebuild the city. He knows what God desires of him, and he is bold enough to ask both the King of heaven and the mightiest worldly power for what he needs. The book of Nehemiah shows that he received what he asked, but he attributes all his good outcomes to the gracious hand of God upon him.

REFLECTING

Spend some time reflecting on Nehemiah's prayer in terms of your own trust in God. After meditating on the questions, write out your answers to each.

- When Nehemiah invoked the name of God, he was calling on "the great and awesome God," the one "who keeps covenant and

steadfast love” (v. 5), the one with “great power and strong hand,” the one who “redeemed” his people” (v. 10). How do these designations give Nehemiah confidence in his prayer? What titles or characteristics of God give me confidence when I pray?

- Nehemiah and the Israelites never doubted God’s power and his ability to deliver his people from exile and return them to their land. The challenge of prayer was getting God’s attention and moving God to act on their behalf. How does this understanding challenge and enrich my own understanding of the purpose of prayer?
- Nehemiah’s prayer is lament, praise, repentance, and petition. Why does his prayer contain so many types of prayer? When does my prayer contain a similar variety?

PRAYING

Speak to God using some of the vocabulary, styles, and approaches to God that you have learned by studying Nehemiah’s prayer.

- God of heaven, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with your people, remember the promises you have given to those who repent and turn back to you. Be attentive to the prayer of your servant as I call upon you in my need.

Continue voicing your petitions to God as you confidently plead for him to hear your prayer.

ACTING

Prayer is not just a pious practice, but the foundation all that we do as God's people. Consider what kind of success you desire from God.

- Nehemiah's prayer is the deep source of all his passionate energy and his very practical work on behalf of his people. What is a project about which I am passionate and for which I want to pray and work?

Group Session Guide for Section II

Begin with hospitality and welcome. Offer any announcements or instructions before entering the spirit of focused discussion. Discuss these questions or those of your own choosing:

1. What would you consider to be an important realization you have had this week from your study of these lessons?
2. In what ways do these prayers of Israel's heroes seem to be unique and different from the prayers of other peoples and cultures?
3. How does Abraham's dialogue with God challenge you to question your ways of thinking about God's justice and mercy, and the ways that you routinely respond to God? ([Lesson 1](#))
4. What have you learned from the prayers of Abraham and Moses about the prayer of intercession? How can you pray on behalf of the people of the church and the world today? (Lessons 1 and 2)
5. In what ways does Moses appeal to God's reputation, God's character, and God's promises? Why is the bold prayer of Moses so effective before God? ([Lesson 2](#))
6. What are indications that Hannah expressed her emotions and heartfelt feelings in her prayer? Which of her emotions have ever motivated your prayer? ([Lesson 3](#))
7. In what ways is the prayer of Hannah subversive? In what ways should prayer be activist or revolutionary today? ([Lesson 3](#))

8. What did David consider to be an appropriate way to pray in response to the wonderful gifts and promises God had given him. What specific practice of prayer is required for those who are uniquely privileged, entitled, and gifted? ([Lesson 4](#))
9. How does Solomon's prayer demonstrate several different forms of prayer: praise, thanksgiving, petition, intercession? ([Lesson 5](#))
10. In what way does Solomon's prayer of petition show an admirable hierarchy or order of priority in the things for which he petitions God? Why is it important that we ask first for the most important things? ([Lesson 5](#))
11. In what sense can it be said that Nehemiah's prayer was the foundation of his ministry for God's people? What difference does it make when prayer becomes the underpinning of all the work we do? ([Lesson 6](#))
12. When Israel's heroes invoked the name of God in their prayers, they called upon God with numerous titles and characteristics. What are some of the titles of God that stand out to you? How do these designations give them confidence in their prayer?

Remind group members to complete the six lessons from [section III](#) during the week ahead.

Offer prayers of thanksgiving aloud to God for the insights and understanding you gained in the lessons this week.

Offer prayers for your own needs and the needs of others. Pray for the grace to act upon any decisions or resolutions you have made during your study.

Conclude together: *Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit ...*

Section III

Prayer in the Prophets of Israel

Divine inspiration is what makes a person a prophet in ancient Israel. This call to be a spokesperson for God caused the prophet to speak out and caused others to listen to the prophet. Israel's prophets claim backgrounds as varied as shepherders, farmers, priests, and scribes. They speak in the marketplace, the temple, the city gates, or wherever people most readily gathered. The writings of the prophets contain their biographies, their prophecies, and their prayers. Israel's prophets embed their prayers within the accounts of their lives and their prophecies. They arise out of the struggles, successes, and misfortunes of their lives in God's service.

Though there are strains of the prophetic ministry throughout Scripture, the classical age of the prophets corresponds to the period of Israel's monarchy. Their message challenges the king and the people for not living up to God's calling as manifested in the covenant and calls for Israel's repentance. The consistent demand of the prophets is that the people worship God alone. In addition, the prophets preached that the right worship of God requires the right treatment of their fellow human beings. The prophets do not tolerate external religious rituals unless they are accompanied by compassionate care of one's neighbors. They serve as the conscience of Israel, warning the kings and the people about infidelity and injustice.

Yet, in the midst of its ministry of admonition, the prophets never cease to speak of God's faithful, enduring love for his people. In addition to prophetic words about God's intolerance of sin, they speak and pray about hope, forgiveness, and restoration. Beyond painful images of God's judgment, the prophets offer images of a bright future. Beyond the immediate crisis will come a wise and just king, a Messiah who will bring God's people back to the covenant, who will purify Israel's worship, and who will establish a kingdom of justice and peace.

The prayers of the prophets manifest the same tension that fills their prophecy. On the one hand, they know that God is just and that God's people must suffer the consequences for their choices of infidelity and injustice; on the other hand, they know that God is inexplicably merciful and generous in his love for his people. So, to pray with the prophets is to acknowledge that the God to whom we offer praise and gratitude is the God to whom we must repent and seek forgiveness. Their prayers reflect the understanding of God that fills the Torah, highlighting the fact that God takes his people from a state of desperate need and brings them to a state of blessing. The prophets know that what God has done for his people in the exodus will also be done in their exile. To pray with the prophets is to refuse to give in to the present painful circumstances, to be led to a profession of trust in God and a deep hope for the future.

As in many biblical prayers, the prayers of the prophets are often not specific. So a prayer may be adapted to any similar situation of fear, sorrow, lament, rescue, or gratitude. The prophets call on the people of God to cry out, repent, weep, give thanks, call upon God's name, make known his deed, and proclaim his name. In prayer, God's people share their grief and their joy, they give voice to their repentance, praise, and thanksgiving. The good news of unmerited salvation must be shared with the assembly, the next generation, and even the surrounding nations. God's blessings upon Israel are a great sign and invitation for all people and ultimately a blessing to be extended to all the nations of the earth.

- What are the primary messages of God's prophets in the Old Testament?

- In what sense do the prayers of the prophets continue the prayers of Israel found in the Torah? How are the prayers offered in Israel's exile the continuation of Israel's prayers during the exodus?
- How can the prayers of the ancient prophets become the prayers of God's people today?



LESSON 7

Isaiah's Prayer of Thanksgiving and Praise

LISTENING

Isaiah's prayer anticipates that day when the salvation of God's people will be accomplished. Say or chant aloud this prayer of confident hope along with all of God's people.

Isaiah 12:1-6

¹You will say in that day:
I will give thanks to you, O LORD,
for though you were angry with me,
your anger turned away,
and you comforted me.

²Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,

for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.

³With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. ⁴And you will say in that day:

Give thanks to the LORD,
call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.

⁵Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.

⁶Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

UNDERSTANDING

Continue exploring this two-part prayer in the context of Israel's history and in light of the fullness of salvation we have come to know in Jesus Christ.

Whether this prayer anticipates God's deliverance from the Assyrian armies during the eighth century BC, or from the captivity in Babylon during the sixth century or from any of Israel's many deliverances from oppression through the ages, this joyful prayer responds to the gift of salvation from the Holy One of Israel. As in many biblical prayers, the references are not specific, so that the prayer may be adapted to any similar situation of fearful peril with an expectation of God's gracious rescue. The introductory "on that day" (vv. 1, 4) anticipates the fulfillment of a divine promise that is sure but not yet at hand. The prayer looks forward with hopeful expectation and refuses to give in to the painful present circumstances.

Isaiah is characteristic of God's prophets in speaking of both divine judgment and hope. His prayer looks back at the former times of God's wrath, but he does not dwell on Jerusalem's harsh judgment. Instead

he moves past the suffering and celebrates the times when God “comforted” his people (v. 1). The term “comfort” anticipates the Isaian words of consolation while awaiting the end of Israel’s exile: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem” (40:1).

Isaiah’s proclamation that “God is my salvation” summarizes his prophetic career (v. 2). It highlights the fact that God takes his people from a state of desperate need and brings them to a state of blessing. The experience of God’s salvation draws from God’s people a profession of trust and fearlessness that God longs to hear. The prayer literally echoes the chant of Moses at the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery: “The LORD is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation” (Exod 15:2). Through its prophets, Israel was able to acknowledge each of its historical deliverances as a renewal of the exodus, making present again the saving power exhibited by God in their archetypal liberation.

The prayer expresses unqualified joy at the blessings that God is sure to bring: “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (v. 3). Drawing water was a liturgical ritual in Jerusalem, a sacramental act dramatizing God’s gift of life to his people. The symbolic ritual and metaphor expresses the reality that everything necessary for the life of God’s people flows from God’s goodness. His merciful love is a source of fresh water that satisfies the thirsty, cools those who are scorched in the heat, and refreshes those who have grown weary.

The second part of Isaiah’s prayer summons the people to give public voice to the unexpected and undeserved salvation they have received from God. In a series of imperatives, the prophet calls on Israel to give thanks, call upon God’s name, make known his deeds, and proclaim his name (v. 4). The good news of such unmerited and inexplicable deliverance must be shared, even among the surrounding nations.

Israel’s praise knows no restraint or limitation. God’s people must praise the Lord, shout aloud, and sing for joy (vv. 5–6). Their evangelization and witness to God is directed outward: “Let this be

known in all the earth.” God’s blessings upon Jerusalem are a great sign and invitation for all nations to join in praise of Israel’s God. The good news of salvation is open to a horizon larger than Israel, and is a blessing to be extended to all the nations of the earth.

REFLECTING

Spend some time reflecting on this prayer of praise and let it deepen your thirst and desire for God’s salvation.

- What did the people of ancient Israel mean when they prayed, “God is my salvation”? What is the fuller meaning of this prayer in the context of my own life?
- Drawing water in the context of liturgical worship was a sacramental act in ancient Israel. What did Isaiah intend to express when he prayed, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation”?
- What are the indications in this prayer that God’s salvation reaches backward to the deliverance from Egypt and forward to the New Testament? What is the fullest deliverance that God has in view and the ultimate reason to give God praise?

PRAYING

Pray again the words of Isaiah's prayer, keeping in mind its fullest meaning. Let his prayer be an incentive to continue with your own heartfelt prayer to God.

- Holy One of Israel, I praise you for your many deeds of salvation by which you have changed my grieving into joy and my fear into trust. Thank you for your merciful love that refreshes my weariness and quenches my thirsty spirit.

When words are no longer necessary or helpful in your prayer, simply rest in the presence of God, who desires to comfort you and help you to trust.

ACTING

God has given us many means to draw water from the wells of salvation. Choose some way in which you can activate one of the imperatives of Isaiah's prayer today.

- How am I able to be an agent of evangelization for others? In what ways can I proclaim God's name and make known his deeds?



LESSON 8

Jeremiah's Prayer of Confident Hope

LISTENING

Even though the invading armies were besieging the city of Jerusalem and would soon conquer and destroy it, God commands Jeremiah to purchase a piece of property near the city as a sign of a future life for God's people in the land. Jeremiah's prayer expresses his confidence in God's assurance and hope in the future.

Jeremiah 32:14-25

¹⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. ¹⁵For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

¹⁶After I had given the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah, I prayed to the LORD, saying: ¹⁷Ah Lord GOD! It is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you. ¹⁸You show steadfast love to the thousandth generation, but repay the guilt of parents into the laps of their children after them, O great and mighty God whose name is the LORD of hosts, ¹⁹great in counsel and mighty in deed; whose eyes are open to all the ways of mortals, rewarding all according to their ways and according to the fruit of their doings. ²⁰You showed signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, and to this day in Israel and among all humankind, and have made yourself a name that continues to this very day. ²¹You brought your people Israel out of the land of Egypt with signs and wonders, with a strong hand and outstretched arm, and with great terror; ²²and you gave them this land, which you swore to their ancestors to give them, a land flowing with milk and honey; ²³and they entered and took possession of it. But they did not obey your voice or follow your law; of all you commanded them to do, they did nothing. Therefore you have made all these disasters come upon them. ²⁴See, the siege-ramps have been cast up against the city to take it, and the city, faced with sword, famine, and pestilence, has been given into the hands of the Chaldeans who are fighting against it. What you spoke has happened, as you yourself can see. ²⁵Yet you, O Lord GOD, have said to me, “Buy the field for money and get witnesses” — though the city has been given into the hands of the Chaldeans.

UNDERSTANDING

After allowing this prayer of Jeremiah to penetrate your mind and heart, use these words to understand the basis of hope that God has given all of his people.

The Babylonians (Chaldeans) had encircled the walls of Jerusalem and built siege-ramps in order to breach the city defenses. The decisive ruin of the state of Judah and its capital was imminent. Within months,

the walls and gates of Jerusalem would be destroyed, the temple razed, and the last king carried away into exile. In this crisis of destruction and despair, when all seemed lost, Jeremiah spoke a prophetic word of hope to the people. As a sign of that hope, the prophet was directed to purchase a piece of property in his ancestral village of Anathoth, just north of Jerusalem and directly in the path of the advancing armies.

Of course, the social chaos of the time and the military threat must have made the land nearly worthless. Productive use of the land under the circumstances was impossible. Yet, Jeremiah paid for the land, signed the deed, and had it witnessed in duplicate. One deed was then sealed and the other left open (v. 14). The prophet then entrusted the deed into the care of his scribe, Baruch, who placed both copies in an earthenware jar for long-term safekeeping. Then Jeremiah spoke the prophetic word of the Lord: “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land” (v. 15). The land the prophet had purchased was an earnest of future economic activity. It was a prophetic sign of hope that God’s people would return to the land and again be blessed by God.

Jeremiah’s prayer is his response to the divine word and sign of hope. The prophet addresses God, praising the extravagant generosity of his steadfast love. The Lord God is the creator of the world and the redeemer of Israel. This great and mighty God can therefore do whatever he wills: “Nothing is too hard for you” (v. 17). Because nothing is impossible with God, he can create a new people after the destruction. The same God who made the heavens and the earth by his “outstretched arm” also brought his people out of the land of Egypt with his same “outstretched arm” (v. 21). This same Lord of hosts guided his people to take possession of the land in which they live, an abundant and fruitful land (v. 22).

Yet, Jeremiah’s astonishing praise of God’s generosity is abruptly broken off and the prophet articulates Israel’s miserable response: “But they did not obey your voice or follow your law; of all you commanded them to do, they did nothing” (v. 23). For this reason, all the evils of the

Babylonian invasion have come upon them and they are faced with sword, famine, and pestilence (v. 24). Even though God demonstrates incredible fidelity to his people — even to the thousandth generation — nevertheless, the guilt of parents affects the lives of the next generation (v. 18). Everyone is responsible and answerable for their deeds.

The prayer expresses, side by side, the two primary ways in which the Israelites understood and interpreted their relationship with God. They knew that God is unfathomably generous in his investment in Israel's well-being. And they also understood that the guilty must suffer the consequences of their deeds. There is always a deep tension between these two perspectives, yet they are held together in this prayer. The God who freely gives also holds his people accountable. This unresolved tension remains in the prayer of all God's people. The Lord to whom we pray is grand and sovereign, beyond all of our ways of understanding. The God to whom we offer praise and gratitude is the God to whom we must repent and seek forgiveness.

The prayer ends by coming full circle, back to the property God directed his prophet to purchase (v. 25). Jeremiah concludes with the utmost hope. In spite of invading armies and the destruction of glorious Jerusalem, God has promised that the currently worthless land will again be inhabited and productive for future generations. Jeremiah proclaims that the only ground of hope for God's people is the will and purpose of God. Through judgment and disaster, hope remains alive. The God for whom nothing is impossible offers an assurance that completely contradicts the dire circumstances of the present moment. But this hope is not just an inner psychological confidence or anticipation of an otherworldly existence. Rather this God-given hope is expressed in houses and fields and vineyards, in the things of concrete, human life.

REFLECTING

Meditate on Jeremiah's prayer and let it deepen the hope that lies within you. Consider how entrusting your future to God enables you to live with confidence, free from undue anxiety.

- Jeremiah's hope existed in, through, and beyond the inevitable disaster that loomed over the city of Jerusalem. What lessons of hope have I learned that could have only been taught through suffering and loss?
- Jeremiah's hope is rooted in God's promise that houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in the land. What assurances do I have that form the basis of my hope for the future?
- Jeremiah's trust in God, as expressed in his prayer, "Nothing is too hard for you," may be rooted in the messenger's questions to Sarah and Abraham when God promised them a son in defiance of all human expectation and possibility: "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" (Gen 18:14). Read these verses from the gospels and note how genuine hope reaches beyond normal possibilities: Luke 1:37; Mark 10:27; Mark 14:36.

PRAYING

Continue to pray in the spirit of Jeremiah. Let the hope God entrusted to him flow over into your own heart.

- Lord God, who has brought your people out of bondage and into a bountiful land, look upon us as we place our hope in you. As you have shown that nothing is impossible with you, help me to pray confidently, to ask expectantly, and to hope beyond expectation.

Continue praying to God with confidence, expectancy, and hope.

ACTING

Consider how you can concretely express your hope in the future because of God's promises to you.

- Jeremiah purchased a piece of land and stored the deed for a later time as a sign of hope for the people of his day. What can I do today to confidently express to others the hope that I have been given?



LESSON 9

The Prophet's Prayer of Lament for Israel

LISTENING

In his role as mediator between God and his people, the prophet voices the communal lament of Israel as they cry out to God in heaven. Read aloud the words of the prayer, so that you not only read them with your eyes, but speak them with your lips and hear them proclaimed with your ears.

Isaiah 63:15 — 64:12

¹⁵Look down from heaven and see,
from your holy and glorious habitation.

Where are your zeal and your might?

The yearning of your heart and your compassion?

They are withheld from me.

¹⁶For you are our father,

though Abraham does not know us
and Israel does not acknowledge us;
you, O LORD, are our father;
our Redeemer from of old is your name.
¹⁷Why, O LORD, do you make us stray from your ways
and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?
Turn back for the sake of your servants,
for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage.
¹⁸Your holy people took possession for a little while;
but now our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary.
¹⁹We have long been like those whom you do not rule,
like those not called by your name.

64 ¹O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence —
²as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil —
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
⁴From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.
⁵You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
⁶We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
⁷There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,

and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
⁸Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.
¹⁰Your holy cities have become a wilderness,
Zion has become a wilderness,
Jerusalem a desolation.
¹¹Our holy and beautiful house,
where our ancestors praised you,
has been burned by fire,
and all our pleasant places have become ruins.
¹²After all this, will you restrain yourself, O LORD?
Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?

UNDERSTANDING

As you study this prayer, try to appreciate the shocking and desperate language used to get God's attention and persuade him to act on behalf of his people.

This communal lament appeals for God's merciful help in a situation of great need. The historical hints suggest that the period is shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The city has become a desolation and the beautiful temple has been destroyed by fire (v. 18; 64:10–11). In such desperate times for the people, God seems to be absent and far away. But in reality, it is the people of Israel who have departed from God. He is the one who has been rejected by the people he loves. Praying in the name of the community, the prophet voices a cacophony of conflicting thoughts and emotions. He is attempting to get God's attention so that he will come down from his heavenly throne and rescue his people in their desperate straits.

Many detect a note of sarcasm in the prayer's appeal: "Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and glorious habitation" (v. 15). In contrast to God's former way of involving himself personally in the experiences of his people, God seems to be ensconced in his comfortable palace, far away from their needs. Like children seeking the attention of their parents, God's people demand to know where God is. Where is your zealous might; where is your tender compassion? Some understand these parallel questions as appeals to God's paternal and maternal nature, as pleas to God's parental care that seems to be withheld from them. Are the critics correct when they say that God has abandoned his children to the cruel forces of the world?

God's people complain that even their own ancestors, Abraham and Israel (Jacob), do not acknowledge them as kin (v. 16). This makes it even more imperative that God concede he is their Father and Redeemer. They pray that God admit his Fatherhood and that he respond to them as a Father should. As children are inclined to fault the parents when things go wrong, Israel blames God for their misbehavior (v. 17). It was God's parental neglect, they claim, that made them stray, that hardened their hearts so that they didn't respect him. Of course, these are shocking statements, but they express the kind of outrageousness that children are in a position to utter about their parents. Children know that their parents can't divorce them and that parenthood is something they can never get away from.

The cry of God's people becomes increasingly impassioned. Not only do they plead to God to "look down from heaven" (v. 15), but now to "tear open the heavens and come down" (64:1). All the questions and doubts, the pains and tensions that are expressed by God's people, are lifted up in their passionate plea. They finally throw themselves upon God's mercy and confess their sins, clearing the way of any prideful thoughts that they can save themselves: "Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hands" (64:8). God is the one who has formed them and who continually molds them. They are as helpless before him as the clay. This humble repentance opens their lives to the reentry of God's healing grace and divine forgiveness.

We know God's response to the final questions of the prayer: "After all this, will you restrain yourself, O LORD? Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?" (64:12). The remainder of the Bible gives us God's answer. In such a situation, where no human parent could remain unmoved, it is impossible that God would turn the other way and remain silent. God's people must trust in the purposefulness of their heavenly parent, their divine potter.

REFLECTING

After studying this biblical prayer from Israel's period of exile, spend some time reflecting on its rhetoric and what you might learn from it.

- Although Israel's prophetic literature rarely refers to God as Israel's "Father," here the prophet uses that most intimate of all Israel's names for God. Why do God's people refer to God as Father and themselves as God's children in this prayer? In what ways does this prayer express the responses that children may voice to their parents?
 - Since prayer is conversational and emotional, it does not have to be theologically correct. What are some of the outrageous questions and statements found in this prayer? In what ways do these kinds of utterances enrich my prayer?
 - How does God respond to the final questions of the prayer? How have I experienced God's response?
-

PRAYING

Select your favorite phrases from the prophet's prayer and include them in your own prayer from the heart.

- Creator God, you are the potter and we are the clay, the work of your hands. Help me to trust in you in the midst of life's pains and trials. Come down from heaven to rescue me. Do not let my heart be hardened or my spirit withdrawn from you.

Continue to imagine God forming you as a potter forms the clay, and entrust yourself to his creative design.

ACTING

Recall all the ways God's parental qualities are recalled in this prayer. Notice the ways God's paternal and maternal qualities are evoked.

- Make a list today of the ways God acts as a parent in your life. Decide today to notice concrete ways that God is a loving parent to you every day.



LESSON 10

A Plea for God's Mercy

LISTENING

Read this sorrowful lament, imagining you are among the people of Jerusalem after their defeat or among the many victims of war today.

Lamentations 5:1–22

- ¹Remember, O LORD, what has befallen us;
look, and see our disgrace!
- ²Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers,
our homes to aliens.
- ³We have become orphans, fatherless;
our mothers are like widows.
- ⁴We must pay for the water we drink;
the wood we get must be bought.
- ⁵With a yoke on our necks we are hard driven;
we are weary, we are given no rest.
- ⁶We have made a pact with Egypt and Assyria,

to get enough bread.

⁷Our ancestors sinned; they are no more,
and we bear their iniquities.

⁸Slaves rule over us;
there is no one to deliver us from their hand.

⁹We get our bread at the peril of our lives,
because of the sword in the wilderness.

¹⁰Our skin is black as an oven
from the scorching heat of famine.

¹¹Women are raped in Zion,
virgins in the towns of Judah.

¹²Princes are hung up by their hands;
no respect is shown to the elders.

¹³Young men are compelled to grind,
and boys stagger under loads of wood.

¹⁴The old men have left the city gate,
the young men their music.

¹⁵The joy of our hearts has ceased;
our dancing has been turned to mourning.

¹⁶The crown has fallen from our head;
woe to us, for we have sinned!

¹⁷Because of this our hearts are sick,
because of these things our eyes have grown dim:

¹⁸because of Mount Zion, which lies desolate;
jackals prowl over it.

¹⁹But you, O LORD, reign forever;
your throne endures to all generations.

²⁰Why have you forgotten us completely?
Why have you forsaken us these many days?

²¹Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored;
renew our days as of old —

²²unless you have utterly rejected us,
and are angry with us beyond measure.

UNDERSTANDING

After carefully listening to this communal lament of the people of Jerusalem, consider the ways this prayer expresses the cries of God's people in every age.

The powerful and dramatic prayers of the book of Lamentations were written shortly after the tragic events of the final Babylonian assault on Jerusalem. The cries of God's people graphically depict the aftermath of the conquest and the helplessness shared by all victims of war. This final prayer of the book asks God to "remember" the destruction of God's city and the suffering of his people.

The people of Jerusalem plead for God to pay attention to them and to recognize the "disgrace" they endure (v. 1). This sense of shame is an aspect of the sufferings of loss, eroding the people's dignity and emphasizing their sense of helplessness. The prayer names and validates this feeling of embarrassing disgrace, which is just as painful as physical suffering.

The prayer continues with a long inventory of the ravages of war, expressing the people's extensive distress by piling one complaint upon another. The land God gave to his people, their "inheritance," has been confiscated by occupying forces along with their houses (v. 2). Children have become orphans, and wives have become widows, as their husbands are killed or deported (v. 3). Now the people of Judah must enter into compromising relationships with other nations for even the basic staples of life — water for drinking, wood for cooking, and bread for their nourishment (vv. 4–6).

In prayer, the people acknowledge that sin is the source of their tragic situation: "Woe to us, for we have sinned" (vv. 7, 16). They realize that their iniquity is both within themselves, and also inherited from generations past. As in all war, human sinfulness begets greed, violence, and oppression. The order of society is broken down and lack of hygiene and sanitation lead to disease and famine (vv. 8–10).

Violence generates more violence. Social chaos respects neither sex, nor rank, nor age. Women suffer rape, aristocrats suffer tortuous death, and children are oppressed with harsh labor (vv. 11–13). The old men no longer sit at the city gates and make decisions for the community. Young men no longer enjoy the leisurely pleasures of life. Song and dance have been turned to mourning and lamentation (vv. 14–15). “The crown” fallen from the head of Zion expresses the collapsed walls of Jerusalem, which were like a great crenellated crown adorning the city (v. 16). Now the royal city is left in misery, ruined and deserted.

As the speaker calls on God in the prayer’s final plea, we sense a distant hope in the face of overwhelming uncertainty and feelings of abandonment. God is enthroned in the distant heavens, but it seems that his view from above does not reach all the way down to the level of human misery (vv. 19–22). The brief praise of God’s enduring reign is effectively undercut by the experience of God’s rejection and anger: “Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days?” The prayer does not end in confidence, but expresses the unyielding grip of suffering on the community.

The one voice not heard in the prayer is that of God. God is spoken to but does not speak. The deafening silence of God, which eerily permeates the entire prayer, becomes most obvious at the end. Yet, this is the characteristic of faith. It is trust in God in the face of divine silence. This silence, especially in the midst of great suffering, is epitomized above all by the cross and highlights faith’s utter lack of absolute guarantees. This prayer of Lamentations, and the many prayers of lament we raise in our suffering, is the voice of faith shattering the silence in an effort to remain faithful to the God we cannot hear.

REFLECTING

Consider circumstances that call forth the prayer of communal lamentation today.

- This prayer was evoked by the conditions that resulted from the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. What realities in our world evoke similar prayers from God's people today?
- The prayer acknowledges that God cannot be blamed for the ruin and misery of Jerusalem. What are some of the reasons for the city's suffering? What does the prayer ask of God?
- When does God seem silent and far away from me? What do I do in the face of God's silence?

PRAYING

If people cannot speak about their suffering, they will be destroyed by it. Through speech addressed to God, we articulate our hope that God hears and responds to our pleas.

- Remember, O Lord, my affliction and hear my plea. I know that you reign forever and have not forgotten or forsaken me. Save me from sin, be present to me in my suffering, and keep me safe from harm.

Continue to pour out your pleas to God, and express your trust in God's constant care.

ACTING

Consider how this prayer and other prayers of complaining and lament call you to respond in action.

- What can I personally do to promote a culture of nonviolent peacemaking in my home, city, or world?



LESSON 11

Daniel's Prayer for the People in Exile

LISTENING

We always stand before God as sinful people, yet as part of a community that God has claimed as his own. As you read this prayer of the prophet Daniel, trust in God's steadfast and merciful love.

Daniel 9:3–19

³Then I turned to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. ⁴I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying,

“Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, ⁵we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances. ⁶We have not listened to

your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land.

⁷“Righteousness is on your side, O Lord, but open shame, as at this day, falls on us, the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you. ⁸Open shame, O LORD, falls on us, our kings, our officials, and our ancestors, because we have sinned against you. ⁹To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him, ¹⁰and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by following his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets.

¹¹“All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice. So the curse and the oath written in the law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against you. ¹²He has confirmed his words, which he spoke against us and against our rulers, by bringing upon us a calamity so great that what has been done against Jerusalem has never before been done under the whole heaven. ¹³Just as it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us. We did not entreat the favor of the LORD our God, turning from our iniquities and reflecting on his fidelity. ¹⁴So the LORD kept watch over this calamity until he brought it upon us. Indeed, the LORD our God is right in all that he has done; for we have disobeyed his voice.

¹⁵“And now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and made your name renowned even to this day — we have sinned, we have done wickedly. ¹⁶O Lord, in view of all your righteous acts, let your anger and wrath, we pray, turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy mountain; because of our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors, Jerusalem and your people have become a disgrace among all our neighbors. ¹⁷Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his supplication, and for your own sake, Lord, let your face shine upon your desolated sanctuary. ¹⁸Incline your ear, O my God, and hear. Open your eyes and

look at our desolation and the city that bears your name. We do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of your great mercies. ¹⁹O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, listen and act and do not delay! For your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people bear your name!”

UNDERSTANDING

This is most probably a public and liturgical prayer, steeped in the covenant traditions of Israel. It assumes both that God holds his people responsible for their sins and that God’s love is faithful and dependable.

Daniel the prophet prays this prayer of confession and penitence in the name of the people. He and the people of Judah know that their future does not lay in the hands of the imperial powers that have conquered them, but in God alone. So with that confidence, Daniel offers this “prayer and supplication” accompanied by the penitential practices of “fasting and sackcloth and ashes” (v. 3).

Daniel addresses God who is great and awesome, faithful in keeping the covenant and in steadfast love (v. 4). In contrast, the prophet relentlessly confesses the guilt of God’s people, acknowledging that the destruction of Jerusalem was deserved punishment for the people’s sins. He loads five largely synonymous terms for sin into one verse: we have “sinned,” “done wrong,” “acted wickedly,” “rebelled,” and “turned aside” from God’s commandments (v. 5). Built within the workings of the covenant is the certain assurance that violation of the commands inscribed in the Torah brings about the covenant curses.

Daniel offers no excuses or mitigating circumstances. The prayer moves back and forth between acknowledging the uprightness of God and the sin of the people. Daniel prays: “Righteousness is on your side, O Lord” (v. 7), but “Open shame, O LORD, falls upon us” (v. 8). To God belongs “mercy and forgiveness” (v. 9), but God’s people “have not obeyed the voice of the LORD” (v. 10). According to Israel’s theology,

guilt is inescapably followed by punishment. Because Israel transgressed God's covenant commands, "The curse and the oath written in the law of Moses have been poured out upon us" (v. 11).

With the pivotal phrase "And now," the prayer moves from the confession of past sins to the long-awaited appeal to God's mercy (v. 15). Addressing God as Israel's deliverer, the Lord who brought his people out of Egypt, Daniel prays that God let his anger "turn away" from Jerusalem (v. 16). Though God's people were unable to turn away from their iniquities, they petition God to turn away his wrath from them. In a second pivot, "Now therefore," Daniel asks God to "listen" to the prayer of his people who refused to "listen" to God (v. 17). The prayer is remarkable in that Israel can continue to petition God, though their sin would seem to have disqualified them completely.

The prayer continues with a flurry of imperatives, calling upon God to respond to the prayers of his people: "listen," "let your face shine," "incline your ear and hear," "open your eyes and look" (v. 18). Israel's many failures are contrasted to God's "great mercies." The possibility of Israel's reconciliation with God and a new future rests completely in God's generosity as his people throw themselves upon his faithful love.

The final verse has been called Daniel's *Kyrie eleison*. A threefold call, "O Lord," is accompanied by an appeal for God to hear, forgive, listen, and act (v. 19). The appeal is made not only to God's mercy, but also to his self-interest. Daniel asks God to forgive Israel "for your own sake." He urges God to act "because your city and your people bear your name." Surely God would not abandon what is his own. Because God has chosen Jerusalem and the people of Israel for his own, Daniel can pray this bold prayer. God's people can hope for an end to their suffering and a new beginning because of God's merciful and faithful love toward his own. It is an incredibly daring act to pray in this way after such a profound confession of sin. Yet Daniel can do so because he knows that God's honor and glory is deeply linked to Israel's future. And for Israel to have a future, God must be willing to relinquish the past and forgive his people.

REFLECTING

Reflect on Daniel's bold prayer of confession and petition in the context of your own relationship with God.

- Israel's communal prayer first confesses the sins of God's people to God before asking for God's help. Why is it important that God's people confess their sins? Why is confession good for us?
- Daniel gave God convincing reasons why God should listen to his prayer, and he repeated his requests with urgency. What are the arguments we can use before God in prayer?
- We have no claims on God and no rights before him. What, then, is the basis of our prayer?

PRAYING

Pray to God using the thoughts and vocabulary from Daniel's prayer.

- Lord, your love is steadfast and you keep your covenant in faithfulness. I confess that I have sinned and turned aside from your commands. I present my request before you, not because of my worthiness, but because of your great mercy.

Continue praying to God with humility and boldness, trusting in his grace and his promises.

ACTING

With self-examination, we are able to name our sins and confess them to God.

- Consider beginning to practice the daily habit of self-examination: review your day, becoming aware of your omissions and failings, confess them to God, and call upon the transforming power of his merciful love.



LESSON 12

Jonah's Prayer of Thanksgiving

LISTENING

After Jonah tried to run away from God and was thrown overboard from a ship in the storm, he was swallowed by a great fish. Listen as Jonah prays to God in thanksgiving for his deliverance from death.

Jonah 2:1–10

¹Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish,
²saying,

“I called to the LORD out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.

³You cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,

and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.

⁴Then I said, 'I am driven away
from your sight;
how shall I look again
upon your holy temple?'

⁵The waters closed in over me;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped around my head
⁶at the roots of the mountains.

I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the Pit,
O LORD my God.

⁷As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the LORD;
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.

⁸Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.

⁹But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.

Deliverance belongs to the LORD!"

¹⁰Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon
the dry land.

UNDERSTANDING

As you study Jonah's prayer, consider the change that occurs within Jonah as he is rescued from the chaotic waters and taught to trust in God.

The colorful tale of Jonah is about a reluctant prophet who flees at the call of God. Instead of going to prophesy at Nineveh, as God directed, Jonah turned away from God. His journey is described as a continual descent, further and further away from God and divine help. He first “went down” to Joppa to escape God’s call (1:3). Jonah then went down into the hold of the ship and fell asleep, while the crew each prayed to his own god (1:5). Finally, Jonah was thrown overboard and descended into the deep sea: “I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever” (2:6). Jonah’s obstinate disobedience to God’s will for him eventually results in a descent over which Jonah has no more control.

Just as Jonah is about to hit bottom, God delivers him. The waters under the earth, according to Israel’s worldview, were the primeval deep, the waters of chaos. Connected with these waters were thoughts of darkness and death, as opposed to God’s created order of light and life. Sinking into these waters was a descent toward Sheol, the realm of the dead. From this “Pit” there is no escape (v. 6). As the story continues, God sends a huge fish to swallow up Jonah and rescue him from the threat of the sea. We can imagine Jonah, rescued but still not feeling very secure, sitting inside the great creature of the sea, uttering this prayer of thanksgiving to God.

As Jonah prays, he first acknowledges that he was in a state of helpless descent. As he plummeted from God’s sight, he realized that the worst aspect of separation from God is the inability to worship God. Yet, Jonah called out to God in his distress, and God answered him and came to his rescue. He says, “As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple” (v. 7). In his desperate situation, he returned to the sanity of trusting in God.

The movement of the prayer is from the pit to the temple, from dire helplessness to salvation from harm. The decisive actor in this movement toward salvation is God. It is Jonah’s remembering God in his need and calling on God for help that causes his prayer to be noticed and answered by the Lord of the temple. Jonah then expresses

his thanksgiving to God by promising to offer a sacrifice to God in the temple and by declaring that God is the source of his help: “Deliverance belongs to the LORD!” (v. 9). Jonah could not save himself nor could he count on the help of any other god.

The truths reflected in Jonah’s prayerful thanksgiving had been known by the people of Israel since the exodus. Yet every Israelite must express thanks to God and proclaim God’s salvation within the contexts of their own personal failings and desperate needs. Jonah is not an isolated Israelite; rather, he prays as a member of God’s people as presented in the liturgy of the temple. Even in a distant land or chaotic sea, he is able to call on the Lord of the temple and be brought to renewed life, which for Jonah is expressed by “the dry land” (v.10).

REFLECTING

Consider how this prayer of Jonah expresses the desperation and thanksgiving you have experienced in your own life.

- The prayer of Jonah expresses the prayer of a unique individual and also a plea that could be expressed by anyone. What are some of the universal elements of Jonah’s prayer? In what ways could it serve as a model for my own prayer?
- Jonah’s prayerful confession, “Deliverance belongs to the LORD,” is illustrated in a dramatic way as God told the fish to spew Jonah out upon the dry land. From what desperate straits has God rescued me? What is the safe, dry spot that I experienced as a result of God’s deliverance?

- The remainder of the story of Jonah reveals that the prophet finally, yet reluctantly, follows God's call to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh. The story satirizes the narrow-mindedness of the Israelites in thinking that God's mercy is offered only to them, and it shows how God constantly calls us to cross the boundaries of our limited vision. Who might be the people of Nineveh for people of faith today?

PRAYING

Having pondered God's word in the prayer of Jonah, voice your own prayer with Jonah as your model.

- God of mercy, I call on you in my distress and cry out to you while flooded with anxiety. As you bring up my life from the Pit, carry me to a place of safety and peace. Help me to trust in you again and acknowledge you as the Lord of deliverance.

Continue to rest in God's presence, allowing God's Spirit to intercede and pray within you.

ACTING

The story of Jonah helped the people of Israel broaden their vision of God's care for other nations, races, and beliefs.

- What can I do to become more aware of my prejudices and see people who are different from myself with the eyes and heart of God?

Group Session Guide for Section III

Begin with hospitality and welcome. Offer any announcements or instructions before entering the spirit of focused discussion. Discuss these questions or those of your own choosing:

1. In what sense do the prayers of the prophets grow out of the call they have been given by God?
2. What continuing themes of the prophets' prayers enable them to be prayed by all God's people in every age?
3. How does the prayer of Isaiah help God's people then and today to move from grieving into joy and from fear into trust? ([Lesson 7](#))
4. How does Jeremiah demonstrate that an action can be an expression of prayer? Can you think of any actions or gestures that have expressed prayer for you? ([Lesson 8](#))
5. How does the prayer of Jeremiah offer me hope for the future? What leads me to believe that nothing is impossible with God? ([Lesson 8](#))
6. What are some of the conflicting thoughts and emotions voiced in Isaiah's prayer of lament? Why are such contradictory ideas acceptable in lament? ([Lesson 9](#))
7. What are some of the similarities of God's suffering people as expressed in Lamentations and people who suffer from war and famine today? What parts of the prayer of Lamentations could be prayed by, with, and for victims of warfare today? ([Lesson 10](#))

8. What are some of the characteristics of lament that we see in these two prayers? What are similar and different about these prayers? ([Lessons 9](#) and [10](#))
9. Daniel's prayer first confesses the sins of God's people to God before asking for God's help. Why is it important that God's people first confess their sins? ([Lesson 11](#))
10. In what sense is Jonah's experience a parable? What are some of the truths that this colorful story teaches us? ([Lesson 12](#))
11. What are some of the universal elements of Jonah's prayer that could be prayed by all people who experience descent and rescue, the movement from the pit to the temple? ([Lesson 12](#))
12. What are some ways that your own prayer might be enriched through your study of these prayers of Israel's prophets?

Remind group members to complete the six lessons from [section IV](#) during the week ahead.

Offer prayers of thanksgiving aloud to God for the insights and understanding you gained in the lessons this week.

Offer prayers for your own needs and the needs of others. Pray for the grace to act upon any decisions or resolutions you have made during your study.

Conclude together: *Our Father, who art in heaven ...*

Section IV

Prayer in the Psalms and Stories of Israel

While many prayers can be found throughout the books of the Bible, Psalms is the only book made up entirely of prayers. The psalms have been described as the prayer book of the people of God. The 150 prayers that fill this book arise out of the lived experiences of people in ancient Israel. They stay very close to the concrete realities of life and express the prayers of God's people in every circumstance of their lives. Yet, while these psalms are two to three thousand years old, they are amazingly contemporary. They have been prayed through the ages by God's people in the temple, synagogue, monastery, cathedral, chapel, and home. To pray the psalms is to enter into solidarity with the human pilgrimage in our longing for God.

The psalms express prayers that are generally much wider in range and much richer in content than the sometimes narrow range we allow ourselves in prayer. The psalms convince us that there are many ways to pray, countless ways to address God, and a rich variety of ways to live in relationship with God. The psalms teach us to pray from our lived experience. They assure us that all our life experiences, extraordinary and very ordinary, are appropriate for conversation with God. The book of psalms contains every form of prayer and just about every imaginable human feeling: from deep anger to ecstatic joy, from profound sadness to genuine delight, from depression and despair to

enthusiasm and hope. The psalms are expressions of faith in the ups and downs of our life experiences.

The psalms present for us an attitude toward prayer in which we can be totally honest and bold with God. They are freeing because they help us break out of whatever limits we have placed on our relationship with God. We can bring our whole selves to prayer — our body, mind, feelings, imagination, intuition, and actions. When we have nothing to hide, when we can be unrestrained with God, then our relationship with God, our prayer-life with God, will truly become the foundation of our lives.

In this section we will study a few select psalms and then look at prayers that imitate the psalms in the colorful books of Job, Judith, and Tobit. These prayers are a good way to bridge the Old and New Testaments because the Psalms are the prayer book of Israel, of Jesus, and of the church. These beloved stories of Israel were known by Jesus, and the prayers in these books continue to be prayed by God's people in every age. Jesus prayed the psalms of his people every day. He learned them in his home and in the synagogue at Nazareth, sang them in the temple in Jerusalem, and he probably knew many of them by heart. The psalms helped form Jesus' relationship with the Father. And he began to understand who he was called to be by praying the psalms. The prayers and teachings of Jesus in the Gospels echo the psalms throughout.

Making these biblical prayers our own prayer depends on two things: what we find in the biblical prayer that is already there and what we bring to these texts from our own lives. The work of prayer is bringing together the ancient Scriptures and the content of our heart to interact and illumine one another. When we practice *lectio divina*, letting our minds and hearts go back and forth between the Scriptural words and our own life experiences, we find that the words of Scripture bring vocabulary, form, and authority to what we know about ourselves. Conversely, our own experience brings vitality and immediacy to the prayers of Scripture.

- In what sense is the book of Psalms the prayer book of Israel, of Jesus, and of the church?
- Why is it important that we not be too cautious, refined, and reserved in our prayer to God?
- In what ways can the prayers of the Bible teach us to pray better? How does the practice of lectio divina enrich our experience of these prayers?



LESSON 13

A Prayer of Trust in God's Steadfast Love

LISTENING

Prepare to listen to the words of this psalm by making the sign of the cross, lighting a candle, or doing some other action that sets apart this sacred time. Speak the words of the sacred text aloud as you make the prayer of the psalmist your own.

Psalms 86

¹Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.

²Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you;
save your servant who trusts in you.

You are my God; ³be gracious to me, O Lord,
for to you do I cry all day long.

⁴Gladden the soul of your servant,

for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
⁵For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving,
abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you.
⁶Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer;
listen to my cry of supplication.
⁷In the day of my trouble I call on you,
for you will answer me.

⁸There is none like you among the gods, O Lord,
nor are there any works like yours.
⁹All the nations you have made shall come
and bow down before you, O Lord,
and shall glorify your name.
¹⁰For you are great and do wondrous things;
you alone are God.
¹¹Teach me your way, O LORD,
that I may walk in your truth;
give me an undivided heart to revere your name.
¹²I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart,
and I will glorify your name forever.
¹³For great is your steadfast love toward me;
you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.

¹⁴O God, the insolent rise up against me;
a band of ruffians seeks my life,
and they do not set you before them.
¹⁵But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.
¹⁶Turn to me and be gracious to me;
give your strength to your servant;
save the child of your serving girl.
¹⁷Show me a sign of your favor,
so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame,
because you, LORD, have helped me and comforted me.

UNDERSTANDING

Continue studying this psalm as a prayer for God's help in a situation of need.

This prayer is composed of a variety of expressions found throughout Scripture, especially from the traditions of Moses and David. This reuse of traditional vocabulary and phrases creates a unique prayer of trust in God in a time of need. It focuses on the character of God and on the identity of the one praying in relationship to God. It offers a traditional but heartfelt plea to God that can be prayed by anyone living within the covenant between God and his people.

The prayer begins with a long series of petitions to God: incline your ear and answer me, preserve my life, save your servant, be gracious to me, lift up my soul, give ear to my prayer, and listen to my cry (vv. 1–7). Each plea is supported by a statement about the one who prays in relationship to God: for I am poor and needy, for I am devoted to you, for to you I cry, for to you I lift up my soul. The one who prays disavows all self-sufficiency and admits that life is totally dependent on God. Each prayer is an expression of confidence that God will respond: “I call on you, for you will answer me.” The familiar phrases, praising God as “good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love” (v. 5), describe a dependable God of unchanging character, tested through generations of believers.

The center of the psalm is a prayer of pure praise, expanding these characteristics of God (vv. 8–10). The personal God who hears and answers the prayers of his people is also the universal and only God. God alone works with unlimited power and unrivaled authority. The Lord is the creator of all the nations, and all peoples will, in due time, offer him homage and glorify his name.

The final section of the prayer returns to petitions, pleading not only for deliverance in time of trouble, but also for a lifestyle and inner character that will enable the one praying to offer God praise and thanks. The psalmist prays to God: “teach me your ways” and “give me an undivided heart” (v. 11). Such understanding of God's ways and

purity of heart enables the one praying to give wholehearted thanks to God and to glorify God's name forever (v. 12). The psalmist seeks a single heart to worship the one God. The prayer echoes Israel's great confession of faith, the Shema: "Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:4–5). Prayer is not based on one's personal faith alone but on the ancient and ongoing confessions of the whole community.

The prayer is wide and deep, from God's glory seen by all the nations (v. 9) to the depths of the nether world from which God delivers those servants who trust in him (v. 13). God's mercy embraces the people of every nation and rescues every person who calls out in trouble and distress. Because of this universal and, at the same time, personal divine love, every person who prays this psalm can petition God in the same way as the original inspired writer: "Turn to me and be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant; save the child of your serving-maid" (v. 16). In every generation, throughout the history of God's salvation from exodus until today, God's people may cry out to him, "Show me a sign of your favor, because you, LORD, have helped and comforted me" (v. 17).

REFLECTING

Continue to reflect on the many elements of this ancient prayer and how it expresses your own confidence in God's help.

- The psalmist described many characteristics of God throughout this prayer. Identify these qualities and reflect on how recognizing them might affect my relationship with God and my prayer.

- The psalm is based both on the personal trust of an individual and on the ancient faith of the whole people of Israel. Why does the psalmist root his personal prayer in the experience of Israel's historical community? What is the advantage of praying within a wide and deep tradition of faith?
- Why does the psalmist pray for "an undivided heart" (v. 11)? In what ways does my heart seem divided? What could restore the unity of my heart so that I could give thanks to God "with my whole heart" (v. 12)?

PRAYING

Respond to God in prayer with words and ideas from the inspired psalm. Begin with these words and continue with your own.

- Lord my God, you are merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Teach me your ways, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name. Hear and answer my prayer, O Lord, and help me to trust in your salvation

Rest with security in God's saving grace at work within your heart.

ACTING

The psalmist's final petition is this: "Show me a sign of your favor, because you have helped and comforted me."

- What can I do to open my eyes so that I can see the signs of God's favor to me this week?



LESSON 14

A Prayer to Our All-Knowing God

LISTENING

Breathe in, being filled with the presence of God's Spirit. Breathe out, letting go of any distractions to your prayer. Slowly inhaling and exhaling, begin reading aloud as you pray this psalm.

Psalm 139

¹O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

⁵You hem me in, behind and before,

and lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"

¹²even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.

¹⁷How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

¹⁸I try to count them — they are more than the sand;
I come to the end — I am still with you.

¹⁹O that you would kill the wicked, O God,

and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me —
²⁰those who speak of you maliciously,
and lift themselves up against you for evil!
²¹Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
²²I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies.
²³Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
²⁴See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

UNDERSTANDING

Continue trying to understand the implications of God's intimate knowledge of you.

The four sections of this ancient prayer speak to the intimate relationship between the one praying and God. God knows the psalmist completely (vv. 1–6), is present where the psalmist is (vv. 7–12), and was even present before the psalmist's birth (vv. 13–16). Even the final section, which reveals the psalmist's hatred for the wicked (vv. 19–22), is a Hebrew way of speaking about the psalmist's closeness to God and distance from evildoers. Even though this last section may seem shocking to us, it is another way of describing the psalmist's existence as totally within the knowledge, work, and ways of God.

This prayer is often described as a meditation on God's omniscience (vv. 1–6), omnipresence (vv. 7–12), and omnipotence (vv. 13–15). Yet, at the same time, the psalm is perhaps the most intimate of all the psalms. Though God knows all things, is present everywhere, and is all-powerful, God displays a striking interest in the individual person expressing this prayer to God. The individual is enclosed in divine reality. The Lord knows whatever she does or thinks; the Lord is present to her wherever she is; the Lord formed her life from the first

moment of her existence. Even at the end of life, she is able to say, “I am still with you” (v. 18).

From beginning to end, the prayer is relational. God and the individual are the psalm’s subjects. The psalmist speaks as “I” and refers to God as “you” throughout. In this I-Thou relationship, the speaker is known, accompanied, created, and sustained by God. The prayer portrays the “I” in the light of God’s being and work, and it expresses God’s being and work as the context of “me” and “my life.”

The prayer is characterized by the use of opposite expressions: “when I sit down” and “when I rise up” (v. 2); “my path” and “my lying down” (v. 3); “behind and before” (v. 5); “to heaven” and “in Sheol” (v. 8); the east, “the wings of the morning” and the west, “the farthest limits of the sea” (v. 9); “the darkness” and “the light” (v. 9); “night” and “day” (v. 10). God encompasses all space and time, yet is intimately close; he is within and without, from beginning to end. Though God does not move from place to place as we do, yet God is present in every place. He is totally present, and no one can escape the divine reach.

This understanding of God, who knows every aspect of our lives from conception to the present, can be upsetting for some. The awareness that we are so scrutinized may make us want to retreat. We may fear we will inevitably disappoint one who takes such a personal interest in us. For evildoers, such knowledge is terrifying. But the psalmist feels tucked into God’s presence and protected there.

For all who make this prayer their own, this understanding of God can evoke fear or wonder. Such scrutiny of our lives can cause us to withdraw or it can inspire us with trusting confidence. Yet, as the psalmist experienced, even when we flee from God, his hand will hold us fast and lead us “in the way everlasting.” As we reflect on our relationship with God through this ancient prayer, we deepen our desire for God’s presence and his way. And we surrender our lives to God’s pursuit and rest in his all-knowing presence and his everlasting love.

REFLECTING

Read the psalm again with a focus on the many ways God knows you intimately. Pause to reflect each time a phrase speaks to you.

- The theme of the whole prayer seems to be the speaker's awe-filled exclamation to God, "You know me!" What are some of the ways that God knows the speaker? In what ways does the psalm encourage me to recognize my intimacy with God?
- The ancient Israelites spoke about child-bearing in mysterious terms (vv. 13–16). Has modern science and medicine increased or decreased the wonder of new life and its formation?
- When people reveal private information about themselves to others, they increase the depth of their relationship. When I imagine the closeness of my relationship to God, who knew me even before I was born, what feelings arise within me at the thought of such familiarity with God?

PRAYING

Choosing the phrases that have spoken most to your heart, express the thoughts and feelings that spring up within you and address them to God.

- You search me, O God, and know my heart. You understand me more than I understand myself, and you care about every aspect of my existence. Guide the path of my life and lead me in the way everlasting.

Rest in the wonder of God's loving care for you, knowing that God knows you through and through and also loves you without measure.

ACTING

Consider how your life is being shaped and changed by the fact that God knows you so thoroughly and loves you so intimately.

- In what ways does God's knowledge and love of me lead me to want to know and love others? What can I do today to deepen my knowledge and love of those to whom God leads me?



LESSON 15

A Prayer of Praise to Our Divine King

LISTENING

Read this prayer aloud, seeing it with your eyes, hearing it with your ears, and speaking it with your lips.

Psalm 145

¹I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.

²Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name forever and ever.

³Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.

⁴One generation shall laud your works to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts.

⁵On the glorious splendor of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.
⁶The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed,
and I will declare your greatness.
⁷They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.

⁸The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
⁹The LORD is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.

¹⁰All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD,
and all your faithful shall bless you.
¹¹They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,
and tell of your power,
¹²to make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.
¹³Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.

The LORD is faithful in all his words,
and gracious in all his deeds.
¹⁴The LORD upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down.
¹⁵The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.
¹⁶You open your hand,
satisfying the desire of every living thing.
¹⁷The LORD is just in all his ways,
and kind in all his doings.
¹⁸The LORD is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.
¹⁹He fulfills the desire of all who fear him;
he also hears their cry, and saves them.
²⁰The LORD watches over all who love him,

but all the wicked he will destroy.

²¹My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD,
and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.

UNDERSTANDING

As you read this psalm again, voice your own praise to God through the words of the psalm. Make this prayer your own and try to understand the reasons why God is worthy of the highest praise.

This psalm is an alphabetical acrostic, in which each line begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Though this feature is not evident in the English translation, we can sense the breadth and depth of this form of poetry, which aims at comprehensiveness. The psalmist voices praise of God, expressing the full range of reasons why God's holy name should be exalted and blessed forever.

The prayer moves from the speaker's personal intention to give praise to God (vv. 1–3) to the praise of the intergenerational community (vv. 4–7), and finally to the praise of all people and all living beings. The word “all” is repeated nineteen times throughout the prayer, emphasizing the completeness of the praise offered to God. The Lord is praised every day forever and ever, throughout all generations, by all his people and all his works, for all his words and all his deeds. The prayer progresses from the first verse, announcing the speaker's desire to bless God's name forever and ever, to the climactic last verse, “All flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever” (v. 21).

Throughout this prayer of praise God is portrayed as the King. From the opening verse, “I will extol you, my God and King” (v. 1), the Lord is exalted for his “glorious splendor” and his “majesty” (v. 5). The middle section of the psalm celebrates God's kingdom, its glory and splendor, and the everlasting endurance of God's reign (vv. 10–13). As God is praised as King, the attributes most clearly highlighted are God's power and his goodness. Yet divine power and goodness are inseparable;

God's power is good and his goodness is powerful. In praising God's power, the speaker extols God's "greatness" (v. 3), his "mighty acts" (v. 4), "wondrous works" (v. 5), and "awesome deeds" (v. 6). The speaker praises God's goodness by describing him as gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and compassionate (vv. 7–9).

The prayer moves from a description of God's royal power to an emphasis on God's compassion. His glorious reign is attentive to the needy: "the LORD upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down" (v. 14). God's ways are just and his deeds are kind, and he is near to those who call upon him (vv. 17–18). He rescues those who cry to him, but he judges the wicked (vv. 19–20).

The prayer broadens the compassionate care of God from an exclusive focus on Israel to a universal concern. The traditional attributes of God, which pertain to Israel throughout most of the Hebrew Scriptures (Exod 34:6), are now applied to all people, and even over all that God has made (vv. 8–9). The only requirements for receiving God's salvation are to "call on him in truth," to "fear him," and to "love him" (vv. 18–20). Favor with God rests not on ethnicity, but on personal authenticity. The division between those to whom the door of salvation is opened is not between Israel and the other nations, but between those who love God and the wicked who reject him. God's kingdom, to which Israel's salvation history bears witness, has no boundaries and is open to all. Indeed, "all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever" (v. 21).

REFLECTING

In making this psalm your own prayer, focus on God's power and goodness in extending his reign over your own life.

- Why does the psalmist praise God as a benevolent King? What does the speaker find good about living in God's kingdom?

- Consider the many uses of the word “all” in this prayer? In what ways does this universalism seem to express God’s power and his goodness?
- What are my reasons for praising God? How do they compare with the reasons of the psalmist?

PRAYING

Continue praising God with your own prayer, after being enriched by this prayer from the tradition of Israel.

- I praise you, my God and King, and I bless your holy name forever and ever. You open your hand to provide me with all that I need each day, and you satisfy my deepest desires. I shall forever speak of the glory of your kingdom, and I shall sing of your compassion over all that you have made.

When words are no longer helpful or necessary, just rest with gratitude in the compassionate care of God.

ACTING

Consider yourself as the subject of God the King, and reflect on what it means for you to live in the kingdom of such a powerful and benevolent Lord.

- What can I do today to proclaim God’s goodness and compassion over all that he has made? What can I do to extend God’s reign in

the world?



LESSON 16

Job's Prayer From the Depths

LISTENING

People experiencing ongoing suffering have the right to cry out to God and protest their suffering. Listen to Job's bitter complaint against what seems to be God's hostility against him.

Job 10:1-22

- ¹“I loathe my life;
I will give free utterance to my complaint;
I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.
²I will say to God, Do not condemn me;
let me know why you contend against me.
³Does it seem good to you to oppress,
to despise the work of your hands
and favor the schemes of the wicked?

⁴Do you have eyes of flesh?
Do you see as humans see?
⁵Are your days like the days of mortals,
or your years like human years,
⁶that you seek out my iniquity
and search for my sin,
⁷although you know that I am not guilty,
and there is no one to deliver out of your hand?
⁸Your hands fashioned and made me;
and now you turn and destroy me.
⁹Remember that you fashioned me like clay;
and will you turn me to dust again?
¹⁰Did you not pour me out like milk
and curdle me like cheese?
¹¹You clothed me with skin and flesh,
and knit me together with bones and sinews.
¹²You have granted me life and steadfast love,
and your care has preserved my spirit.
¹³Yet these things you hid in your heart;
I know that this was your purpose.
¹⁴If I sin, you watch me,
and do not acquit me of my iniquity.
¹⁵If I am wicked, woe to me!
If I am righteous, I cannot lift up my head,
for I am filled with disgrace
and look upon my affliction.
¹⁶Bold as a lion you hunt me;
you repeat your exploits against me.
¹⁷You renew your witnesses against me,
and increase your vexation toward me;
you bring fresh troops against me.

¹⁸“Why did you bring me forth from the womb?
Would that I had died before any eye had seen me,
¹⁹and were as though I had not been,
carried from the womb to the grave.

²⁰Are not the days of my life few?
Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort
²¹before I go, never to return,
to the land of gloom and deep darkness,
²²the land of gloom and chaos,
where light is like darkness.”

Job 42:1-6

¹Then Job answered the Lord:
²“I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
³‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
⁴‘Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me.’
⁵I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
⁶therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.”

UNDERSTANDING

Examine these two prayers of Job: his early prayer of complaint and his final prayer of praise.

Sometimes the daily lot of human suffering seems unbearable, and many have cried out in words like Job’s: “I loathe my life.” Job’s prayer takes the form of a bitter complaint against God (10:1). He demands to know why God contends against him and oppresses him with such suffering (10:2). He even sarcastically accuses God of being unjust, since he despises his own creation, the work of his hands, and favors the ways of the wicked (10:3). If God were a mere mortal, with limited vision and temporary life-span, then perhaps God’s flawed justice and

false accusation would make some sense (10:4–7). Job acknowledges that if he were guilty, he would deserve his dreadful condition. But despite Job's innocence, God continues to hunt his mortal prey like a lion, making him appear guilty and thus worthy of such divine onslaught (10:14–17).

In contrast to Job's perception of God's inescapable terror, Job reflects on the painstaking artistry with which God had created him. He highlights the mystery of God's involvement in his conception, gestation, and birth, all seemingly manifestations of God's intimate care and steadfast love (10:10–12). Like a sculptor, Job's Creator fashioned him from clay with meticulous care, just as Adam was formed from "the dust of the ground" (10:8–9; Gen 2:7). Yet, God's creative work is negated by his destructive intent. After fashioning such a fine masterpiece, God destroys his divine handiwork and returns it to dust again. This mystery of deep suffering makes no sense to Job. How can such artistic hands demolish what those very hands have so wondrously created?

Toward the end of the book of Job, this daring hero of faith finally receives a long-delayed response from God. In the midst of a whirlwind, God manifests himself to Job in magnificent power and wondrous splendor (Job 38–41). God proclaims the wonders of his own cosmic design and mysterious governance that Job has belittled as purposeless and cruel. Job learns that God is beyond limitation, explanation, or accountability.

The dialogue then concludes with Job's final prayer in response to God (Job 42:1). The prayer begins with an acknowledgment of God's wisdom and power (42:2). It then follows with a quote from God's whirlwind speech: "Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?" (42:3). By citing God's words, Job makes it quite clear that he is responding to God's challenging question. Job confesses that he is indeed the one who obscured God's cosmic design with ignorant accusations. He admits that he does not possess the wisdom or understanding that God challenged him to display. He concedes that

there are “things too wonderful,” which are beyond his human comprehension.

Job then continues with another quote from God’s whirlwind speech “Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me” (42:4). In response to God’s challenging statement, Job must decide whether or not he will continue with his dispute. Job acknowledges that God has indeed responded to his cry, though in a manner far surpassing what Job has demanded (42:5). God has manifested himself from the whirlwind and overwhelmed Job with the living evidence of God’s presence and purpose. That moment was as numinous for Job as God’s revelation from the burning bush was for Moses.

Finally, Job withdraws his challenge to God and reaffirms his faith in God’s governance of the world (42:6). The traditional understanding of Job’s final words assumes that Job repents of his arrogant attitude toward God and abases himself as a humiliated mortal. In this conflict between the divine and human adversaries, God wins and Job submits. Yet, a careful study of the texts reveals that Job’s final response is ambiguous. Job does not necessarily “despise” himself; rather, he spurns his former stance, recanting his accusations against God. The word “repent” can also mean “to change one’s mind”; thus, Job changes his mind about his position as an angry accuser before God in the dust and ashes. God and Job are reconciled and normal life can continue. Job has come to understand that the designs of God are not governed simply by a system of reward and punishment. Yet, he also realizes that God’s wisdom and the reality of human suffering remains a mystery, beyond the level of human comprehension. Job comes to accept the wisdom of God in the cosmos without understanding the full dimensions of God’s purposes. Though he is created from “dust and ashes” and vulnerable to innocent suffering, he is nevertheless made in God’s image.

REFLECTING

Consider in what ways Job expresses confusions and feelings that might be similar to your own. Consider Job's transformation in the context of your own life.

- In what ways does Job seem to be changed from his early prayer of complaint to his final prayer of praise?
- Job's prayers seem to be a confluence of many different feelings. In what ways does Job seem to be confused, defiant, arrogant, hurt, confident, humbled, or submissive? When has my prayer seemed to be a confusing mix of emotions?
- In Abraham's encounter with God, he said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes" (Gen 18:27). Though fully conscious of his creaturely status before God, Abraham boldly claims a hearing with God. In what sense is Abraham's self-understanding as "dust and ashes" similar to Job's stance before God?

PRAYING

In prayer we can, like Job, put forward our most powerful emotions and expect to receive a hearing before God.

- Lord of Life, who fashioned me from the dust of the earth and granted me the breath of life, I believe that you hear all of my prayers, even the most desperate and confused. Help me to trust in

your governance of my life, even when your ways are impossible for me to understand.

Continue expressing your deepest feelings and the content of your heart to God in prayer.

ACTING

Think about the people who are suffering, angry, and confused like Job.

- How aware am I of people around me who are experiencing emotional pain or who are wearied with life? How sensitive am I to their real needs? What am I ready to do for them?



LESSON 17

Judith's Prayer of Trust in God

LISTENING

When Israel has lost all hope against their Assyrian invaders, Judith appears as the beautiful champion who will save the day for her people. Embodying Israel's covenant faith, she turns to God in prayer in the context of national mourning and penance. Listen to her heroic plea to God.

Judith 9:1–14

¹Then Judith prostrated herself, put ashes on her head, and uncovered the sackcloth she was wearing. At the very time when the evening incense was being offered in the house of God in Jerusalem, Judith cried out to the Lord with a loud voice, and said,

²“O Lord God of my ancestor Simeon, to whom you gave a sword to take revenge on those strangers who had torn off a virgin's clothing to

defile her, and exposed her thighs to put her to shame, and polluted her womb to disgrace her; for you said, 'It shall not be done' — yet they did it; ³so you gave up their rulers to be killed, and their bed, which was ashamed of the deceit they had practiced, was stained with blood, and you struck down slaves along with princes, and princes on their thrones. ⁴You gave up their wives for booty and their daughters to captivity, and all their booty to be divided among your beloved children who burned with zeal for you and abhorred the pollution of their blood and called on you for help. O God, my God, hear me also, a widow.

⁵"For you have done these things and those that went before and those that followed. You have designed the things that are now, and those that are to come. What you had in mind has happened; ⁶the things you decided on presented themselves and said, 'Here we are!' For all your ways are prepared in advance, and your judgment is with foreknowledge.

⁷"Here now are the Assyrians, a greatly increased force, priding themselves in their horses and riders, boasting in the strength of their foot soldiers, and trusting in shield and spear, in bow and sling. They do not know that you are the Lord who crushes wars; the Lord is your name. ⁸Break their strength by your might, and bring down their power in your anger; for they intend to defile your sanctuary, and to pollute the tabernacle where your glorious name resides, and to break off the horns of your altar with the sword. ⁹Look at their pride, and send your wrath upon their heads. Give to me, a widow, the strong hand to do what I plan. ¹⁰By the deceit of my lips strike down the slave with the prince and the prince with his servant; crush their arrogance by the hand of a woman.

¹¹ "For your strength does not depend on numbers, nor your might on the powerful. But you are the God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, savior of those without hope. ¹²Please, please, God of my father, God of the heritage of Israel, Lord of heaven and earth, Creator of the waters, King of all your creation, hear my prayer! ¹³Make my deceitful words bring wound and bruise on those who have planned cruel things against your covenant,

and against your sacred house, and against Mount Zion, and against the house your children possess. ¹⁴Let your whole nation and every tribe know and understand that you are God, the God of all power and might, and that there is no other who protects the people of Israel but you alone!”

UNDERSTANDING

Try to appreciate this prayer of Judith within the context of the story of her heroic actions on behalf of God’s people.

Judith embodies the faith of the Israelites in their covenant with the Lord. Even though all the other nations have surrendered to the power of Assyria, Judith insists that giving up would deny God’s power and his plan for his people. She sees the threat of the Assyrians as an opportunity for faith, urging God’s people to resist the enemy and demonstrate their covenant loyalty.

The book of Judith contrasts the strength of Judith, the widow, with the seemingly insurmountable power of Holofernes, the commander of the Assyrian army. In this female version of David and Goliath, Judith is the beautiful champion who saves her people. With her delicate feminine charm and her trust in God, she will topple the forces that oppress her people.

Judith begins her daring feat by calling on God in prayer. She offers her prayer in a posture of penance and unites her prayer with the evening liturgy of God’s people in Jerusalem (v. 1). At the beginning of the prayer, she unites herself with other women of Israel who suffered violence and oppression, making reference to the rape of Dinah, the only daughter of Jacob (vv. 2–4; Gen 34). She speaks of Simeon’s act of revenge on those who violated his sister Dinah. Just as those adversaries defiled Dinah and polluted her womb, so now the Assyrians intend to defile the sanctuary and pollute the tabernacle of Israel’s God (v. 8).

Israel is God's bride, but she is a bride who is in danger of being raped and plundered. Judith interprets the threat of Assyria in terms of Israel's national honor. The sword with which Simeon took revenge and the bed stained with blood foreshadows the sword Judith will use to slay Holofernes as he lies in his bed. The threat to Judith and her possible defilement express the danger that Israel faces. Judith's honor and Israel's honor are interwoven, but her integrity suggests that Israel will maintain her integrity.

She prays, "Give to me, a widow, the strong hand to do what I plan" (v. 9). Her words aroused the curiosity of the audience to know what the clever woman has devised to defeat the world's greatest commander. As a simple widow, she represents all the widows, orphans, and aliens, indeed all the poor and lowly. The strength of the Assyrians consists in horses and riders, footsoldiers, shields and spears, bows and slings (v. 7). Little do they know that the God of Israel does not depend on arsenals supplied with the most powerful weapons: "For your strength does not depend on numbers, nor your might on the powerful" (v. 11). Rather, Judith prays to the God who paradoxically demonstrates his power in weakness: "You are the God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, savior of those without hope." No litany in Scripture expresses the hope of the poor and lowly better than this one.

REFLECTING

Consider Judith's prayer in the context of the challenges and dangers that confront the people of God today.

- The prayer of Judith offers us ten titles for God arranged in two groups of five (vv. 11–12). Which of these divine names helps me to see a dimension of God that I do not usually consider in my prayer?

- Judith became the great champion who liberated God's people from the threat of destruction. After her heroic deed, the elder praised her: "O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth" (13:18). In what ways does God use women as instruments of his saving presence in the world?
- Judith knows that God does not depend on worldly power: "For your strength does not depend on numbers, nor your might on the powerful" (v. 11). In what ways does God continue to demonstrate his strength through the weak and lowly?

PRAYING

In prayer, believers acknowledge God's presence and power in every circumstance. Pray, because victory over the power of evil does not depend on our own strength but on God's grace.

- God of the heritage of Israel, you are the Helper of the oppressed, the Savior of those without hope. Look with compassion upon the poor and lowly of the earth, and give your people the desire to reflect your loving kindness to all those in need today.

Continue asking God for the courage and the trust of Judith.

ACTING

When we remember human history or watch the daily news, it is difficult to believe that the Lord is the God of the lowly, helper of the

oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, savior of those without hope.

- In what ways could my life more clearly reflect God's passion for the lowly, oppressed, weak, forsaken, and hopeless ones?



LESSON 18

Tobit's Prayer of Thanksgiving

LISTENING

The story of Tobit is filled with prayers, from laments to praise. In response to Tobit's prayer, God sends his messenger Raphael to heal him. Tobit then prays this prayer of thanks for God's mercy in the land of exile.

Tobit 13:1-17

¹Then Tobit said:

"Blessed be God who lives forever,
because his kingdom lasts throughout all ages.

²For he afflicts, and he shows mercy;
he leads down to Hades in the lowest regions of the earth,
and he brings up from the great abyss,
and there is nothing that can escape his hand.

³Acknowledge him before the nations, O children of Israel;
for he has scattered you among them.
⁴He has shown you his greatness even there.
Exalt him in the presence of every living being,
because he is our Lord and he is our God;
he is our Father and he is God forever.
⁵He will afflict you for your iniquities,
but he will again show mercy on all of you.
He will gather you from all the nations
among whom you have been scattered.
⁶If you turn to him with all your heart and with all your soul,
to do what is true before him,
then he will turn to you
and will no longer hide his face from you.
So now see what he has done for you;
acknowledge him at the top of your voice.
Bless the Lord of righteousness,
and exalt the King of the ages.
In the land of my exile I acknowledge him,
and show his power and majesty to a nation of sinners:
'Turn back, you sinners, and do what is right before him;
perhaps he may look with favor upon you and show you mercy.'
⁷As for me, I exalt my God,
and my soul rejoices in the King of heaven.
⁸Let all people speak of his majesty,
and acknowledge him in Jerusalem.
⁹O Jerusalem, the holy city,
he afflicted you for the deeds of your hands,
but will again have mercy on the children of the righteous.
¹⁰Acknowledge the Lord, for he is good,
and bless the King of the ages,
so that his tent may be rebuilt in you in joy.
May he cheer all those within you who are captives,
and love all those within you who are distressed,
to all generations forever.
¹¹A bright light will shine to all the ends of the earth;

many nations will come to you from far away,
the inhabitants of the remotest parts of the earth to your holy name,
bearing gifts in their hands for the King of heaven.
Generation after generation will give joyful praise in you;
the name of the chosen city will endure forever.

¹²Cursed are all who speak a harsh word against you;
cursed are all who conquer you
and pull down your walls,
all who overthrow your towers
and set your homes on fire.
But blessed forever will be all who revere you.

¹³Go, then, and rejoice over the children of the righteous,
for they will be gathered together
and will praise the Lord of the ages.

¹⁴Happy are those who love you,
and happy are those who rejoice in your prosperity.
Happy also are all people who grieve with you
because of your afflictions;
for they will rejoice with you
and witness all your glory forever.

¹⁵My soul blesses the Lord, the great King!

¹⁶For Jerusalem will be built as his house for all ages.
How happy I will be if a remnant of my descendants should survive
to see your glory and acknowledge the King of heaven.
The gates of Jerusalem will be built with sapphire and emerald,
and all your walls with precious stones.
The towers of Jerusalem will be built with gold,
and their battlements with pure gold.
The streets of Jerusalem will be paved
with ruby and with stones of Ophir.

¹⁷The gates of Jerusalem will sing hymns of joy,
and all her houses will cry, "Hallelujah!
Blessed be the God of Israel!"
and the blessed will bless the holy name forever and ever."

UNDERSTANDING

Continue exploring this prayer within the context of the story of Tobit in order to understand its significance for the literature of Israel.

The book of Tobit is about two Jewish families who live in exile from Jerusalem. Tobit is a devout and prosperous Israelite living in Nineveh. He loses his position, is reduced to poverty, and is afflicted with blindness. Near death, he remembers he had deposited a large sum of money in far-away Media, and he sends his son Tobias there to bring back the money. Meanwhile, in Media there lives a young woman, Sarah, who is praying for death because she has lost seven husbands. Each was killed in turn on their wedding night. The story weaves the piety of these two families into a story that serves as a model for Jewish faith in the midst of exile and adversity.

After both Tobit and Sarah express their lament in prayer, God sends the angel Raphael in human form to help them both. As the story unfolds, both Tobit and Sarah are shown to be models of courage, even possessing a sense of humor in the midst of their harsh lives. They express exemplary responses to God's word. And they show those who hear their story how to persevere in their faith. Eventually, at Raphael's urging, Tobias marries Sarah and then returns to Nineveh with his wife and his father's fortune. With the instructions of Raphael, Tobias heals his father's blindness. Tobit then expresses this beautiful prayer of thanksgiving to God.

In the first half of the prayer (vv. 1–8), Tobit praises God in words that echo the psalms of Israel's tradition. He urges the children of Israel to address God with a variety of titles and rich attributes: Our Father, God forever, Lord of righteousness, King of the ages, and King of heaven. He acknowledges that God has scattered his people among the nations, yet even in exile, God has shown his greatness to them (vv. 3–4). Though they have been afflicted, God will again show his mercy. He will gather again his people from all the nations to which they have been scattered (v. 5). Tobit offers the experience of his own faithful life in sharing with his fellow Israelites the secret of genuine happiness in

relationship to God: “If you turn to him with all your heart and with all your soul, and do what is true before him, then he will turn to you and will no longer hide his face from you” (v. 6).

The second half of the prayer (vv. 9–17) is Tobit’s celebration of Jerusalem. He praises it as the ideal city, embodying not only the hopes of God’s people in exile, but also the aspirations of all people to worship God and experience God’s salvation. The fate of the holy city echoes the fate of God’s people: afflicted for a time, conquered and devastated, yet destined to be rebuilt with prosperity and blessings. He echoes the words of the prophet Isaiah, extolling Jerusalem as a light that will shine to the end of the earth and to which all the nations will come (v. 11; Isa 60). All those who grieve with Jerusalem will rejoice with her and witness her everlasting glory (v. 14). The gates and wall of Jerusalem will be built with jewels and precious stones, in anticipation of the climactic visions of the heavenly city in the Bible’s final chapters (Rev 21–22).

REFLECTING

As you consider the circumstances of Tobit’s prayer and his joyful gratitude to God, consider the parallels to your own life and prayer.

- The author of the book of Tobit taught the Israelites of his day how to maintain fidelity to their covenant with God in a foreign land and alien culture. When have the circumstances of my life moved me away from the roots of my faith and challenged me to live my faith in a new way in a different environment?
- The story communicates a sense of the joy that comes from a faithful life, a joy that is obvious in the prayer of Tobit. In what ways

does Tobit's prayer express the joy that I experience in covenant with God?

- Tobit offers hope to God's people and shares with them the way to happiness with God. What advice is most helpful and encouraging to me?

PRAYING

After listening in your heart to the prayer of Tobit, pray your own prayer of praise and thanks to God for all he has done for you.

- Lord of righteousness and King of the ages, you have led me through the trials and afflictions of exile, yet you continued to look with favor upon me and show me your mercy. I know that you will bring me to the new and everlasting Jerusalem where I will worship you with all your saints in glory.

Continue offering praise and thanks to God from your heart.

ACTING

Tobit urged his fellow exiles to be faithful to God and trust in the future God has promised. Think about the advice he might offer to you.

- Tobit exhorts: "Now see what he has done for you; acknowledge him at the top of your voice." In what ways can I express gratitude for what God has done for me and acknowledge him to others?

Group Session Guide for Section IV

Begin with hospitality and welcome. Offer any announcements or instructions before entering the spirit of focused discussion. Discuss these questions or those of your own choosing:

1. The psalms contain every form of prayer and express every imaginable human emotion. Why is it helpful to be uninhibited and unrestrained in the expression of our mind and heart to God in prayer?
2. What are some indications that Psalm 86 is a personal prayer that is rooted in the historical faith and experience of Israel? Why is it important to root your own prayer within the historical faith of the church? ([Lesson 13](#))
3. The center of Psalm 86 is a prayer of pure praise of God. In what ways does this section differ from the other parts of the psalm? Why is praise so important in the midst of petition? ([Lesson 13](#))
4. In Psalm 139, God is described as knowing all things, being present everywhere, and being all powerful. Yet it is perhaps the most intimate of all the psalms. How does the one praying the psalm experience both the awe-inspiring greatness of God and his personal closeness? ([Lesson 14](#))
5. God's intimate knowledge of us and God's closeness to us can evoke both fear and wonder. It can cause us to withdraw or it can inspire us with confidence. When have you felt like the psalmist? ([Lesson 14](#))

6. What are some of the ways that Psalm 145 praises God for his goodness and power? What difference would it make if you focused more of your prayer on the praise of God? ([Lesson 15](#))
7. In what sense can we say that Job's cry of bitter complaint to God is a form of prayer? ([Lesson 16](#))
8. In what ways does Job seem to change from his early prayer to his final prayer to God? What can Job teach you about a relationship to God in prayer? ([Lesson 16](#))
9. Reread Judith's invocation to God in Judith 9:11–12. In what ways do these divine titles express her experience of God? What do they emphasize to me about my relationship to God? ([Lesson 17](#))
10. How is Judith instilled with such courage and confidence in her prayer? What do you find most admirable about her? ([Lesson 17](#))
11. Tobit's prayer is filled with joy and hope for God's people. Which of his words are most helpful and encouraging to me? ([Lesson 18](#))
12. In what sense can we say that the book of psalms is the prayer book of Israel, of Jesus, and of the church? Why is the book of psalms the ideal transition from the Old Testament to the prayers of the New Testament?

Remind group members to complete the six lessons from [section V](#) during the week ahead.

Offer prayers of thanksgiving aloud to God for the insights and understanding you gained in the lessons this week.

Offer prayers for your own needs and the needs of others. Pray for the grace to act upon any decisions or resolutions you have made during your study.

Conclude together: *Hail Mary, full of grace ...*

Section V

Prayer in the Life of Jesus

The New Testament is a definitive stage in the development of prayer because of the prayer manifested in the life of Jesus. His prayer expresses his mission as mediator between God and humanity and as the redeemer of all. The prayer of Jesus was also a concrete expression of his fully-lived humanity. His prayer reveals what God wants *for* us by bringing the love of the Father as close as possible. And he demonstrates what God wants *from* us by showing us how to pray.

By understanding the prayer of the Hebrew Scriptures we know what Jesus inherited through his Jewish tradition. Jesus imitated the prayers of his ancestors in Israel's history, he was immersed in the prayers of the prophets, and he regularly prayed the psalms by heart. Jesus prayed regularly in the temple of Jerusalem. He also prayed in the synagogue on the Sabbath with the rhythms and words of the Jewish people. He prayed before each meal, and he prayed in the morning, afternoon, and evening, according to the times of the regular offerings in the temple.

In addition, Jesus cultivated a solitary life of prayer, away from the crowds and often apart from his disciples. Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus prayed early in the morning, "while it was still very dark." And Mark says that he deliberately prayed away from other people, going "to a deserted place" (1:35). Later in the gospel, Mark tells us that Jesus left the crowd after feeding them in order to pray by himself in the

mountains (6:46). Here his prayer was late at night, and again Jesus sought a solitary experience away from the crowds. He pursued communion with God, whom he addressed as Father with the intimate term, “Abba,” seeking peace, refreshment, and renewal.

More than any other gospel writer, Luke focuses on the practices of prayer in his portrait of Jesus. Prayer highlights all the crucial events of Luke’s gospel. Jesus prayed as the Holy Spirit descended upon him after his baptism (3:21). He spent all night in prayer before choosing the twelve apostles (6:12). He had been praying when he asked those disciples their view of his true identity (9:18). Jesus was transfigured before his disciples “while he was praying” on the mountain (9:29). During the passion, Jesus prayed for Peter that his faith not fail (22:32) and even for those who put him to death (23:34). When Jesus went to the Mount of Olives on the night before his death, Luke’s gospel notes that he went to a particular place where he prayed regularly. There Jesus asked his closest disciples to pray. And he withdrew from them a ways and then knelt down to pray intensely to his Father (22:39–41).

At the climactic conclusion of Jesus’ mission and ministry, Jesus ends his life in prayer. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in paragraph 2605 expresses the intensity of his prayer to the Father:

When the hour had come for him to fulfill the Father’s plan of love, Jesus allows a glimpse of the boundless depth of his filial prayer, not only before he freely delivered himself up (“*Abba ... not my will but yours*”) (Luke 22:42), but even in *his last words* on the Cross, where prayer and the gift of self are but one: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34); “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43); “Woman, behold your son” — “Behold your mother” (John 19:26–27); “I thirst” (John 19:28); “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34); “It is finished” (John 19:30); “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46) until the “loud cry” as he expires, giving up his spirit (Mark 15:37; John 19:30).

- In what ways does Jesus show us the value of both communal prayer and private prayer?
- What have the previous lessons from the Old Testament taught me about the prayer of Jesus? Why is it important to understand the prayer of ancient Israel to understand the heart of Jesus' prayer?
- What are some of the lessons on prayer that Jesus demonstrates through the gospel accounts of his own prayer?



LESSON 19

The Prayer That Jesus Taught His Church

LISTENING

Because the life of prayer lived by Jesus had such an impact on his disciples, they asked Jesus to show them how to pray. Listen as Jesus teaches you the kinds of words to offer to God in prayer.

Matthew 6:5–15

⁵“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their

many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹“Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us this day our daily bread.

¹²And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

UNDERSTANDING

Try to better understand the prayer that Jesus taught us and that his church adopted as its own.

Jesus’ teaching on prayer in his Sermon in the Mount describes the internal disposition that must motivate the true disciple at prayer. Rather than praying with elaborate display meant to impress others, Jesus urges us to pray in a quiet, secluded place, making God the reason for our prayer. He says that prayer is not a one-way street — it requires both listening and speaking to God. And it does not require a multitude of words, since God knows our needs before we even ask. Jesus’ instruction, “Pray then in this way” (v. 9), suggests that Jesus is offering his followers a model prayer. He gives us not just a prayer to be memorized but a pattern to follow in all of our prayer. As a blueprint for our prayer, it demonstrates our relationship with God and highlights the prayer of praise, contrition, and petition.

The Lord's Prayer comes from the heart of Jesus. In addressing his prayer to "our Father," Jesus invites us to share in his own prayer-life, to participate in his intimate relationship with God, and to involve ourselves in the life of the Trinity. In the Holy Spirit, we can consider ourselves as children of God alongside Jesus. The phrase "our Father" suggests God's immanence, his personal presence among us, while "in heaven" implies God's transcendence, reminding us of the cosmic scope of God's reign. The Creator and divine cause of the universe is the God we can know as our loving Father.

The first three petitions, all of which contain the word "your," focus on God. "Hallowed be your name" asks that God's name be made holy or held in reverence. We can bring honor to God's good name or we can disgrace his reputation by the things we say and do. Yet, ultimately, only God can truly sanctify his name by revealing himself fully to the world. "Your kingdom come" (v. 10), prays that God complete his work of creation and redemption. The petition asks him to vanquish evil and establish his reign in the world. Though God's kingdom has been inaugurated with the coming of Jesus, God's rule over creation will only be complete in Christ's glorious coming. "Your will be done" asks that we strive to follow God's will as obediently as we can on earth, while realizing that God's desire for creation will only be accomplished when heaven and earth are one. All three of these petitions have implications for our lives today as we live in accord with the vision of God's reign among us. They also anticipate the fullness of God's holy presence and rule over the world and over our lives eternally.

The next four petitions, all of which contain the word "us," focus on our needs. While we hope for the future kingdom, we pray for the practical and urgent needs we find as we live in a world not yet fully conformed to God's will. They ask God to help us with our human needs for sustenance, forgiveness, and strength in the face of testing and evil (vv. 11–13). "Give us this day our daily bread" requests that God grant us what we need to sustain us in all aspects of our lives. Yet, "daily bread" can also be translated as "bread for tomorrow" or "bread that is coming." In this sense, the petition asks God to bring us to the banquet of his eternal kingdom. "Forgive us our debts" asks God to

forgive our sins and the debt we owe to God and others when we trespass against them. “Do not bring us to the time of trial” prays that we be kept safe during the time of suffering that will precede the final coming of God’s kingdom. Yet, the word for “trial” can also be interpreted as a time of testing, temptation, or enticement to sin. So we ask God to help us stand firm in the midst of whatever comes our way. Finally, “rescue us from the evil one” petitions God to deliver us from all the wickedness that surrounds us in the world, while knowing that he has conquered the powers of evil so that they can have no ultimate hold upon us.

REFLECTING

Spend some time considering the ways that the prayer Jesus taught us can have a deeper and more personal impact on your life as his disciple.

- Pray the Lord’s Prayer again, this time imagining the prayer coming directly from the heart and lips of Jesus himself. What aspects of this prayer do I particularly notice through this imaginative experience?
- The entire Lord’s Prayer anticipates the coming of God’s kingdom, when justice and peace will embrace one another and the whole world. How should I live in the present while carrying this vision of God’s future reign within me?

- Prayer to God cannot ignore my relationships with my neighbors. In what ways does the Lord's Prayer remind me of this reality?

PRAYING

Jesus tells his disciples, "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (v. 8). If this is so, then do not pray for a multitude of needs, but place yourself in the presence of God who knows the depths of your heart, cares about you deeply, and desires the fullness of life for you.

- Lord Jesus, I don't want to be like the hypocrites, performing religious deeds while my heart is far away from God. Help me to develop a heart like your own and to pray in the way you taught me.

When words are no longer helpful in your prayer, spend some moments in contemplative prayer, imagining your heart beating to the rhythm of the heart of Jesus, being filled with his love for the Father.

ACTING

Jesus ends his teaching on prayer with these words: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

- Whom do I need to forgive so that I can experience my Father's forgiveness more fully in my own life? How can I forgive today?



LESSON 20

Jesus' Prayer of Praise to the Father

LISTENING

Jesus prayed these words to the Father at a pivotal moment in his own life. Listen to these words of praise and thanksgiving that Jesus offers to his Father.

Matthew 11:25–30

²⁵At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

²⁸“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn

from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

UNDERSTANDING

After listening to this brief prayer of Jesus and his invitation that follows, consider what they tell you about Jesus’ own life of prayer in relationship to the Father.

Though the gospels tell us that Jesus prayed often throughout his life, they only offer us a few of the actual prayers of Jesus. This brief prayer seems to be a spontaneous moment of praise and thanksgiving addressed by Jesus to the Father. He calls upon God as “Father, Lord of heaven and earth” (v. 25). As in the Lord’s Prayer, he blends both intimacy and reverence in his address to God. As Father, he emphasizes God’s immanence and personal presence; as Lord of heaven and earth, he stresses God’s transcendence and cosmic majesty.

Jesus expresses gratitude that God reveals the ways of the kingdom to “infants,” and hides them from “the wise and the intelligent.” Those who are open and humble, unimpeded by preconceived ideas of how God should act, are able to receive God’s revelation. But those who are arrogant cannot understand God’s ways. God’s “gracious will” has always worked in this way: resisting the proud and giving grace to the humble (v. 26). Although God freely gives, the attitude of the receiver determines the results.

The unique bond between Jesus and his Father, manifested in prayer, is the source of his power and authority (v. 27). Because Jesus knows the Father so intimately, his teaching can uniquely reveal the plan and will of God to anyone to whom he chooses to reveal it. The Father has entrusted everything into the hands of his Son. He has given Jesus the authority to teach, forgive sins, expel demons, heal the sick, and raise the dead. Jesus is the channel of God’s revelation. Because

he knows the Father, he can make the Father known to anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him.

Jesus' prayer to the Father seems to express his deep joy. His intimate and loving relationship with God as his Father overflows into his prayer. He is filled with joy because he is able to share with others the experience of being a child of God. With ordinary childlike men and women, he is able to make his Father known. Then those to whom Jesus makes God known can, in turn, also pray to God as "Father" and experience God as a loving, providing parent.

Since the way to know the Father is through the Son, Jesus offers one of the most appealing and memorable invitations of the gospel. He calls to all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and encourages them to come and experience the rest he offers them (vv. 28–30). The invitation of Jesus is twofold. First, he says, "Come to me." Being with Jesus and sharing his life is the way to fulfillment. Next, he says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me." When an animal is yoked, it is ready for work. Following the teachings of Jesus and taking up the cross are certainly not effortless. Yet, Jesus says paradoxically, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Though the Christian life is a challenge, the way of Jesus gets at the heart of God's will for us. Because Jesus is gentle and humble, learning from him and following him is not burdensome. His way leads to rest, to his Father, to the fullness of life.

REFLECTING

Consider what the prayer of Jesus can teach you about your relationship to the Father and how you can deepen your intimacy with him.

- Do I experience God more as intimate Father or as transcendent Creator in my prayer? How can the prayer of Jesus help me to better balance these two aspects of my relationship with God?

- Why is the kingdom hidden “from the wise and intelligent” and revealed “to infants”? In what sense could this possibly be God’s “gracious will”?
- What are the implications for my prayer of God’s choice of the childlike to understand his revelation? What encouragement does Jesus offer me when he says “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light”?

PRAYING

Allow the joyful praise of Jesus for his Father to capture your heart, then voice your prayer to him.

- Lord Jesus, you invite me to come to you and to learn from you the ways of the Father. As I come to you, weary and bearing heavy burdens, show me the ease and lightness of your way. I want to follow you and learn the ways of the kingdom as a humble and needy child.

Continue expressing your prayer from your heart.

ACTING

The ways of God’s kingdom are hidden from the wise and intelligent, but revealed to infants.

- What qualities would make my heart more receptive to God’s revelation to me? In what ways can I make my desires more like

those of a child?



LESSON 21

The Prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane

LISTENING

After the Last Supper, Jesus went to Gethsemane to pray in anticipation of his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and death. Listen to the way that Jesus addresses the Father.

Matthew 26:36–46

³⁶Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.”

³⁷He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. ³⁸Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” ³⁹And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” ⁴⁰Then he came to the disciples and found them

sleeping; and he said to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? ⁴¹Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” ⁴²Again he went away for the second time and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” ⁴³Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. ⁴⁵Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

UNDERSTANDING

While studying this three-fold prayer of Jesus, consider how his prayer exemplifies the type of prayer that he had previously taught his disciples.

Jesus knew the Psalms of his Israelite tradition by heart, and he must have prayed them often throughout his life. As Jesus went to Gethsemane to pray before his death, a psalm of lament naturally arose within him, to express his anguish and emotional distress. Jesus tells Peter, James, and John, “I am deeply grieved.” The literal translation of Matthew’s Greek says, “deeply grieved is my soul,” or “my soul is cast down.” These words allude to the words of Psalm 42–43, originally one psalm of lament, from the prayer book of Israel that Jesus knew so well. The refrain of the psalm is repeated three times, “Why are you downcast, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?” (Ps 42:5, 11; Ps 43, 5). By referring to just one line of the psalm, the Jewish-Christian readers of Matthew’s gospel would know that Jesus recited the entire psalm as his prayer to the Father. The same could be said for the words of Psalm 22 on the lips of Jesus as he was dying on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Matt 27:46). The gospel’s quotation of the first line lets the reader know that Jesus would have recited the entire psalm as his final prayer to the Father.

Both Psalm 42–43 and Psalm 22 are prayers of lament, yet they each express a longing for God and end with words of trusting confidence. We could say that at Gethsemane and at Golgotha Jesus embodied Israel's psalms of lament.

Jesus' prayer echoes many elements of the prayer Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Mount. As he taught his disciples to pray "our Father," Jesus addressed his prayer to "my Father," as he prayed aloud and "threw himself on the ground" in submission (v. 39). Exemplifying the third petition of the Lord's Prayer, "your will be done," Jesus focuses his attention in prayer on his Father's will. Despite his very human fears and frailty, Jesus remains obedient. Although he desires to be excused from suffering and death, "let this cup pass from me," Jesus chooses his Father's will over his own. In his first prayer, Jesus expresses his submission to his Father: "not what I want but what you want." In his second prayer, Jesus accepts that he must drink from the cup of suffering, and he says, "your will be done" (v. 42). Finally, he prayed for the third time, "saying the same words" (v. 44). In the Bible, saying or doing something three times expresses resolve. Here Jesus declares in prayer his steadfast determination to follow the Father's saving plan for the world.

Jesus echoes the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer, "do not bring us to the time of trial." He urges his disciples to stay awake and pray "that you may not come into the time of trial" (v. 41). Jesus had warned his disciples that they would experience persecution and tribulation. So he urges them to remain prayerful and vigilant, ready for the testing that will come their way. He gives them a realistic assessment of the overwhelming nature of evil and why it is so easy to fall prey to it. The "spirit" and the "flesh" are the two struggling tendencies within each human person. The human spirit is fortified by God's Spirit and thus can remain faithful in trial. But the "flesh," human frailty and sinfulness, is too weak to be obedient under the test.

Jesus is the exemplary model of faithfulness and prayer for the suffering Christian community. He remains watchful in prayer as the passion approaches. His readiness for the trial strongly contrasts to his

threefold return to find the disciples sleeping. The contradictory attitudes of watchful obedience and drowsy unpreparedness play out in the remainder of the gospel. Jesus triumphs in the face of trial and the disciples enter into temptation and flee.

REFLECTING

Think about ways that Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane can influence your own growth in prayer.

- What are some of the emotions Jesus must have felt in Gethsemane? Do I allow myself to experience and express my emotions in prayer? What did Jesus want from his disciples?
- One early Christian approach to praying the psalms was to read them as if Jesus was the speaker. Pray Psalm 42–43 while imagining you are saying this prayer through the passion of Jesus. What new understanding of the prayer of Jesus does this provide for you?
- When has it been most difficult for me to pray, “Your will be done”? What does the example of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane teach me?

PRAYING

Learning from the prayer of Jesus himself, ask him to help you to pray as he prayed.

- Jesus, your prayer at Gethsemane shows your intimacy with the Father and your submission to his will. Help me to stay alert and awake as I live as your disciple, and teach me how to pray for knowledge and acceptance of the Father's will for me.

Continue speaking from your heart in response to the insights you have received.

ACTING

In his prayer in Gethsemane, Jesus grew to embrace the Father's will and accepted the cup of suffering he was given to drink.

- Begin praying this evening that God will help you understand his will for you tomorrow. Decide to end every day with a prayer that God will give you insight into what he wants from you for the next day.



LESSON 22

Jesus Teaches His Disciples How to Simply Ask

LISTENING

As one of his disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray,” let Jesus teach you to pray as you listen to his words.

Luke 11:1–13

¹He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” ²He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

⁵And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ ⁷And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ ⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

⁹“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

UNDERSTANDING

Spend some time thinking about Jesus’ short course on prayer. Let him teach you as he taught his disciples.

After seeing Jesus pray, as he was in the habit of doing, one of his disciples said to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples” (v. 1). Jewish rabbis would commonly teach their disciples particular prayers and methods of prayers, and apparently John the Baptist had done the same. But there must have been something particularly attractive about the way Jesus prayed that made his disciples desire to share it. So Jesus spent some time teaching his disciples to pray.

This first lesson on prayer from Luke’s gospel consists of three units: a briefer form of Jesus’ model prayer (vv. 2–4), followed by a brief

parable about asking for what we need (vv. 5–8), and a short teaching about God’s desire to give good things to his children (vv. 9–13). All three parts of the lesson are rooted in the reality that God is a generous and loving Father to his sons and daughters.

This version of the Lord’s Prayer begins with two brief petitions of praise to God: “hallowed be your name” and “your kingdom come.” These two “your” petitions look forward to the coming fullness of God’s reign that is the center of attention for a disciple living in the world. The prayer then follows with three “us” petitions: for sustenance, forgiveness, and protection while anticipating the kingdom’s coming.

Jesus’ parable asks that his disciples envision a situation that would not have been at all difficult to imagine at the time. People often traveled at night to avoid the heat of the day, so an unexpected visitor at midnight would not be uncommon. And since Palestinian homes were small, often with a mat serving as a bed for the whole family, it would not be difficult to understand why the friend would not want to get up and disturb the whole family. With this brief parable, Jesus teaches that God will answer our prayers. If a person will answer the request of a friend, though not eagerly because of great inconvenience, certainly God, for whom there is no inconvenient time, will answer the prayers of his children.

Jesus then concludes his teaching by instructing his disciples to ask, to search, and to knock, knowing that when we ask we will receive, when we search we will find, and when we knock the door will be opened (vv. 9–10). In other words, we should pray expectantly, knowing that God always responds to our prayers. When children ask for the necessities of life like a fish or an egg, what parent would refuse them, or give them a snake or a scorpion instead (vv. 11–12)? If even imperfect earthly parents do good in response to their children’s requests, how much more will our heavenly Father give to those who ask!

We should imitate the expectancy of children who are not afraid to ask their parents for anything because they know they can count completely on their love. God delights in answering our prayers and

giving us good things. In fact, God gives us the best gift of all, the Holy Spirit, the one in whom we share in God's very life (v. 13).

REFLECTING

Consider ways that Jesus' teachings on prayer can be activated in your own life.

- As Jesus responds to the request of his disciple to teach them how to pray, what seems to be some of the most important points he emphasizes in his teaching?
- Jesus teaches his disciples the importance of praying with confidence and expectancy. How confident am I that God hears and answers my prayers?
- Too often we think that we have to learn particular techniques and contemplative modes of prayer in order to be effective before God. But Jesus invites us to find the model for prayer in the simple request of a child to a loving father. How would I like to be able to pray?

PRAYING

After considering Jesus' words on prayer, pray simply from the heart to God.

- Lord Jesus, all that I am and all that I have is the gift of our loving Father. Teach me to pray as you taught your disciples. Show me how to simply ask, to search, and to knock with confidence and trust.

Continue praying with expectancy, offering your prayer with simple faith and reliance on God's care for you.

ACTING

Try to improve your life of prayer by putting these teachings of Jesus into practice in the concreteness of your daily existence.

- If I take the teaching of Jesus seriously, about receiving whatever I ask for in prayer, then how should I pray? What will I ask for in prayer today?



LESSON 23

Two Parables About Prayer

LISTENING

Jesus continues to teach his disciples how to approach God in prayer. Listen as he instructs you on the need to pray always, not to lose heart, and to trust humbly in God.

Luke 18:1-14

¹Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” ⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will

he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

UNDERSTANDING

Jesus seeks to teach us the proper attitude when we are at prayer. Try to understand what he is teaching you through these parables.

Both of these parables are found only in Luke's gospel. Each parable portrays two central characters: the first shows us the widow and the judge; the second shows us the Pharisee and the tax collector. Each story opens with a statement of purpose (vv. 1, 9) and concludes with summary comments (vv. 6–8, 14). As parables, they each challenge the inner disposition of the hearers — both the disciples of Jesus' day and those in the next generation who hear the gospel proclaimed. Prayer, they teach us, is not just a matter of right words or proper technique. Rather, it concerns our relationship with God and our changed hearts.

Widows, like orphans and aliens, were defenseless and had no social standing. Yet, this widow eventually receives justice from the judge, not because she is powerful or because the judge is

compassionate, but because she is relentless in her pursuit of justice. She will not take no for an answer, and she wears him down. The point of the parable is clear. If this defenseless widow can achieve justice from a heartless judge through persistence, how much more can we expect that God, the just and merciful judge, will answer our prayers if we persevere.

The introduction states that the parable is about the need “to pray always and not to lose heart” (v. 1). This means that prayer is not about the quantity of words we say, but about our whole relationship with God. Praying always means making our whole life a response to God. The conclusion asks whether or not Christ will find faith on earth when he comes again (v. 8). This implies that persistent prayer is necessary to maintain a living faith. In our life with Christ, our faith prompts us to pray, and prayer strengthens our faith. Disciples must continue to pray so that they will be found faithful when the Lord returns.

The second parable contrasts the prayer of the Pharisee and the tax collector. In order to understand the impact of Jesus’ story, we must realize that the Pharisees at the time of Jesus were the models of Jewish learning and devotion, while tax collectors were despised as corrupt collaborators with the Roman occupiers. When these two men went up to the temple to pray, the differences in their internal dispositions is obvious. The Pharisee depends on his adherence to all the laws of his faith, and he assumes that he is righteous before God. He thanks God that he is not like the tax collector standing nearby (v. 11). The Pharisee exalts himself and has no real sense of his own sinfulness and unworthiness before God. In contrast, the tax collector humbles himself, confesses that he is a sinner, and cries out for God’s mercy. Jesus concludes the parable by stating that the tax collector, not the Pharisee, went home justified before God.

Jesus teaches that we can never earn or deserve our salvation. The grace of God’s forgiveness and the gift of our justification before God means that no one can feel religiously superior to another. The parable’s conclusion warns us not to exalt ourselves before God lest we be humbled. Our prayer should be humble and honest. We should not

try to convince God of our righteousness but acknowledge our dependence on his grace and mercy.

REFLECTING

Spend some time reflecting on these parables and the challenges they offer you concerning your life of prayer.

- Sometimes we are tempted to become discouraged when we do not get an instant answer to our prayer and when it does not yield the results that we expect. How does the first parable challenge my discouragement and urge me to pray always?
- If Jesus told the second parable today, what group of people would be the Pharisee and who would be the tax collector in order to communicate the same point?
- Why did the Pharisee act the way he did? Why did the tax collector act the way he did? What do these two characters teach me about prayer?

PRAYING

Using the lessons of Jesus' parables, pray to God from the heart with humility and gratitude.

- Compassionate God, you are the just and merciful judge who hears and answers my prayers. I come before you, grateful for your gift of forgiveness and salvation, and confidently trusting in your grace.

Continue in silent prayer, humbling yourself before God and trusting in his mercy.

ACTING

Jesus' parables always challenge us to change our hearts and to transform our relationship to God. Consider how these parables challenge you in this way.

- Jesus teaches us to pray always, not to lose heart, and to trust humbly in God. How can I implement these teachings in my daily prayer?



LESSON 24

Jesus' Prayer During the Crucifixion

LISTENING

The gospels show us that Jesus prayed throughout his life, and his prayer continued throughout the ordeal of his torturous death on the cross. Listen to the final words of Jesus addressed to his Father.

Luke 23:32-49

³²Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" ³⁶The soldiers also mocked

him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴²Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

⁴⁴It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.” ⁴⁸And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. ⁴⁹But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

UNDERSTANDING

Search for a deeper understanding of Jesus’ final words in the context of his entire life that culminates on the cross.

More than any other gospel, Luke’s account shows Jesus praying at all the most important moments. So it is not surprising to see Jesus praying from the cross, at the most important moment of all. These three final utterances of Jesus are prayers of Jesus to the Father and his response to the prayer of another. In each, Jesus shows himself to exemplify what he taught throughout his public ministry.

After being crucified, Jesus prays that God forgive his executioners and the crowd who had pressed for his death: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (v. 34). With this prayer, Jesus shows himself to be faithful to his teachings on love of enemies (6:27–36) and to his teaching on forgiveness in the prayer he taught his disciples (11:4). In his dying moments, Jesus lives out his mission of calling sinners to repentance (5:32) by assuring them of the Father’s bountiful forgiveness. Evidently touched by this prayer, the people who had demanded Jesus’ crucifixion now begin to experience a change of heart. After his death, they return home beating their breasts, an expression of regret and remorse (v. 48).

Of the two criminals crucified with Jesus, one remains unrepentant and keeps deriding Jesus. But the other is touched by the grace of repentance, acknowledging his own guilt and the innocence of Jesus. As the unrepentant one mockingly scoffs, “Save yourself and us!” (v. 39), the repentant criminal speaks, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (v. 42). Jesus’ reply shows that he does indeed save him. He offers the ultimate example of how far divine forgiveness can go: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (v. 43).

Finally, Jesus dies while entrusting his spirit to the Father in prayer. The gospels of Matthew and Mark show Jesus praying the words of Psalm 22 from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But Luke shows Jesus praying the words of Psalm 31, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (v. 46). Each psalm is a lament, and we can assume that Jesus prayed the entire psalm as his final prayer before his death.

In Psalm 31, the innocent sufferer addresses God, describing his suffering with great emotion and expressing trust in God’s care. In praying this psalm, Jesus places himself in solidarity with all innocent sufferers in the past, present, and future. Like the other lament psalms, this prayer ends in a prayer of thanksgiving, anticipating what God will do for those who put their trust in him.

REFLECTING

Spend some time reflecting on these questions in order to understand the last prayers of Jesus from the perspective of your own life.

- Why is Jesus' forgiveness of his persecutors such a noble act? Why is it so difficult to forgive people? How can the example of Jesus help me forgive those who have wronged me?
- Of the two criminals crucified with Jesus, one remained unrepentant and the other turned to Jesus. What might have made the repentant criminal recognize his need for Jesus and the salvation he offers?
- Imaginatively pray Psalm 31 as if it was prayed on the lips and in the heart of Jesus. What do you notice about this prayer when prayed through him, with him, and in him?

PRAYING

Respond to Jesus who offers you divine forgiveness and call upon his merciful pardon in prayer.

- Merciful God, teach me to overcome hatred and vengeance with mercy and forgiveness. Help me to live and die like Jesus, blessing the past with forgiveness and entrusting my life into your hands.

Continue resting in God's presence, considering how God has forgiven you.

ACTING

Forgiveness of others relieves our lives of hatred and unleashes God's healing power.

- Whom do I need to forgive? How can I prepare to offer forgiveness so that God's healing may enter my life?

Group Session Guide for Section V

Begin with hospitality and welcome. Offer any announcements or instructions before entering the spirit of focused discussion. Discuss these questions or those of your own choosing:

1. Why is it important to understand the prayers of the Old Testament in order to understand the prayers of Jesus?
2. In what ways does the Lord's Prayer invite you to involve yourself in the life of the Trinity? (Lesson 19)
3. Which of the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer have you learned to understand better as a result of this study? ([Lesson 19](#))
4. In both of Jesus' prayers to the Father in Matthew's gospel, he emphasizes both the immanence and the transcendence of God. How does each prayer emphasize both God's personal presence and cosmic majesty (Lessons 19 and 20)
5. What are some of the emotions that Jesus expressed because of his relationship with the Father? What are some of the feelings you experience as you receive the invitation of Jesus to come to him? ([Lesson 20](#))
6. In what ways does Jesus embody the petitions of the Lord's Prayer in his prayers at Gethsemane? ([Lesson 21](#))
7. What does Jesus' prayer of the psalms indicate to you about his life of prayer? How does his prayer of Psalms 42, 43, 22, and 31

help you understand better his passion and death? (Lessons 21 and 24)

8. What might the disciples have seen in Jesus' life of prayer that prompted them to say, "Lord, teach us to pray"? What do you want to learn and practice from the prayer of Jesus for your own life? ([Lesson 22](#))
9. What do you notice about the similarities and differences in the two versions of the Lord's Prayer? (Lessons 19 and 22)
10. Jesus teaches his disciples the importance of praying with confidence and expectancy. How confident am I that God hears and answers my prayers? ([Lesson 22](#))
11. Jesus' two parables on prayer attempt to teach his listeners about the internal dispositions necessary for genuine prayer. What are some of these dispositions and which ones do I need to integrate better into my own life? ([Lesson 23](#))
12. In what ways do Jesus' final prayers of the cross bring to a conclusion his teachings on prayer throughout his ministry? ([Lesson 24](#))

Remind group members to complete the six lessons from [section VI](#) during the week ahead.

Offer prayers of thanksgiving aloud to God for the insights and understanding you gained in the lessons this week.

Offer prayers for your own needs and the needs of others. Pray for the grace to act upon any decisions or resolutions you have made

during your study.

Conclude together: *Our Father, who art in heaven ...*

Section VI

Prayer in the Apostolic Church

The example of Jesus' prayer and his teachings on prayer in the gospels are carried on in the early church. Luke makes this connection most explicitly. He demonstrates that what Jesus practiced and articulated in his gospel comes to life in his sequel, the Acts of the Apostles. Just as prayer was the foundation of the life of Jesus, prayer also stands at the heart of his church. Acts portrays the disciples as a community that habitually engaged in prayer. Like Jesus, they continued to pray in unison with the offerings at the temple. Yet, we also see that Paul received his divine mandate to bring the gospel to the Gentile world while praying in the temple (Acts 22:17–21). No longer would the temple serve as the center of faith and worship for followers of Jesus. On several occasions in Acts, prayers were addressed to Jesus as Lord. At his martyrdom, Stephen cried, "Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit" and "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:59–60). Thus, he imitated the prayers of Jesus at his death. The early Christians were known as "those who call upon the name" of Jesus.

As Luke demonstrates the relationship of prayer to all the crucial moments of the ministry of Jesus, so in Acts, he demonstrates the parallels of the church and Jesus. Just as Jesus prayed in anticipation of receiving the Spirit at his baptism and before he chose his apostles, so the church prays in anticipation of Pentecost (1:14) and before replacing Judas with Matthias (1:24). Prayer affirms the role of the church as heir of the ministry and authority of Jesus. Prayer among the

disciples leads to their most critical decisions, such as the inclusion of both the Samaritans and the Gentiles in the church. Finally, as the disciples learned from Jesus the importance of prayer in the midst of trials, the church prays when facing opposition and is thereby emboldened for mission.

For Paul, prayer is the source of his apostolic work and feeds his apostolic spirit. He believed that ministry and prayer are complementary. His prayer demonstrates his consciousness of being an instrument of the Lord. He believes that God uses his human talents, energy, and will for the development of the church's mission. As Paul becomes immersed in this ministry, he never neglects the necessity of prayer. He urges his companions in the churches to pray for him: "Join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf" (Rom 15:30). And during his imprisonments, his prayer for the church takes the place of his apostolic work for the church.

The language of prayer permeates the letters of Paul. He consistently begins and ends his letters with blessings: "The grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." He usually follows with prayers of thanksgiving for the community and for the work of God in their midst. His prayers of petition throughout his letters express confidence that God will respond to the needs of his people. These petitions go beyond usual requests for basic needs. They focus on faith, the quality of Christian life, and effectiveness in ministry. Paul's prayers are bold, persevering, and confident because they flow from his deep and abiding relationship with Jesus. He urges all his listeners to personal and communal growth, transformation into the image of Jesus Christ, through faith-filled prayer.

In this final section, we will study Christian prayer as it is presented to us by Luke, Paul, James, and John, the seer of Revelation. Each of these inspired writers will teach us different aspects of prayer within the apostolic church and lead us to personal and communal growth in Christ. When we pray for, with, and in Christ's church, we plead for the church's continual transformation as it understands its mission more

clearly. And we ask that we may better understand our role as faithful witnesses of Jesus and heirs of his ministry.

- In what ways does Luke show us that the church prayed, following the teachings and example of Jesus?
- In what ways does Paul demonstrate that prayer and ministry are complementary?
- What do I want to learn in this section about my own prayer in the context of the church?



LESSON 25

The Prayer of Christian Believers

LISTENING

Prayer in common was a characteristic mark of the early Christian community in Jerusalem. Listen to this account from Luke's writing, focusing on the communal prayer of the church.

Acts 1:12-14

¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. ¹³When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Acts 4:23–31

²³After [Peter and John] were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, ²⁵it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant:

‘Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples imagine vain things?
²⁶The kings of the earth took their stand,
and the rulers have gathered together
against the Lord and against his Messiah.’

²⁷For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, ²⁸to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” ³¹When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

UNDERSTANDING

Learn to appreciate the role of prayer as the unifying practice of the early Christian community as they continued the work of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem.

Luke’s second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, demonstrates how prayer defined the early community of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Just as Luke had portrayed Jesus at prayer throughout his gospel, here he presents his disciples praying together as they continued to preach

and work in the name of Jesus. They prayed as Jesus taught them, with humility and persistence, in words of praise, thanksgiving, and petition.

After Jesus' ascension to heaven, his disciples returned from the Mount of Olives to the city of Jerusalem. There they "were constantly devoting themselves to prayer" (1:14). The nucleus of this community was formed by the male and female disciples who had followed Jesus from Galilee, including Mary his mother. They gathered to express their dedication to their departed Lord, who had not abandoned them, but promised that the Holy Spirit would come upon them. Gathered in "the room upstairs," they engaged in communal prayer to their God, awaiting the manifestation of God's Spirit.

When Peter and John were released from prison, they reported what the religious leaders had said, including the prohibition against speaking or teaching in the name of Jesus (4:23). The community responded to the apostles' report in prayer: "They raised their voices together to God" (4:24). The Christians prayed in common, praising God and giving thanks for the release of the apostles. They also asked God's help during their persecution. Their prayer first addresses God as "Sovereign Lord," the creator of all things. They prayed the words of Psalm 2, realizing that the psalms were inspired by the Holy Spirit and completed in the life of Jesus, and in the life of his church (4:25–26). "The Gentiles" and "the peoples" are the Romans and all those who had a share in the death of Jesus; "the kings" and "the rulers" are the powers in Jerusalem, like Herod and Pontius Pilate, who plotted against him (4:27–28). As they make the words of Psalm 2 their own, the Christians pray in confidence that all that has happened has been done in accord with God's saving plan.

In their prayer, the disciples ask God to take notice of the threats that had been made against the church in Jerusalem. Yet, they do not pray that God spare them from persecution. Rather, they ask for the grace to proclaim God's word "with all boldness" (4:29). They trust that God, who raised his Son from the dead, will give them confidence to carry out what he has called them to accomplish in preaching the gospel they

have received. Furthermore, they ask that healings and other signs and wonders may accompany and verify their preaching of God's word.

Following the bold prayer of these early Christians, the Holy Spirit is manifested as a sign that their prayer has been heard. The place where they were gathered for common prayer was shaken, and their prayer was shown to be effective: "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness" (4:31). They had prayed for power, and with power they were answered. The evangelizing church is rooted in prayer and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim and live the gospel.

REFLECTION

Consider the ways in which the prayer of the early church in Jerusalem might enhance your own prayer with the church today.

- Why would Luke, who presented Mary at the beginning of his gospel, also want to show her present with the disciples as they awaited the coming of the Spirit? How might Mary's presence have enriched the prayer of the infant church?
- The psalms have been traditionally attributed to David. But here, the words are ascribed to God, speaking through the Holy Spirit (4:25). How do these words affirm the church's teaching on the inspiration of Scripture? In what sense are the psalms of Israel the word of God in the words of human beings?

- The prayer of the believers in Jerusalem addressed their prayer to God as the Sovereign Lord, through the name of God's holy servant Jesus, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. What similarities do you notice between this prayer and the liturgical prayers you hear in the Mass today?

PRAYING

Let the prayers of the Bible enrich the images and vocabulary of your own prayer. Having studied God's word, respond to God now in prayer.

- Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, give me the courage to proclaim the gospel word with my life. As I continue to better understand your saving plan, help me to speak your word with boldness and confidence. I ask this in the name of Jesus your Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

Continue to allow God's Spirit to fill your heart as you pray for his divine gifts.

ACTING

Like the early Christians in Jerusalem, continue letting the words you pray become the life you live.

- Rather than ask God to spare them from hardship, the early Christians prayed only for the courage to face it and to keep on speaking God's word with boldness. For what purpose do I need to pray for boldness? What can I do today to claim the strength and courage God offers to me?



LESSON 26

Paul Teaches Believers to Be Confident in Prayer

LISTENING

Paul teaches the Romans about the role of the Holy Spirit in our prayer. Listen to what Paul says about how God's Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us.

Romans 8:14-27

¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ — if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

UNDERSTANDING

Prayer is an expression of our relationship with God. Seek to understand the dynamics of that relationship with God as it is manifested in our prayer.

Our prayer to God flows not from “a spirit of slavery” but from “a spirit of adoption” (vv. 15–17). A relationship of slavery consists of bonded labor and repaying debts owed to a master, motivated by worry and fear. The relationship of adoption, in contrast, is lived in the freedom of a loving family, experienced in security and joy. Through living in Jesus Christ, we are adopted by God as his very children. The same divine Spirit who dwelt so completely in Jesus now dwells in us, completely reorienting our lives. Led by that Spirit, we become “children of God” and are able to call upon God as “Abba! Father!” As the Holy

Spirit lives in us, we enjoy the life of God's adopted children. We become co-heirs with Christ of all the glory the Father has given the Son.

The objective work of the Son, reconciling us to the Father and bringing us into God's family, is matched by the subjective work of the Spirit, making the mediating work of the Son a living experience within us. God sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts so that what is true in fact becomes real in experience. Because of the Spirit's work within us, our prayer is not just empty words but the expression of a parent-child relationship, a real communication with our God. Christian prayer is thoroughly Trinitarian. The Father invites us to call upon him through Jesus the Son and in the Holy Spirit. God is at work on both sides of the relationship: both to receive our prayer and to motivate our prayer. The Father hears our prayer; the Son mediates our access to the Father; the Holy Spirit inspires us to pray. In the Spirit we join with the Son in calling upon God as our Father.

Our lives have been transformed from the inside and given new purpose through the Holy Spirit who lives within us. But we still struggle with prayer and in our relationship with God. Although we have received wonderful promises of the glory to come, we still experience weakness and affliction (v. 18). Because we have been incorporated into Christ through his Spirit, we share in both the suffering and the glory of Christ. Our present experience of the Spirit is like the "first fruits" of a crop in ancient Israel. The initial yield of a field was offered to God in sacrifice and served as a promise of the remainder of the harvest to come (v. 23). We might say today that we have a "down payment" of the Spirit, a partial experience of God's life that assures us that the fullness will be revealed in the future. Though the Holy Spirit has already made us children of God, we will receive our full inheritance when the harvest of God's glory is revealed. So we wait with eager longing and confidence, along with the whole of God's creation, for the freedom and the glory we have been promised (vv. 19-21). We live in hope, oriented toward the future, while living in the tension between suffering and glory (vv. 24-25).

In the present, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness to pray (vv. 26–27). Without the Spirit, we are at a loss to know how to communicate with God or to pray as we ought. All we know how to do is to “groan inwardly” (v. 23), but the Spirit intercedes for us and transforms our groaning into “sighs too deep for words,” translating our stumbling words into the language of God’s world. When we pray, “Abba, Father,” God searches our hearts and hears his own Spirit praying within us. By restoring our communication with God, the work of the Spirit is our foretaste of that transformed union with God for which we long.

REFLECTING

Spend some time reflecting on life under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Consider the influence of Paul’s insights upon your own daily life.

- Life under “a spirit of slavery” makes us worried, fearful, and obligated; whereas life under “a spirit of adoption” makes us trusting, secure, and confident. In what ways am I still influenced by a spirit of slavery? When do I experience the spirit of adoption most completely?
- What is the difference between “hope” and “wishful thinking”? How does the Holy Spirit’s gift of hope enable me to live confidently and trustingly?

- Paul says, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought.” How does the Holy Spirit help me to pray? What evidence do I have that God’s Spirit is praying within me?

PRAYING

Sometimes we stumble in prayer and our words fail us. But the Holy Spirit, who knows what God desires, prays within us so we can always voice our prayer to God in confidence.

- Abba, Father, I turn to you in my weakness, trusting your Spirit to pray within me. Listen to my inward groaning and hear my heart longing for you. Help me to live with confidence and with a deep desire for you, as I wait in hope for the fullness of your promised glory.

In wordless silence, let the Holy Spirit pray within you. “With sighs too deep for words,” give praise and thanks to God.

ACTING

When my prayers become confused, God makes sense of them. When my thoughts seem incoherent, God interprets them. When my words come out wrong, God hears my true intent. When I do not know what to pray for or when I pray for things that are not best for me, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us and makes every prayer in accord with God’s will.

- If the Holy Spirit prays within me, what is my responsibility in prayer as a child of the Father? How can I begin to pray with greater confidence?



LESSON 27

Paul's Prayers of Thanksgiving for the Churches

LISTENING

Most of Paul's letters begin with an expression of thanksgiving, giving us insights into his practice of prayer. Listen to Paul's words, asking the same Holy Spirit who inspired Paul to guide your understanding of the inspired text.

Philippians 1:3–11

³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this

way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Colossians 1:3–14

³In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel ⁶that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. ⁷This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, ⁸and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

⁹For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. ¹¹May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

UNDERSTANDING

Continue exploring the significance of Paul's words for his prayerful care of each of these early Christian communities.

In the thanksgiving sections of Paul's letters, we learn a great deal about his prayer. Paul is deeply connected to the communities to whom he writes, and that spiritual bond is nourished by his constant prayer for them. Paul wrote these letters to the Philippians and the Colossians from prison, yet his words to them are positive and emotional; he prays with joy, confidence, and longing.

Paul's words of deep affection must have been a great comfort and encouragement for the struggling church in Philippi. He prayed for all of them with gratitude and with joy, and he prayed for them constantly (Phil 1:3–4). What especially calls forth this grateful joy is the wholehearted partnership of the Philippians with him in the work of the gospel (v. 5). Paul knows that service to the gospel cannot be done alone; it involves shared ministry and support of one another in the face of opposition. His affection for them continues to deepen as they stand with him while he is in prison and do not back away from their convictions (vv. 7–8). Paul knows that the work they share together is God's work. And he is confident that God will continue and complete the work he has begun in them until the coming of Christ (v. 6). For this reason, Paul is able to write from his prison cell with joy and confidence as he sets his sights on Christ and the glorious future ahead.

After describing the practice of his prayer, Paul then describes the content of his prayer for the Philippians (Phil 1:9–11). The prayer begins by asking that the love of the community might continually overflow with "knowledge and full insight." Love for God, for one another, and for the lost is the heart of Christian discipleship, but genuine love is not just sentiment. It must also be both informed and discerning. Disciples experience the transforming power of God through knowledge of the gospel and a deepening understanding of Jesus Christ. The insight for which Paul prays is a practical understanding that can be applied to the choices disciples must make

everyday. Paul tells the community that he prays for this informed and discerning love “to help you to determine what is best.” In Christian spirituality this determination of “what is best” is called discernment. The community must live in such a way that their lives reflect the gospel so that others may see the beauty of Christianity. The “harvest of righteousness” is the product of the new life that has been planted within them. Union with Christ will bear fruit “for the glory and praise of God.”

Paul introduces his familiar triad of faith, love, and hope when offering his reasons to the Colossians for praying in thanksgiving for them (Col 1:3–5). They have responded with faith in Christ, they have demonstrated their love for other believers, and they have rooted their lives in the hope given to them by the gospel. For these reasons, the gospel has been bearing fruit among them, just as it has been growing and bringing blessings to the whole world (v. 6). So Paul has prayed unceasingly for them. The heart of his prayer has been that they may know God’s will: “asking that you be filled with knowledge of God’s will” so that “you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him” (vv. 9–10). After having experienced the faith, love, and hope that is the Christian life, believers must discern God’s will for them. They must learn to live their lives in a way worthy of the Lord to whom they have entrusted themselves, demonstrating the fruits of Christian existence.

Paul then specifies four characteristics of how the community may live in a manner worthy of the Lord. These are not intended to be a definitive list, but serve to flesh out what it means to live a life that is pleasing to God. First, he prays that they will “bear fruit in every good work” — deeds of compassion, justice, kindness, and self-denial. These are the fruits that the gospel produces. Second, he prays that the Colossians will “grow in the knowledge of God.” The more believers know God, the more they know what pleases him and the more they desire to please him. Third, Paul prays that the Christians will “be made strong” with God’s power, so that they will be able to endure the trials that come (v. 11). And fourth, he prays that they will “joyfully give thanks to the Father,” for he has rescued them from the dominion of darkness and given them a share in the inheritance of the saints in the

kingdom of light (vv. 12–13). In all these ways, Paul trusts that Christians will live in a way that is worthy of their new identity, making their lives living testimonies to Christ.

REFLECTING

Reflect on the implications of these words of Paul for your understanding of the purpose and meaning of the Christian life.

- Paul says that genuine love grows when it is accompanied by knowledge of the gospel and insight to discern what is best. How do the way that Christians live and the choices they make enable others to see the beauty of the gospel?
 - Paul describes “knowledge of God’s will” not as knowing a specific plan for one’s life — what job to pursue, whom to marry, where to live — but, rather, discerning how to live in a way that pleases God (Col 1:9–10). What are the petitions I most commonly pray for myself and others? How are Paul’s priorities in prayer different from my own?
 - These passages from Paul’s letters have served as models for genuine Christian prayer through the centuries. What parts of Paul’s prayers teach me new ways to pray?
-

PRAYING

Having listened to the way Paul prayed for the communities that he carried with him in his heart, pray for those things that seem most important for living a life that is worthy of the gospel.

- Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, give me a deepening understanding of your will so that I will know how to live a life that is worthy of you and that testifies to the new life I have received in your Son. Enliven my heart with joy and help me to always be grateful for the faith, love, and hope you have given to me.

Rest with trusting confidence and gratitude for the saving grace of God at work within you.

ACTING

In his prayer for the Colossians, Paul specifies four characteristics of how believers may live in a manner worthy of the Lord. Consider practical ways that you may live a life that is pleasing to God.

- Which of these four characteristics of Christian life do I desire to pray for today?



LESSON 28

Paul's Prayer That the Ephesians Know the Love of Christ

LISTENING

Read Paul's prayers aloud, slowly and reflectively, noticing how he blends praise, thanksgiving, and petition.

Ephesians 1:3–23

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption

through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

¹⁵I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²²And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Ephesians 3:14-21

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶I pray that,

according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

UNDERSTANDING

Seek to understand with your mind and heart the words of Paul as he prays for the church.

Paul begins his letter by praising God for the spiritual blessings he has bestowed upon believers in Christ (1:3–14). The doxology shows a strong influence from the liturgical hymns that the early Christians used for worship and instruction. This entire section of twelve verses is one long sentence in the original Greek text, the longest sentence in the New Testament. Its division into several sentences in the English translation diminishes the effects of the author's continual movement to new heights as he instills awe in the listener in the face of God's majesty.

This prayer of praise emphasizes the life of the Trinity, describing the work of the Father (1:3–6), the Son (1:7–12), and the Holy Spirit (1:13–14). The Father is the source of all spiritual blessings: God chose us as his own before the world's creation, destined us for adoption into his own family, and freely bestowed his grace upon us. The Son is the agent through whom all these blessings are realized in us: in Christ we have redemption and the forgiveness of our sins. The Holy Spirit is the

pledge of our inheritance: in him we have been sealed in Christ and marked as God's own people.

Paul then expresses his thanks for the community because of their "faith in the Lord Jesus" and because of their "love toward all the saints." And he offers prayers of petition for them (1:15–16). He prays specifically that they will have the wisdom and enlightenment to comprehend all that they have been given in Christ: the hope to which God has called them (1:18), the riches of his inheritance, and the greatness of God's power within them (1:19). The final section of Paul's prayer expounds upon that divine power at work in believers, the same power that is manifested in the resurrection, exaltation, and universal dominion of Christ (1:20–21). But this glorification of Christ is not just his enthronement in which all things are put under his feet. It is also a vital union of Christ with his church (1:22–23). The church is Christ's body and he is its head. The church belongs to Christ and derives its meaning in union with him. The church is "the fullness of him who fills all in all." In a wondrous way, the church is necessary for Christ's completeness, and he gives the church its fullness.

Paul's next prayer is a development of his previous prayer. He humbly kneels before the Father of all people in heaven and on earth, and he prays for the church (3:14–15). Drawing on the vast reservoir of God's riches, Paul prays that God will give them inner strength through the power of the Holy Spirit. He asks that Christ will dwell in their hearts through faith (3:16–17). He then uses both a botanical and an architectural metaphor to describe this life in Christ empowered by his Spirit: "You are being rooted and grounded in love." Love is the rich soil in which the roots of believers grow; love is the firm foundation on which the structure of the Christian's life is built. Paul prays that the community will have the ability to comprehend how wide and long and high and deep is the incomprehensible love of Christ (3:18–19).

The ultimate goal of humanity is union with God — to be "filled with all the fullness of God." It is a goal that we experience now through our union with Christ, but a goal that we do not yet fully possess. As God's life continues to fill our own, God is able to accomplish within us "far

more than all we can ask or imagine” (3:20–21). God’s vast and eternal plan will continue to unfold as his Spirit works within Christ’s body, which is his church.

REFLECTING

Reflecting on Paul’s magnificent prayers, consider what you learn from him about the blessings God bestows on us in Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit within the church.

- Paul’s doxology (1:3–14) gives us an indication of how the early Christians gave praise to God for their spiritual blessings. In what ways do Paul’s words help me to understand and rejoice in the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
- Paul prays for the congregation, that the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened (1:18). What do believers “see” when the eyes of their hearts are enlightened? What am I able to understand better when I experience this kind of enlightenment?
- Paul prays that the community become “rooted and grounded in love” (3:17). How do I expect to change as love increasingly becomes the rich soil and the firm foundation of my life in Christ?

PRAYING

Join your prayer with that of Paul as you let his thoughts and desires become the faith and love in which you pray.

- I pray, Father, that you will enlighten the eyes of my heart to appreciate all the blessings you have given to me in Jesus Christ. You have done for me far more than I can ask or imagine. As I have set my hope on Christ, may I live always for the praise of his glory.

Spend a few moments in silence now, praying with gratitude for the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love.

ACTING

Paul convinces us that prayer changes us from within, as we experience the love of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

- How do I expect to grow in my faith, hope, and love as a result of pondering and praying these words of Paul? What can I do today to put one of these virtues into action?



LESSON 29

James Instructs the Community on Prayer Offered in Faith

LISTENING

James offers advice to the church about how and when to pray. Listen to his teachings to learn about the right conditions for prayer and the effects of the church's prayer.

James 1:5–8

⁵If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. ⁶But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; ⁷for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

James 5:13–18

¹³Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. ¹⁷Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

UNDERSTANDING

After your reflective reading of James' letter, continue exploring its implications for your life and for your community.

Prayer is a favorite topic for James in his letter to the Christian community. He teaches about the effectiveness of prayer at the beginning and the end of his letter, as indicated in these excerpts. He believes that prayer to God should be integrated into every situation and at every stage of the believer's life journey. Whether experiencing misfortune or cheer, Christians should turn to God in prayer (5:13). If any are suffering they should pray for the grace of endurance; if any are joyful, they should praise God in prayer.

James begins his letter by urging those facing trials to pray for wisdom (1:5), the spiritual gift to understand the purposes of God in the midst of their trials. He professes an unlimited confidence in the power of prayer, for God "gives to all generously and ungrudgingly." So he encourages his community to pray sincerely and with great assurance, knowing that God will bestow the gift on those who ask. This is the

same confidence that Jesus urged on his disciples: “For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (Luke 11:10).

Effective prayer must be offered in faith. For James, faith is single-minded commitment to God, a confident trust in God. The believer can approach God and “ask in faith” because God can be trusted. God gives without reservations or mixed motives. He gives without grudging feelings, without looking for a return, and without complaining about the cost of the gift. James’ description of God’s generous goodness forms a strong contrast with people who are “double-minded and unstable” (1:7). These unstable doubters live in inner conflict between trust and distrust in God, swaying back and forth like wind-tossed water. When life is good, they think well of God; when life is difficult, they think ill of him. For double-minded people, God is one option among others for getting what they want. If God is treated in this way, it should not be surprising that prayer is unsatisfactory.

Prayer offered in faith keeps its focus on God and is open to the furthering of a relationship with God. When prayer is made solely with the intention of furthering an individual desire, it is bound to fail. James echoes the teaching of Jesus who insists that God’s response to prayer is limited by what God sees as good for the person. Jesus used the analogy of a parent who gives what is good for the well-being of the child (Luke 11:11–13). Jesus also demonstrated in his own life that prayer must be made in openness to God’s will, as he prayed in Gethsemane, “Not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

In his teaching on prayer for the sick, James shows that there is always a communal dimension to prayer. The elders (*presbyters*, in Greek) of the church, as representatives of the community, should be called to pray over the sick while anointing them with oil (5:14). Through these ministers of the church, the community reaches out to its weakest members, and through this sacramental ritual, the prayers of the church are offered in faith for their bodily and spiritual healing. The prayer and anointing is made “in the name of the Lord,” indicating that the power and authority to act comes from Jesus Christ. The confident statement

of results, “the prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise them up,” indicates that the saving power of Christ’s death and resurrection resides in his church (5:15).

James does not limit the communal dimensions of prayer to the church’s elders, but he expresses the wish that everyone should pray for one another: “Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (5:16). James shows the close connection of sickness and sin within the community. The grace of forgiveness is shown as the church prays for the healing of its members. As Elijah the prophet effectively prayed for rain upon the land, the church prays in faith because “the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” Through prayer in faith, the church continues to discover its identity in relationship to Christ and to one another.

REFLECTING

Reflect on the teachings of James concerning genuine and effective prayer and how they encourage the church today.

- James urges us to pray to God with faith, because the doubter should not expect to receive anything from God (1:5). Why do all the gospel promises of Jesus assume a single-minded commitment to God and trust in him?
- When we pray with faith and confidence in God, we know that — whether God gives us that for which we ask or not — his response will be for our ultimate good. When have I experienced this parental care of God? When have I failed to receive what I asked for from God, but received something far better?

- Prayer offered in faith does not mean convincing ourselves that God will give us whatever we ask. Rather, prayer is the expression of a relationship with a God whom we are learning to trust because he is faithful, generous, and good. How have I learned to understand the meaning of genuine prayer in a situation of my own sickness or that of a loved one?

PRAYING

Pray in response to what you have heard and understood through this letter of James.

- Lord God, you give generously and ungrudgingly when I ask in faith. Help me to trust in your goodness and faithfulness, knowing that you will give me all that I need for my life in Christ Jesus. Save me from sin, raise me up from my sickness, and send your Holy Spirit to pray within me.

Continue to pray in your heart with wisdom as the Holy Spirit prompts you.

ACTING

James shows us that the faith with which we offer our prayer does not depend only on our individual trust in God. Rather, the faith of the church supports and reinforces our assurance so that our prayers become genuine and effective.

- How can I draw upon the faith of the Christian community to which I belong to help me with my prayer this week?



LESSON 30

The New Creation Offers Joyful Prayer to the Lamb

LISTENING

The book of Revelation is a heavenly liturgy honoring the risen Jesus, the Lamb of God. Listen to the prayers of the angels and saints, as you imagine the incense rising to God's throne.

Revelation 5:6–14

⁶Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. ⁸When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹They sing a new song:

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;
¹⁰you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our
God,
and they will reign on earth.”

¹¹Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels
surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they
numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹²singing
with full voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

¹³Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under
the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might
forever and ever!”

¹⁴And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell
down and worshiped.

Revelation 19:1–8

¹After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great
multitude in heaven, saying,

“Hallelujah!

Salvation and glory and power to our God,

²for his judgments are true and just;

he has judged the great whore

who corrupted the earth with her fornication,

and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”

³Once more they said,

“Hallelujah!

The smoke goes up from her forever and ever.”

⁴And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who is seated on the throne, saying,

“Amen. Hallelujah!”

⁵And from the throne came a voice saying,

“Praise our God,

all you his servants,
and all who fear him,
small and great.”

⁶Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,

“Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.

⁷Let us rejoice and exult

and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;

⁸to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure” —

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

UNDERSTANDING

The images and words of Revelation reflect and echo the Old Testament throughout. Explore these images of the Lamb and the prayers of praise offered by the church in glory.

John, who sees these visions while gathered for the church’s liturgy on the Lord’s Day, describes the heavenly counterpart to the church on earth with wondrous images and evocative symbols. He envisions the completion of the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, when God’s name is “hallowed” by all creation, God’s kingdom has come, and God’s will is done “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:9–10; Luke 11:2). Between

the heavenly throne of God and the church in glory gathered to worship him is the Lamb, the crucified and risen Christ. This is the Lamb of God, which John's first-century church experiences as their "daily bread," the supernatural food of the church gathered for Eucharist. As this church on earth awaits the glory to come, they know that God has "forgiven" the debt of their sins, rescued them from "the time of trial," and delivered them "from the evil one." God has forgiven, rescued, and delivered the church through the blood of the Lamb, the saving death of Christ.

Like the gospel image in which the risen Christ bears the marks of his crucifixion, the Lamb is "standing as if it had been slaughtered," possessing the fullness of power and the Spirit of God (5:6). The scroll with seven seals that the Lamb receives is God's redeeming plan, from the cross of Christ to his coming in glory (5:7–8). The prayers of the saints both in heaven and on earth are symbolized by the incense (Ps 141:2). It indicates that the church on earth worships with the assembly in heaven in adoration of God and the Lamb.

The "new song" is a prayer of adoration, proclaiming the universal salvation that God has given through the slain Lamb. He is the one who is "worthy to take the scroll and break open its seals" (5:9). The four living creatures represent all living beings, and the twenty-four elders represent the twelve patriarchs of Israel and the twelve apostles, as they bow down before the Lamb. Like the blood of the Passover lamb that protected the Israelites from the plague of death, the blood of the Lamb of God has ransomed people of every language and nation. And it has "made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God" (5:10). The prayer continues as the assembly is joined by a countless throng of angels singing with full voice. They announce seven gifts for which the Lamb is worthy: power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessings (5:11–12). Finally, the prayer of praise is sung by every creature — the whole universe (5:13). Their praise is directed jointly to the Father and the Son: "To the one seated on the throne and the Lamb" (5:13).

The Bible's final scene of heavenly worship gives praise for the conquest of evil (19:2), the coming of God's reign (19:6), and the wedding feast of the Lamb (19:7). The vision is a timeless expression of the fullness of God's saving plan, the complete union of God and creation. In this joyful liturgy the worshipers repeatedly cry out, "Hallelujah" (19:1, 3, 4, 6), a Hebrew word meaning "praise the Lord!" In contrast to "the great whore," the powers of the Roman Empire who persecuted the church and shed the blood of the martyrs, stands the triumphant image of the Lamb and his bride, the church. Those who have based their lives on God's grace, who have followed the Lamb, will be united with Christ in an everlasting embrace of love. As the Old Testament prophets used the image of marriage to describe the relationship between God and Israel, John envisions the kingdom of God as the eternal union of Christ and his church. This is the communion with Christ, which the church experiences today in Eucharist and which we will enjoy forever in God's new creation. The Eucharist on the Lord's Day is, in its full reality, a union of heaven and earth, the worship of all creation in divine liturgy.

REFLECTING

Let John's images of the heavenly community and their prayers of praise lead you to enrich your worship of God.

- The adoration of God is the highest form of prayer and the deepest fulfillment of his creation. How much of my prayer consists of adoration of God for who he is and what he has done? How do I give praise to God in prayer?
- The church's eucharistic liturgy is the sacramental anticipation of the heavenly marriage feast. What aspects of marriage make it an

ideal symbol for the union of Christ and his church celebrated in Eucharist?

- The prayers found throughout the book of Revelation are an appropriate conclusion to the prayers found throughout the Bible. In what sense do these prayers bring the prayers of all God's people to a fitting climax?

PRAYING

Respond in prayer to your listening, understanding, and reflecting.

- Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, how blessed are those called to your wedding feast. I rejoice in the embrace of your love and the complete and faithful unity you desire to share with me.

Continue praying in praise of God from your heart.

ACTING

The prayers of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, show you the wide variety and deep richness of biblical prayer. Think about what you have learned and how you want to change.

- What are some of the primary insights from this study that I would like to remember? How do I want to pray differently as a result of this study?

Group Session Guide for Section VI

Begin with hospitality and welcome. Offer any announcements or instructions before entering the spirit of focused discussion. Discuss these questions or those of your own choosing:

1. In what ways does the New Testament demonstrate the continuity of prayer in the early church with the prayer of Jesus?
2. What most impresses you about the prayer of the early church in Jerusalem? ([Lesson 25](#))
3. What did the early Christians believe about the psalms of Israel? In what distinctive ways did the church pray these psalms? ([Lesson 25](#))
4. In what way does Christian prayer flow from “a spirit of adoption”? How do you experience this spirit of adoption in your own prayer? ([Lesson 26](#))
5. What is the work of the Holy Spirit in the experience of the Christian life? How do you experience the Holy Spirit in your prayer? ([Lesson 26](#))
6. What does Paul ask in prayer from prison for the community in Philippi? How do Paul’s petitions compare to the requests you make to God? ([Lesson 27](#))
7. Paul prays that the community in Colossae may discern God’s will for them, learning to live their lives in a way worthy of the

Lord. What does Paul teach you about living a life worthy of the Lord? ([Lesson 27](#))

8. What do you learn about the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Christian life from Paul's praise of the Trinity? ([Lesson 28](#))

9. What does Paul say is the relationship between the glorified Christ and his church? How does this give you a new understanding and appreciation of the role of the church in God's saving plan? ([Lesson 28](#))

10. What are some reasons why people might find prayer unsatisfactory, according to James? What are some of his criteria for genuine prayer? ([Lesson 29](#))

11. In what ways does James emphasize the communal dimensions of prayer? In what ways do I need the church for my life in Christ? ([Lesson 29](#))

12. In what ways do the visions of the book of Revelation express to you the full power and true effectiveness of the church's prayer on earth? In what ways do these images bring this study to a conclusion for you? ([Lesson 30](#))

Discuss whether or not the group would like to continue their learning with another book in the *Lectio Divina Bible Study* series.

Offer prayers of thanksgiving aloud to God for the insights and understanding you gained in the lessons this week.

Offer prayers for your own needs and the needs of others. Pray for the grace to act upon any decisions or resolutions you have made during your study.

Conclude together: *Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit ...*

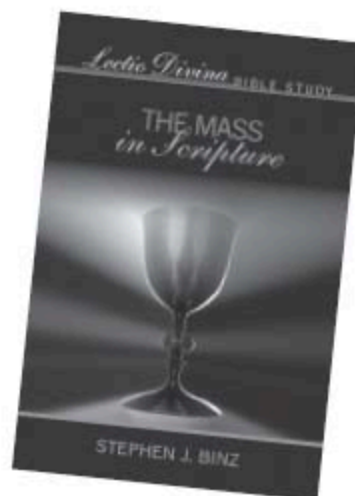
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